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Barbara Park

The Big Book Trend— A Discussion with Don Holdaway

Park: Shared book experience and the use of powerful text in enlarged form with beginning readers is currently receiving a great deal of interest within the context of natural approaches to literacy. These strategies and materials build on pre-school experience with print and induce an immediate, confident and enthusiastic response from children.

Holdaway: Yes, much of the print in the environment to which children have been attending since babyhood tends to be large, colorful, and well designed. Signs, advertisements, and print on TV have these qualities of visual impact for very sound economic and psychological reasons—they *work* in controlling attention. But it is the learning possibilities of using these dominant print forms which embody the real purposes of so-called “shared book experience” techniques. The natural setting of young children gathered around a big book or chart in a shared experience of literary pleasure with the teacher offers the possibility of powerful learning within a context of satisfying meanings. Like the bedtime story situation, this learning environment is trusting, secure, and expectant. It is free from competition, criticism and constant correction, and sets up a natural intimacy between the teacher and the children.

Park: When teachers understand the dynamics of this teaching situation which is so central to shared book experience, they can capitalize on the learning possibilities, but it is so different from many of the established patterns of teaching reading and writing that it is easy to destroy the “atmosphere” or “feeling” you have described. Perhaps you could describe in more detail at this stage what is meant by “shared book experience” procedures so that some of these issues can be clarified.

Holdaway: Historically, we were concerned in the late sixties in New Zealand to build on sound procedures in current practice. We sought to add crucial elements which were missing from the total program and at the same time to co-ordinate the

entire program in a way which would overcome the confusions associated with an eclectic mixture of procedures. We were chiefly influenced by new insights arising from developmental, descriptive, and psycholinguistic research, especially in terms of the learning experiences and strategies of successful early readers. We wished to shift the enjoyment of a rich, open literature of favorite stories, poems and songs right into the center of literacy instruction, and to develop teaching procedures which would make this possible. We could see a proper and important place for graded materials in the new synthesis, but not a central place. We wished to avoid reliance upon materials which had been de-natured and rendered boring or unpredictable because of vocabulary or phonic controls.

On the other hand, we saw much of central value in the natural procedures of "language experience" techniques, provided they were enriched by extensive experience with written dialect in its most satisfying forms of story, poem, and song. The central focus was to be shifted to whole stories or literary transactions and away from meaningless fragments, exercises, isolated words and phonic shrapnel. Since we were anxious to preserve and develop language experience techniques greatly enriched by the most satisfying children's literature available, the name "shared book experience" was coined to identify the new center of the balanced program.

Park: So you are not talking about a new approach but rather about a new central component of a balanced program in which what we know as "language experience procedures" play an important part, and in which there also is a place, although not a central one, for graded or basal readers. The program seems to have the qualities of what is now being called a "holistic" approach in the professional literature. What would you say are the outstanding features of shared book experience procedures?

Holdaway: Most simply, the model lying behind shared book experience procedures is that of developmental learning as displayed in the bedtime story situation, in learning the spoken language, and in the mastery of other early developmental tasks.

It is helpful to distinguish three phases of experience through which a favorite book passes in the bedtime story: First, there is a successful introduction to the book for the purpose of enjoyment. There *may* be considerable participation and questioning by the infant in a very relaxed and un-pressured way. Applied to the classroom, this first introduction presents invaluable opportunities for involving the children naturally in anticipating both meanings and vocabulary, and in decoding *some* words in the text. But essentially, the experience must remain one of shared pleasure. Second, the infant demands many repetitions over the next few days or weeks—the "read-it-again" phenomenon. In the classroom this repetition-on-demand presents ideal opportunities for focussed repetition and for increased participation in reading the text. (You could say that repetition-on-demand replaces or rehumanizes drills.) It is here that enlarged print—the big book—becomes of the first importance. All children should be able to see the text clearly, and the teacher should use careful pointing and masking to focus attention on appropriate aspects of the print. In this way, the strategies of reading are taught and exemplified within a deeply meaningful context. Third, the infant spends many happy hours independently with the favorite book, role-playing as reader and recreating the familiar experience with increasing sophistication. In the classroom, the children are provided ample time for independent reading of their favorite stories. As in the model situation, much of this independent reading is self-selected and self-

monitored. The social dimensions of the classroom also provide opportunities for shared reading, for related activities in the arts, and for writing which is stimulated by favorite books.

Park: This suggests that on any given day a teacher may introduce a new story, poem or song in much the same way as has been done in traditional storytime periods with the children perhaps anticipating what is to come next, joining in whenever there is a repeated word or phrase and relating the story to their own experiences. Following this, other stories which have been introduced in a similar way and which have now become favorites are shared in enlarged format in the repetition phase. Time is always provided for independent reading and related arts activities. Often the themes, structures and enriched vocabulary of favorite stories provide a jumping-off point for the children's own writing. Here the features of language-experience and shared-book-experience begin to merge.

For instance, a class which has enjoyed a shared-book-experience with *Grant the Ant* might decide to establish an ant farm in the classroom. This interest could lead to a great deal of purposeful discussion, planning, additional reading, chart building, and extensive writing of observational notes as well as stories and poems. These could then be published and used as further reading material for the class and school to share. Other responses may occur in the area of the arts if children choose to dramatize or illustrate their reactions. All of these activities support and reinforce the concepts and language introduced in the original highly motivating story.

How can a teacher tell which texts will work well as a shared-book-experience and lead to further language activities?

Holdaway: The choice of materials, especially those that we take the trouble to enlarge, influence the program deeply. Our first priority must be to select from the open literature, books that are worthy of repetition and have a high likelihood of becoming favorites. We need not be narrowly concerned with simplicity or progression as in a basal program, but rather with quality and satisfaction. We control the ability of the children to master more difficult material, in the first instance, by the number and spacing of repetitions within a body of favorite literature, and in the second instance, by varying the degree of predictability in the language and structure of the materials. These two neglected principles of controlling task difficulty are much more powerful than controlled vocabulary—and to some extent run counter to the procedures by which many graded texts are controlled.

Park: The use of predictable materials allows beginning readers to take advantage of extensive experience with language and apply it to the reading task. They are encouraged to use semantic and syntactic cues and with appropriate support from the teacher, also develop the graphophonic cueing system. All the while they are successfully reading whole and meaningful text which is giving them pleasure and satisfaction. This is significantly different from traditional approaches used for beginning readers in which the child is often forced into relying very heavily on instant word recognition and a shaky knowledge of graphophonic relationships and is, at the same time denied, by the nature of the text, the support of predictable meaning and syntax.

There are many other features such as rhyme, rhythm, familiar cultural sequences, and the inevitability of events which can make a text predictable. With these criteria in mind, the prime reason for selecting a piece of text must remain the interest

of the children. If the teacher selects a story or poem to read to the children and finds that it just doesn't interest them, then the best thing to do is forget it and find something that they do enjoy before moving on to the repetition phase. In my experience stories such as *Three Billy Goats Gruff*, *The Gingerbread Man* and Bill Martin's *Instant Readers* meet all of these criteria and work beautifully with this approach.

Holdaway: Prediction from pattern or structure often results in the easy recognition of whole language sequences ("Run, run, as fast as you can . . .") as well as providing essential cues in decoding individual words. This is the natural entry to teaching word recognition—and psycholinguistically the most sound way. Unlike word-by-word processing it has the fluency of real language.

Park: You mentioned earlier that basal or graded readers can be used as a component in a reading program in which shared-book-experience and language-experience are the main approaches. Isn't there a danger that the children will become confused by the apparent contradictory messages being received from the teacher? At one time of the day the teacher may be saying, explicitly or implicitly, that one goes about reading by paying minute attention to all the letters in the text and "sounding them out," and at other times of the day be encouraging the child to use knowledge of how written language works in order to read. The strategies the beginning reader uses to read highly interesting, predictable text just don't work with much of the text in pre-primers and primers where phonic elements, controlled vocabulary and sentence length have shaped the reading material.

Holdaway: The New Zealand experience was to use natural language graded texts much later in development, and much less. The teacher uses discretion to select natural and satisfying grade materials (often entirely excluding the denatured pre-primer and primer material) introducing them for the experience of *independent* reading of *new* material only when the children are able to process them with ease at the first, and usually *only*, sitting. In this way the children read about as much graded material as when it constituted the center of the program, but they spend considerably less time in doing so.

Park: Once past the books for very beginning readers, many of the newer graded series contain excerpts from high quality children's literature. Even with these, the children read more if they spend a relatively short time in the reader and are then directed to the original books. With this treatment of the basals, what happens to all the related seatwork exercises that constitute such a large part of the graded program?

Holdaway: Generally speaking, the use of unrelated exercises and the practice of skills isolated from a genuine context gradually become unnecessary. When children begin to master the basic strategies of reading and writing through copious and successful reading and writing—and display their mastery in objective ways—reliance on the isolated drilling of skills becomes counter-productive.

Park: Many teachers feel insecure if they don't teach reading skills in isolation and in some predetermined order. This grows, I believe, out of their beliefs about the nature of the reading process and also a concern for accountability. This isolated skills approach leaves unanswered questions about the interrelationships of the various cueing systems and the transferability of such skills instruction to the actual reading task.

The development of phonic and structural generalizations in a powerful context which the child has already read successfully is less abstract and more meaningful to

the child than rules and examples generated in isolation or in relatively meaningless settings. Enlarged print lends itself particularly well to the development of skills in context because the teacher can control *which* features of the text the children attend to within the *totality* of a genuine reading experience.

Holdaway: Gathered around a book as a natural, sharing community children learn more from actual participation than from direct instruction: they learn from the teacher's model, from their own sensible involvement, and from each other, without any sense of competition or pressure. They also learn from judicious instruction which is more intelligible because of its real and obvious purposes.

For instance, we often go to strange lengths in our attempts to teach confusable basic sight words such as *me* and *my*. If we simply introduce the memorable old story of *The Teeny Tiny Woman* with its escalating "Give me my bone!" we escape the classic problems even with our slowest children. In the many self-motivated readings of the story which will follow, no child will ever read, "Give my me bone." When we draw the children's attention to the visual difference, there is no confusion or temptation to error as there would be if we isolated the words on flash-cards. The natural situation of sensible language responses provides for errorless repetition and reinforcement—the exact conditions required for optimal discrimination learning. The simple and the natural solution often proves to be the most effective. The learning of virtually any reading skill is enhanced by teaching in a familiar and deeply meaningful context.

Park: As I've watched you work with children I've seen you use a variety of cloze or prediction procedures with great success. These procedures clearly embody the principle of teaching in a memorable language context. The children are actively engaged in problem-solving and they perfectly understand the purpose of the instruction.

Holdaway: A very powerful technique, which should often be used in introducing a big book, is to attach flaps over some of the words or parts of the words. The children then volunteer what is under the flaps. With a normal-sized book, the teacher simply pauses at predictable words, or gives crucial letter cues on a blackboard or with a felt pen. All the intricacies of phonic options (and they can be discussed honestly as options) can be taught and exemplified at the critical moment when they are needed—when they are clearly functional. Many of the classic difficulties of teaching phonics are overcome by such natural procedures.

Park: An interesting thing about using cloze procedures is that the children are required to think of real words and then visualize the expected letters. That's using the phonic association in exactly the opposite direction from "sounding." The reader moves from sounds in the predicted word to letters he or she expects to see in confirmation of a prediction.

Holdaway: Yes, and in a more natural, rapid, effective and rewarding way. The children are much more likely to remember or learn the association when the process is rewarding rather than frustrating. You see, you don't have to know the phonic association of *every* letter in a word before you have a certain solution—your knowledge of only some, or one of the letters is often enough to confirm your expectation to the hilt.

Park: Children are thus led into using effective strategies from the very first stages in their reading development. With judicious guidance from the teacher they sample the text, hypothesize and test, and they do all of these things in an environment which is filled with support and social vitality.

We have only touched on the potential of big books to generate copious quantities of writing at the class, group and individual levels. Children take the patterns from the stories, poems and songs they have enjoyed together in shared book experiences and make them their own. They use this rich resource as a base for their own writing—what Bill Martin calls “innovating on literary structure.”

Holdaway: This writing can lead to the creation of additional big books or other published formats which are shared with genuine audiences such as other classes and proud parents.

Park: One problem I see is that the limited availability of big books can pose a problem for teachers who wish to use shared book experience in the primary classroom.

Holdaway: Of course, big books and charts are not the only—or the cheapest—forms of enlarged print. The overhead projector, the opaque projector, and the slide and filmstrip projector all have special features which display instructional potentialities. The overhead projector is simple and cheap to use and it opens up special techniques of masking and unmasking. For instance, by using two sheets of paper the text may be progressively exposed word-by-word or even letter-by-letter with delicate control by the teacher to suit the needs of her children. The opaque projector makes it possible to display any text in full color from the original. These are also powerful settings for remedial or recovery work, providing high motivation in working with small groups of older children. The slide and filmstrip projectors offer a rapid method of increasing the stock of enlarged text in a school, and they too provide special advantages for shadow pointing and masking.

Park: In a number of schools I've visited, older students have borrowed copies of the primary classes' favorite stories and put them in big book formats. This can be a satisfying task for some of the poorer readers in the upper grades. They not only perform a genuine service to the school, but they also get beneficial exposure to interesting text. Parent volunteers may also be willing to help with this task. Not all big books need replicas of the original illustrations to be satisfying to children. Many teachers copy in the text themselves in large clear print and then invite the children to do the pictures.

I have seen a sort of “big book fever” take over in a few schools where the novelty of making the enlarged texts has completely clouded the real issues of their use. In these instances great quantities of text of dubious quality have been copied into big books with small, crowded print that children couldn't possibly focus on. Like any good teaching practice, shared book experience can be poorly used if the approach is not thoroughly understood by teachers before it is implemented.

Holdaway: Big Books form the very visible and exciting evidence of important changes in the whole structure and direction of early literacy programs. It must be said, however, that crudely grafted to old prejudices in the teaching of reading, without reference to the developmental and psycholinguistic imperatives which gave rise to their use, they may readily become another bandwagon doomed to early decay. I am optimistic that enlightenment about more sane and natural approaches to the development of literacy is so widely dispersed and informed by modern descriptive research that this will not generally occur.

The Big Book is an all too sensational artifact of important new insights in teach-

ing (insights that demand a whole range of new styles of teaching and supports for learning) many of them less visible than the use of enlarged print. The most important and generative idea is that of *wholeness*. Failure in the past has been associated with the isolation of parts by meaningless fragmentation—especially disastrous to language, which is an embodiment of whole meanings. Every linguistic process is informed by meaning. The strategies required to learn and master the “skills” of language are dependent on the meanings which give them human sense and integrity.

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The streamer pictured is by Susanna Natti; it is one of a set of three streamers for 1982 Book Week. Ms. Natti prepared the two-color streamer especially for the Children's Book Council, Inc., official sponsor of Book Week. Prices and ordering information for the streamer set and other Book Week materials are available from CBC (67 Irving Pl., NY, NY 10003, Attn: Current Brochure) for a #10 stamped (first class postage for one ounce) self-addressed envelope.