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Understanding the Barriers and Motivations to Shared Reading with Young Children: the role of enjoyment and feedback

Abstract

Shared reading with young children has a positive impact on a range of areas including language development and literacy skill, yet some parents face challenges in engaging in this activity. While much is known about the benefits of shared reading, the barriers to the activity are poorly understood. The research presented here draws on in-depth interviews with 20 parents of pre-school children to understand home reading practices in a socio-economically and culturally mixed sample, exploring the motivations and barriers that exist to engaging in shared reading. Results indicate that parents are motivated to engage in shared reading when there is clear evidence of their child's enjoyment. However, parental perceptions of 'negative' child-feedback could be a barrier to shared reading. This has particular implications for the age at which parents perceive reading to be a valued and worthwhile activity for their child, suggesting that some parents may choose not read with their babies because they are not receiving the feedback they require in order to sustain the activity. Moreover, this study also revealed that for many parents, parental enjoyment of shared reading activity was closely related to evidence of child-enjoyment, thus creating a further barrier to reading when child-enjoyment was perceived to be absent. This has strong implications for interventions that seek to encourage and support home reading practices between parents and young children.

Key words

Shared reading; enjoyment and feedback; barriers; motivation

Introduction

There is substantial evidence that shared reading with young children has a positive impact, from the development of language and literacy skills to the emotional relationship between parent and child (Bus and Ijzendoorn, 1995, Mol et al., 2008). While parents are frequently identified as an 'undertapped resource' in supporting early literacy development (Reese et al., 2010, p.114), few studies have focused on the barriers to parents engaging in shared reading with pre-school children. In those that have, research designs have restricted parents to selecting barriers from a list of pre-existing factors (Harris et al., 2007, Lin et al., 2015), rather than providing opportunities to discuss how shared reading features in their everyday lives. This study utilises a qualitative design enabling parents to talk in-depth about their everyday lives with young children over time, identifying barriers and motivators to shared reading relating these to parental beliefs about the purpose of reading, and reading as a family practice. The purpose of this article is to explore the role of enjoyment and feedback as a barrier and motivator for shared reading. This responds to calls for qualitative research to develop more nuanced insights into home literacy environments (Bingham, 2007), practices in under-researched groups (Manz et al., 2010), and barriers to shared reading (Lin et al., 2015).

This paper draws on in-depth interviews with 20 parents of pre-school children in one English city. The sample comprised a mixture of low- and high-socioeconomic status (SES) households, from different cultural and educational backgrounds; the approach to these classifications is discussed in later sections. The research suggests that for many parents, enjoyment was an important motivating factor in reading with their child. While parents used different techniques to maintain their own and child enjoyment, it was clear that parental enjoyment was strongly connected to child-feedback. However, parents responded to feedback in varied ways, and the perception of 'negative' reactions had the potential to disrupt reading relationships. The results have implications for interventions designed to support parents in shared reading.

Shared Reading with Pre-school Children

Children who read regularly before they enter school are more likely to learn language faster, enter school with a larger vocabulary, and become more successful readers at school (Bus et al., 1995, Mol et al., 2008). Moreover, the frequency with which parents read with children has a positive relationship with children's language and emergent literacy, even in families with lower levels of literacy (Bus et al., 1995). This is partly because shared reading facilitates more complex talk than during caretaking or play (Snow, 1994), and provides an opportunity for physical proximity and social interaction (Hardman and Jones, 1999). Emotionally supportive, sensitive and engaging reading activities may therefore also contribute to the development of positive orientations to reading (Bingham, 2007). Given parents' role in scaffolding children's encounters with text, it is important to understand how parents experience shared reading.

Various studies have explored the role of reading style in the development of children's early literacy skills (Manz et al., 2010, Mol et al., 2008), identifying variation in achievement between different groups on the basis of SES. Some have argued that frequent reading with children is associated with higher levels of education (Duursma and Pan, 2011) and income (Britto et al., 2002), and that higher education is associated with an emphasis on enjoyment and child-involvement in book-reading (Curenton and Justice, 2008). However, others noted that the frequency of book reading was not dependent on SES (Bus et al., 1995), that working-class households valued literacy (DeBaryshe, 1995), and that there is not necessarily a direct relationship between income and the presence or use of literacy resources (Grieshaber et al., 2012). The relationship between SES, class, and literacy practices is therefore complex, and such categorisations are subject to considerable fluidity and intersectionality in relation to other influences on identity (Rollock et al., 2012).

Given this complexity, research is required that can unpick heterogeneity in home literacy environments and practices (Grieshaber et al., 2012), and particularly to provide greater understanding of practices in households with lower levels of economic and cultural capital, given the relative lack of research with these families. This is especially relevant when considering that parental beliefs – how people feel, talk and act about literacy – can off-set the impact of low levels of parental educational attainment on children's literacy (Cottone, 2012).

Few studies have explicitly explored the barriers to shared reading with young children; among those that have, such as Harris et al (2007), parents have been restricted to selecting from a set of fixed responses, which may not measure the things that are most relevant to parents. Lin et al (2015) considered a broader range of barriers to reading with children, showing that mothers are more likely to report child-centred barriers than any other type, however the authors acknowledged the limitations of restricting the barriers that parents could report. They called for interview methods to be used to identify additional factors that prevent parents from reading with their children. The study presented here addresses this by enabling parents to express for themselves how reading fits, or does not fit, within everyday family life. Importantly, it also focuses on how parents respond to child behaviours during shared reading.

It is therefore crucial to explore how shared reading is perceived and performed in homes. While 'reading' is multimodal, with technology influencing the kind of texts that children engage with (Marsh et al., 2015, Neumann and Neumann, 2015), much shared reading still draws on books, which are 'read' in varied ways. Some parents read every page, while others name pictures or just read particular words (Makin, 2006). Others may be more comfortable telling a story in their own words (Fletcher and Finch, 2015). Although parents do read with children in different ways, the perception of a singular, 'correct' way of reading could act as a barrier. This may also affect how parents perceive and respond to child-feedback and interest, an area in which further research is needed (Hume et al., 2015). Swain et al. (2016), for example, found flexibility in how fathers shared books with their children, responding to child-feedback and maximising engagement.

This is significant given that the power dynamics of shared reading may influence children's motivation and engagement with the activity, with children losing interest when caregivers take control during reading (Cross et al., 2011). Studies have indicated that flexibility of approach can help to develop positive motivations for reading (Baker et al., 1997). This highlights the importance of promoting enjoyment of shared reading, rather than focusing on technical reading skill or 'going through the motions' (Curenton and Justice, 2008, Makin, 2006). Further investigation into the relationships between socio-emotional involvement in literacy activities and enjoyment is therefore required (Vandermaas-Peeler et al., 2009).

Given the potential importance of enjoyment as a motivation for later reading, and the ability for parental enjoyment to positively influence children's perspectives on reading (Timmons and Pelletier, 2015), it is instructive to explore parental beliefs about the role of reading as an enjoyable activity for parent and child. Existing research suggests that enjoyment of shared reading does not necessarily relate to the 'literacy' aspects of the activity, but is seen as an opportunity to spend time together and develop a positive bond (Hammer et al., 2005, Swain et al., 2016, Vanobbergen et al., 2009), with parental enjoyment underpinned by receiving positive cues from children (Kucirkova et al., 2013).

This affective relationship may be especially relevant at the start of shared reading, providing an opportunity for joint attention and interaction with babies and very young children. Research has demonstrated relative stability in parental reading practices and child-interest in reading when measured longitudinally (Hume et al., 2015), suggesting that it is important to consider early practices. The research presented here considers the development of reading relationships retrospectively, using in-depth conversations with parents of three or four-year-old children to explore how shared reading developed, or did not develop, as a home practice. There is evidence that some parents may not perceive shared reading to be an appropriate activity for a baby because they believed that their children were not ready (Straub, 1999) or it would rush development (Vanobbergen et al., 2009). Different home cultures may also influence the age at which shared reading is introduced (Reese and Gallimore, 2000). This makes it crucial to understand how parents view shared reading and the extent to which these views are stable.

Framing the Study

This study is grounded in everyday family life, enabling a more holistic understanding of the barriers to shared reading. Although conceptualisations and modes of literacy have changed, literacy has been a part of family life, in some form, for every generation (Author, 2016). Although this paper is concerned with shared reading practices, the research was situated within a broader exploration of participants' lives and daily routines, acknowledging that daily activities are a key site of parenting (Goodwin, 2007). As Lewis and Fabos (2005, p.474) noted, understanding literacy practices means moving beyond 'events' with texts to encompass the interweaving of events with broader social and cultural norms, beliefs and attitudes. The use of in-depth interviews facilitates access

to ‘the wisdoms, beliefs, assumptions, and lay theories of sociocultural practices’ (Lim and Renshaw, 2001, p.15).

Pink (Pink, 2012, p.146) suggests that we are trying to achieve a sense of ‘feeling right’ as we engage in everyday tasks at home. Pink and Leder Mackley (2016) explored the co-construction of affective atmospheres through social, embodied and habitual night-time routines. In the context of this study, we consider how parents construct a sense of what ‘feels right’ when engaging in shared reading practices. Feedback between parents and children is a crucial component in creating the affective and emotional context of shared reading. Jessel et al. (2011) refer to fluid, co-constructed ‘spaces’ that are imbued with different qualities. Therefore, affective atmospheres have a spatial form, emanating from the bringing together of bodies in everyday situations (Anderson, 2009). Yet, they are also autonomous from the bodies from which they emerge, radiating from one individual to another and permeating space (Anderson, 2009, p.80). It is in these spaces that the ‘intra-activity’ between people and the material environment can be understood (Kuby et al., 2015). Shared reading practices are emotional and embodied, for example Goodwin (2013) argues that gesture and bodily orientation are crucial to the organisation of action. Children enact their emotions, which are made visible through posture, facial expression, voice, movement, and language (Kuby, 2014, p.1286). Parents ‘read’ these emotions, with feedback guiding subsequent action and the development of reading relationships. As Goodwin (2007, p.57) argued, ‘seeing how the addressee is responding to the current action is clearly consequential for the organisation of subsequent action’. Whilst highlighting the impact of atmospheres on experiences of storytelling and the role of embodiment, however, it is also important to acknowledge the complexities of articulating these experiences through talking and writing (Ehret, 2018).

In the research presented here, parental descriptions have been the starting point for conceptualising enjoyment. For many, enjoyment was embodied; this was encapsulated by one participant who reported that during shared reading with her daughter she could “see that there’s something going on…on her face…she enjoys it” (Bina). ‘Enjoyment’ was also associated with factors such as laughter, entertainment, comfort, fun, and bonding. In this research, reading enjoyment is seen as deriving pleasure from volitional engagement in reading. This draws on research on enjoyment and reading for pleasure, which highlights ‘reading for the sake of reading’ (Paulson, 2006, p.52), a volitional activity, associated with reader engagement and interest (Kucirkova et al., 2017). Linking interest and enjoyment fits with the ways in which parents talked about these features of reading relationships interchangeably.

However, not all emotions are perceived as facilitative of shared reading. In the context of schooling, some emotions are seen as ‘acceptable’, while others are regulated (Boldt et al., 2015, Kuby, 2014). This is also relevant at home, with the identification of ‘child-centred’ barriers to reading, such as ‘fussiness’ (Lin et al., 2015). Whilst it has been established that child-interest is important in motivating parents to read with children (Hume et al., 2015), it is not known how parents respond to perceived ‘negative’ responses and how they affect shared reading. Rather than regulating engagement with

texts to ensure the production of the 'correct' emotions, Lewis and Tierney (2011) argue that emotion plays a central role in children's engagement with texts. It is important to consider how parents may seek to regulate emotions in home environments, especially if over-regulation can limit learning opportunities (Boldt et al., 2015).

Method

A number of researchers have called for qualitative and mixed methods approaches to understand parental reading beliefs (DeBaryshe, 1995), household practices in under-researched groups (Manz et al., 2010) and home literacy environments (Bingham, 2007). The research presented here is drawn from in-depth interviews with 20 families living in one city, and highlights the importance of using wide-ranging conversations to understand the development of home literacy practices. The research was conducted with a culturally mixed population with a range of incomes (see Table 1). The study is the first phase of part of an ESRC-funded programme of research across a number of UK cities, exploring the impact of shared reading on children's language development.

The overriding research question was: what are the barriers to parents reading with their child(ren)? Sub-questions included understanding how reading featured in family life, if at all, the purpose of reading, and whether child responses affected reading practices. Whilst the research focused on families with three and four-year-old children, interviews were wide ranging and included understanding how parents began reading with their children, how the shared reading relationship may have changed over time, and parents' own relationships with reading.

Rather than focusing immediately on these reading practices, semi-structured interviews with parents sought to understand everyday practices and routines in order to achieve a general picture of family life. Initial topics included understanding what parents and children liked to do when they spent time together, whether they had any daily routines, how family life fitted in with other areas of life, and whether parents found any challenges in daily life. The interviews moved on to consider how family life compared with parents' childhood experiences, and their own relationships with reading, before discussing the nature of their shared reading practices with their own child. The interview then considered how this relationship may have changed over time, when shared reading began (if at all), and any barriers to reading, both in the present or the past. This provided important context and explanatory power when analysing the data. It also enabled parents to talk about the wider context of their lives and to express spontaneously how reading featured in family life.

Recruitment focused on a number of neighbourhoods that were relatively disadvantaged according to the 2015 Indices of Multiple Deprivation (amongst the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, with a range of 5% to 20%), with the aim of obtaining a sample containing parents with low socioeconomic status (SES). There were several strands to recruitment. A flyer was distributed to parents of nursery children at five schools. Face-to-face recruitment also took place at playgroups, health visitor drop-ins, and children's centres in low and mixed-income areas. All children were three or four-

year-olds, with the exception of three slightly younger children. Parents taking part in interviews received a £10 voucher. In order to maintain anonymity, parents and children have been given pseudonyms.

A range of measures, including income, education and employment, were taken at the interview to explore the potential role of class and capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Although there is no standard approach to the measurement of class (Skeggs, 1997), these characteristics often inform assessments. Income provides a measure of economic capital, and data on education gave an indication of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984), however it was clear from this sample that class is 'dynamic' (Savage et al., 1992, p.211), and is 'materially based but not determined' (Paton, 2013, p.85). In this sample, for example, some families were highly educated but worked in poorly paid industries or had only one parent in employment. Despite low incomes, these households displayed largely middle-class values and orientations. Others worked in lower-level occupations but were highly educated in non-European countries, with qualifications that had less value in the UK labour market. Where relevant, and considering the complex and fluid nature of classed identities, this article refers to distinctions between measures of economic and cultural capital. This is not to generalise to broader populations, but to highlight emerging distinctions that require further in-depth exploration.

Although we have used measures of capital as a lens through which to understand this sample, it is important to acknowledge intersectional complexities in relation to personal identity (Lawler, 2014, Rollock et al., 2012). Rollock et al (2012), for example, emphasise the intersection of histories, identities and experiences among racially marginalised groups when seeking to understand class, as well as the fluid, porous and messy nature of classifications. The position of this study was to explore everyday family lives in order to situate practices, understand, and value the literacy environment in diverse home settings. As McKenzie (2015) argues, working-class practices are often misunderstood because value systems are not recognised.

Table 1: Sample characteristics

	n
Parent	
Father	1
Mother	19
Parental age	
21-25	1
26-30	2
31-35	11
36+	6
Parental education	
No formal qualifications	4
1-4 GCSEs / O Levels / NVQ L1	1
5+ GCSEs (A*-C) / O Levels (pass) / NVQ L2	2
1 A-Level / 2-3 AS Levels	
2+ A Levels / NVQ L3	2

University degree / HND / HNC / NVQ L4 or 5	6
Postgraduate degree (e.g. PGCE, MA, PhD)	5
Parental ethnicity	
White British / Irish	7
Mixed White and other	3
Asian / Asian British	7
Other ethnic group: Arab	3
Child gender	
Male	9
Female	11
Child age (months)	
48-59	4
36-47	13
24-35	2
18-23	1
Is this child the mother's first child	
Yes	10
No	10
Total number of children in household	
1	6
2	9
3	3
4 +	2
Household composition	
Single parent household	2
Dual parent household	18
Annual household income (pre-tax)	
£0-£14,000	6
£14,000-£24,000	6
£24,000-£42,000	5
£42,000 +	3

Interviews were carried out at participants' homes, sometimes with children present, depending on parental preferences. Most conversations lasted between 45 minutes and an hour and 20 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded, then transcribed and analysed within Nvivo. Analysis drew on the broad principles of grounded theory, with three levels: open coding, clustering of codes around categories and thematic coding (Harry et al., 2005). Open coding and axial coding were carried out independently by two researchers, beginning with a set of areas of interest arising from the existing literature. A large number of codes were initially developed. Researchers met to compare analyses and to agree a set of core codes and group these thematically; this acted as a reliability check on the data analysis. Although there was broad agreement in terms of the codes used, some were combined or re-named as a result of this discussion, for example under the theme 'purpose of reading', different codes for 'confirmation of development', 'encouraging developmental milestones', and 'satisfaction from development' were combined under a new 'development' code. As an example of the final coding scheme,

under the theme of ‘the reading encounter’ were ten codes, including ‘bedtime routine’, ‘child reaction to reading’, and ‘sibling relationship’. For each participant, a summary of the most prominent themes and codes was produced to aid analysis and writing. The next section presents the results of this analysis.

Results

Flexible home reading practices facilitating enjoyment

Parents’ descriptions of shared reading demonstrated how texts, usually books, facilitated a shared encounter between parent and child. Enjoyment was important for parents and children, but the ways in which parents orchestrated enjoyment for themselves varied. For many, this meant reading ‘in their own ways’ and adopting a flexible attitude to sharing texts.

Some parents tried to promote engagement by linking texts to children’s everyday experiences and as a pedagogical tool to impart lessons. For example, Amal (mother of Jasmine and 4 older children) talked about changing the names in stories so that if her daughter was naughty she could insert her name into the narrative to teach her “who's good and how to learn to be nice, and helpful”. Amal was not constrained by the words on the page. She reported:

> When I read it…I’m making word from…my mind…She's just listening and just watching…she wants to see the pictures…starting a conversation with the baby…You can do what you want in the story
>
> Amal

For Amal, texts were a starting point for a shared interaction or conversation. Many other parents also described being comfortable reading in their own ways. This included reading the pictures rather than the printed text and making new connections so that “even when I've read it a hundred times…I'm like 'let's try and find something new on the page'” (Elizabeth, mother of Leo and one younger child). Similarly, Jo (mother of Katie and one older child) would “talk more about the pictures…or counting things in the pictures, because it makes it more interesting for me than just repeatedly reading them”.

It was also common for parents to shorten stories or paraphrase text in order to share longer books. Fiona (mother of Leila), for example, reported that with longer stories she “might sort of ad-lib it a bit myself”, whilst Latika (mother of Jasna) similarly “used to just make my own thing and just finish it off…'oh, they lived happily ever after'”. Rather than rejecting child-initiated reading, or the book choices children had made, parents therefore tried to adapt texts, deviating from what was written in order to make the reading experience more enjoyable for themselves and to respond positively to children’s choices despite other household pressures. This reflected their commitment to being led by their child in terms of what, when, and in some cases how they read.

Children also prompted their parents to move away from the printed text and share books in non-linear ways, facilitating child-enjoyment. Whilst some parents found this

challenging, because it conflicted with ideas about what 'reading' looked like, most tried to adapt the reading experience. For example, Javid (father of Karim and two older children) reported:

> He opened the book and he told me 'this paragraph, can you read that'…then he jumps to the next one, then telling me to read that for him…And I'm trying to read it all from start to finish, but he doesn't, certain pages he kind of…boycotts that and skips it
>
> Javid

Karim appeared to be challenging Javid's notion of what 'real' reading looked like, rejecting a linear progression of reading and instead moving backwards and forwards in the book. Javid described this as being "fussy", although he also reported that he tended to "just go with flow" and respond to his child's directions.

Many of the book-sharing techniques that parents talked about were ways of actively engaging their children in shared reading, making it a more enjoyable experience for everyone. Bina (mother of Hadara) illustrates this:

> [My husband] reads it…in a slightly different way…I'm like 'no, no, no! You do it like this!...She's used to it where the monkey's eating the banana…but if you say just 'a monkey', she won't get it'…and he's like 'oh just shut up!' (laughs) 'I'm gonna read it the way I want to'…He reads it in a different way and I think both of us have the same kind of end goal which is to make her laugh…so like when she's doing the peekaboo books, it's like, who can make the scariest or funniest noise so she laughs
>
> Bina

Although sharing books in different ways, both parents aimed to promote enjoyment and an embodied, emotional response of laughter. When talking about why she read with her daughter, Bina reported that reading was "for enjoyment really…it's more the feedback that I get, like she's enjoying it or, we're entertaining her". Significantly, Bina recognised her own need for positive feedback and evidence of her child's enjoyment. While Bina clearly believed that her way of reading fostered understanding as well as enjoyment, evidenced by her concern that her daughter might not understand the text when her husband read it differently, she acknowledged that they shared the same goal, which was for their daughter to enjoy reading.

Parental enjoyment of shared reading took many forms. For some, there was an affective dimension, fostering an emotional connection between parent and child. For Zainab (mother of Rameena), reading was "a comfort thing for me, I enjoyed it…it was nice to know…I've got a little baby of my own, and I'm reading to her". In part, shared reading was significant because Zainab had experienced difficulty in having a child; she could now perform some of the key practices, such as reading, that she associated with motherhood. Similarly, Cathy (mother of Daisy and two older children) described shared reading as "a nice bonding moment…she'll say like a silly answer, which gets us both giggling…this is more of a…fun interaction". Therefore, for some parents, enjoyment is strongly associated with the emotional atmosphere of shared reading. This was relevant

even when children were very young, suggesting that emotions could be significant in the development of early reading practices.

While parental enjoyment facilitated shared reading, lack of enjoyment could inhibit reading. Latika, for example, stated that "I don't do anything which I don't like…if I'm not gonna enjoy it, if I'm not giving my 100%...she's not gonna enjoy it with me, so what's the point…you have to be into it". This suggested that Latika's own enjoyment influenced how her daughter would experience shared reading. Latika indicated that her daughter would sense whether she was genuinely 'into it'; rather than just going through the motions, an authentic performance of reading required enjoyment.

Child feedback and parental enjoyment

A key factor in parental enjoyment was receiving feedback to show that children benefitted from the experience, making shared reading a worthwhile activity that parents were encouraged to continue offering. Reported feedback took the form of evidence of learning, understanding or enjoyment. However, if children were seen as reacting negatively, parents were less likely to try to share books with them. Although 'negative' reactions rarely deterred parents entirely from shared reading, they commonly delayed the commencement of regular reading until there was a change in response.

Examples of 'positive' feedback included children labelling objects in books, pointing at texts, and repeating parents' labelling. Sarah (mother of Sam and three older children) described her son "listening and pointing to pictures…he like says things what you're saying…what's in the book". Similarly, Sumaira (mother of Bilal and one older child), reported that when her son "sees the ball he'll say 'that's ball', 'that's an apple', 'that's a banana'". Much of the labelling at this age was spontaneous, for example Bina's daughter had a favourite book in which "she labels the items, so she will say 'trousers' and 'he puts his pants on'". Some children were also asking questions about storybooks, although this was more extensively reported by households with higher cultural and economic capital. Elizabeth, for example, talked about her son "asking 'why?'…exploring actually, why is that bear doing that, rather than…going 'oh, there's a bear!'" (Elizabeth).

Parents also discussed embodied response such as changes in children's facial expressions, demonstrating understanding or enjoyment. Sharing a book with his son, Javid noticed "his facial expression that he's realised, he's understanding it". Similarly, Bina reported "I'm happy to get her books because I can see that there's something going on (laughs), like on her face, she gets it, she enjoys it, but I'm not one of those to just do it and just think 'hopefully it's going in'". Positive feedback such as enjoyment or understanding encouraged many parents to continue engaging in shared reading. Conversely, the absence of feedback, or perceptions of 'negative' reactions, could make shared reading a more challenging activity. As Bina noted, without evidence to show her that her daughter understood the text, was enjoying the activity, or 'getting something' from sharing stories, she would be unlikely to engage in this practice. Parents wanted to spend time doing things that their children enjoyed and which seemed to have a concrete

benefit, but many required feedback from their child as evidence that reading was worthwhile.

Many parents, including those who frequently shared books with their children, had experienced occasions when their child did not want to engage with texts, but the extent and type of reaction could influence subsequent reading practices. Because being child-led was an important value underpinning shared reading, there was wariness around being seen as forcing children to engage in activities if their response indicated dislike or disinterest. Parents were therefore attuned to the feedback they received, looking for clear cues of enjoyment and engagement in order for reading activities to continue.

However, feedback was not always positive and many parents described 'negative', embodied responses, including the child moving away, not sitting still, seeming distracted, or pushing books away. Sarah explained how her son "wouldn't like settle…you know wanting to look at something else or get something else". Similarly, Latika reported that her daughter would "get distracted so easily…if I'm reading a book to her, and then she's not even interested". Parents also spoke about children's physical responses, such as cutting books (Amal) and pushing books away (Roshana, mother of Ester and one younger child), seeing these as signs of lack of enjoyment.

In some cases, parents found it hard to adapt to the way in which a child wanted to engage with reading. For example, Farah reported that her daughter "doesn't like books…when I want to read the books for her she's…trying to just pick…another page". Each had different expectations, with Farah reporting trying to read the book from start to finish, but her daughter wanting to skip backwards and forwards. Farah perceived this as evidence that her daughter did not like books, especially because she was not giving other feedback such as labelling or asking questions; this made shared reading increasingly challenging.

Other parents described the ways in which children's reactions could create barriers to shared reading. Fiona reported:

> I remember for quite a while thinking 'she's just not interested'…until she were maybe like going on for two…she didn't want to sit down…she didn't want you to be reading to her…she just didn't really have that interest in books at all…just like…wouldn't sit still to listen, and didn't seem to be interested in it when you were trying to read to her at night
>
> Fiona

Fiona perceived these responses as a sign that her daughter was not ready to engage in shared reading in a meaningful way. Crucially, her expectations of what successful shared reading looked like were not being fulfilled. Although at the time of Fiona's interview, shared reading was part of a daily bedtime routine, in general, households with lower levels of economic and cultural capital who reported these barriers seemed to read less frequently with their children, were less likely to have a routine of book-reading, and introduced books at a later age. For example, Latika reported that books could be shared in the morning or evening, depending on working patterns. Similarly, Tara reported that

“I go through phases where I'll do it, and then I go through phases where I stop doing it, whereas I should give them that time to sit and say 'come on then, let's read', but I don't”. It seems that when households with higher economic and cultural capital talked about their child having a negative response to sharing books, this was largely seen as a temporary issue, for example related to children being “very tired, or a bit poorly” (Elizabeth). The data indicates that for some parents, positive feedback was crucial to engaging in shared reading. Moreover, the absence of ‘positive’ feedback, or the presence of ‘negative’ feedback, prevented some parents from attempting to read with their children at all.

Reading with babies

‘Negative’ reactions such as fidgeting and pushing books away could lead to a pause or reduction in parent-initiated reading in favour of a ‘wait and see’ approach. Although this research was conducted when children were three or four-years-old, data on the development of reading practices from birth onwards has implications for reading with babies and the age at which shared reading is seen as a worthwhile and enjoyable practice.

Over half the participants described sharing books when their child was a baby, most commonly at six to eight months when their baby could sit independently. However, many highlighted challenges that stopped regular shared reading. Sarah, for example, had shown books to her son when he was younger, but reported that “he's never like been bothered about reading…He weren't interested then”. She perceived that “there's no point, they don't understand…when they're babies”. Javid also stated that he “didn't think they probably would be…interested at that age”. Similarly, Bina had tried to look at books with her daughter as a baby, but reported that “at the beginning you think 'she's way too young…she doesn't get this'”. Feedback in terms of evidence of understanding or enjoyment was therefore crucial to Bina seeing shared reading as worthwhile; once her daughter was three-years-old, Bina was “happy to get her books” and felt “this is the right age” because she had clear evidence of benefit.

Although many of these parents had tried to share books with their children when they were babies, the lack of feedback, or the perception of ‘negative’ feedback, meant that shared reading did not become part of their everyday family practices. Some parents who did report reading with their children as babies highlighted other benefits, arguing that “even if she doesn’t realise she’s getting anything out of it she will be, just from hearing the language” (Elizabeth). These parents expressed confidence that there was positive benefit to shared reading, particularly in relation to child language development, which existed independently from perceiving evidence of benefit through child feedback. Although the majority of participants spoke positively about shared reading as a concept, a number of parents did not necessarily think this applied to babies. Moreover, given that many of these parents needed positive feedback from their children in order to include reading in their everyday life, this indicates an urgent need to focus on the role of enjoyment and feedback in intervention activity.

Discussion

This paper has shown that parental enjoyment is an important factor in motivating parents to read with their children. In addition, the feedback parents receive from their children, including evidence of child-enjoyment, is also vital in sustaining shared reading practices. However, when child enjoyment was seen as lacking, or responses to reading were perceived to be negative, some parents were likely to reduce or pause shared reading activity.

This research contributes to understandings of how child interest affects parental literacy-promoting practices (Hume et al., 2015), and supports initial evidence from Lin et al. (2015) that child reactions are crucial in guiding whether parents feel they can engage in shared reading. Although parents scaffold children's engagement with text, children play an active part in co-constructing these interactions (Jessel et al., 2011). While previous research has highlighted the promotion of literacy for enjoyment and entertainment in higher-SES households (Sonnenschein et al., 1997, Swain et al., 2016), for parents with lower levels of economic and cultural capital who participated in this research, perceptions of positive feedback, including child-enjoyment, were a particularly important motivator. This would benefit from further exploration, given that shared reading activity has a range of benefits (Bus et al., 1995, Mol et al., 2008). This supports the argument that it is crucial to gain an in-depth understanding of the nature of home literacy practices (Gregory and Ruby, 2010).

All parents described instances when shared reading had not been an enjoyable experience. For some, these were rare events, while for others strong beliefs in the value of shared reading enabled them to overcome barriers. However, in other households, 'negative' responses from children significantly impact on the development of regular shared reading. While parents were not necessarily deterred from sharing books with their children entirely, the commencement of regular shared reading could be delayed until there was a perceptible shift in the child's response. Shared reading is therefore a dynamic practice that changes over time.

Building on the findings of Lin et al. (2015), who identified child 'fussiness' as a barrier to reading, this study highlights that parents perceive such 'fussiness' as an indication that their child is not engaged with reading or does not enjoy it. For many participants, behaviours such as children being distracted or not sitting still challenged their expectations of shared reading and were seen as indicators that their child did not enjoy looking at books. This was especially the case when parents perceived that there were 'correct' ways of reading, such as reading a book from start to finish. When children sought to skip backwards and forwards in the text, some parents felt that this was not authentic reading, leading to a pause or reduction in parent-initiated shared reading. This raises questions about how parents engage with shared reading when children start school, given that parents and children often view 'schooled reading' as the 'correct' discourse, taking precedence over home reading practices (Author, 2011). Further research is required to understand what happens to shared reading practices when children start school.

In-depth conversations with parents revealed that many already adopted a flexible approach to shared reading, finding their own ways of sustaining enjoyment and interaction, being child-led, and ensuring children were 'getting something' from it. Existing research has highlighted the importance of parents being open to child-initiated reading (Baker et al., 1997) and children having some control of reading encounters to maximise enjoyment (Cross et al., 2011). The research presented here shows that it is also important for parents to sustain their own enjoyment. Parents should be encouraged to read in a way that suits their own family, rather than having a 'one size fits all' approach (Fletcher and Finch, 2015, Makin, 2006) imposed on them, which may be centred on a 'school discourse' of decoding and print reading. This includes supporting parents to see a range of practices, such as talking about pictures or deviating from texts, as 'real' reading and recognise their value in promoting affective atmospheres that 'feel right' (Pink and Leder Mackley, 2016).

Parent and child enjoyment is inextricably linked and critical to sustaining shared reading. It was common for parents to report that their own enjoyment stemmed from their child's evident enjoyment of the activity. A number of parents expressed the belief that if they did not find ways to enjoy shared reading, their child's enjoyment would be diminished, and they would be less likely to share books. Parental responses to shared reading therefore played an important role in subsequent action (Goodwin, 2007). Parents wanted to support their child in activities that children enjoyed, but for many this was dependent on receiving clear cues such as sustained attention, smiling, laughing, labelling, and pointing. Given that parents were already responsive to these cues, this suggests a need to encourage parents to view other behaviours, such as a child hitting a book or pushing it away, as part of active engagement (especially for very young children), rather than negative feedback.

Conclusions

Many of the barriers reported by parents were more common when parents were beginning to share books with their children. Frequently, 'negative' responses such as perceived lack of child interest and enjoyment led to a 'wait and see' approach, whereby parents waited for a clear sign of interest in books before they would read regularly. Such signs included children asking to be read to, or showing their engagement and enjoyment by laughing or labelling objects. Given that early, regular reading is positively associated with emergent literacy (Debaryshe, 1993), it is important to understand the barriers to reading with young children. A significant proportion of parents perceived that their children were not ready to meaningfully engage in shared reading until they were between 18-months and three years, when they could provide clear feedback. The perception from many parents was that young children were not ready for being read to, and that this was not a worthwhile activity to engage in if other activities provided greater enjoyment.

This study strongly suggests that interventions should focus on helping parents to see a range of child reactions to shared reading as 'normal'. Rather than being seen as

'negative', behaviours such as being distracted and pushing books away are an expected part of sharing books with very young children. Instead of regulating emotions to ensure the production of the 'correct' responses, which may limit learning opportunities, parents can be supported to see such responses as 'normal' engagement (Boldt et al., 2015, Lewis and Tierney, 2011). Responding to behaviours, such as children grabbing books, or wanting to do something else (Straub, 1999), in the course of shared reading is therefore an important area to develop.

Parents were already engaging in a wide range of literacy activities with their children, including books but also engaging in singing, oral storytelling, environmental print, and the use of apps and games. Interventions can help parents to recognise the value of all their reading interactions with their children, even if this challenges an accepted discourse of 'real' reading. This underlines the need to recognise the value of existing practices (McKenzie, 2015). Finally, 'enjoyment' can be foregrounded as a valuable motivator for engaging in shared reading. Rather than viewing shared reading activity as preparatory for the 'real' reading which takes place in school, parents can be encouraged to find ways of making the activity pleasurable for themselves and their children.

One of the limitations of this research is that it has focused on parents of pre-school age children, but some findings have relevance to babies and the beginnings of home reading practices. We have relied on parental memories of shared reading with babies and changes to this relationship over time, but one area for future research is to focus on shared reading with babies. A longitudinal design would be particularly useful in tracking how barriers and motivations for shared reading may change over time. In addition, almost all participants were mothers. Although they discussed the role played by fathers and other family members in shared reading, the absence of these voices remains a significant gap in the research literature. Finally, whilst we have suggested that there are some differences in practices within this sample, this is a small scale study from which wider generalisations about reading practices among different groups cannot be drawn. The findings discussed here, particularly in relation to different shared reading practices, require further in-depth exploration with a larger sample.

These limitations notwithstanding, the research makes an important contribution to understandings of shared reading practices. By starting with everyday family lives, parents were able to explain in their own words how these practices did, or did not, develop. Whilst the research has highlighted the importance of enjoyment in sustaining shared reading, it must be recognised that the co-construction of shared reading practices that 'feel right' (Pink and Leder Mackley, 2016) will likely look different in different home contexts. What some parents may need is simply the feeling that they can enjoy shared reading activity with their children and to keep reading in ways that work for them.

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