

# Surfacing complexity in shared book reading: the role of affordance, repetition and modal appropriation in children's participation

**Dr Lucy Rodriguez Leon - The Open University**

[lucy.rodriquez-leon@open.ac.uk](mailto:lucy.rodriquez-leon@open.ac.uk) - Corresponding author: The Open University, Stuart Hall Building (Level 2), Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA Tel: +44 (0) 1908 659151

**Professor Jane Payler - The Open University**

[jane.payler@open.ac.uk](mailto:jane.payler@open.ac.uk) The Open University, Stuart Hall Building (Level 2), Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA Tel: +44 (0)1908 654363

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## Abstract

Adult-child shared-book-reading (SBR) is an everyday practice that is fundamental to young children's early engagement with literature. Its potential for supporting young children's participation in literacy is of continuing interest to parents, practitioners, researchers and policymakers alike. However, there is limited research involving critical examination of the processes involved in SBR, particularly of interaction beyond verbal language and of the ways in which differing social contexts influence children's participation. Through close examination of two children's involvement in eight SBR episodes using a multimodal lens, this paper surfaces complexity in the ways in which different contexts and children's previous experience of the text afford differential participation and influence narrative interpretations. The findings contribute to understandings of how SBR practices, and the role of affordance, repetition and modal appropriation, shape children's early engagement with literature.

**Key Words:** Shared book reading; Sociocultural affordance; Early childhood education; Multimodal dialogue; Narrative.

## 1 Introduction

For several decades research has evidenced the potential of adult-child shared book-reading (herein SBR) in promoting various aspects of children's language and literacy development (e.g. Bus et al., 1995; Conner et al. 2009; Gilkerson et al., 2017; Education Endowment Foundation, 2018), and elucidated the capacity of children's literature to support children as they make sense of lived experience (Arizpe et al. 2016; Nikolajeva, 2012). Picture storybooks play a powerful role in children's developing knowledge of narrative structure, providing a vehicle not only to create fictional stories, but to recall past events, anticipate future ones, dream, and construct and revise plans (Bruner, 1986; Cremin and Flewitt, 2017; Engel, 2005).

SBR is a culturally and historically situated practice in which, oftentimes, the adult mediates the child's engagement with the book (Pesco and Gagne, 2017). It is widely accepted that regardless of context, learning is enhanced through narrative related interactive dialogue (Lennox, 2013; Cohrssen, Niklas and Taylor, 2016). Yet, there is great variation in the ways in which adults read to, or with, young children (Kindle, 2011; Edwards, 2014). Thus, the degree to which the broad developmental potential of children's literature is realised is dependent on the type of participation afforded by the social context. Research has found that the adult's beliefs, values and purposes for an activity, coupled with the pedagogic approach adopted, can 'open-up' or 'shut-down' opportunities for children's active involvement and meaning-making (Lennox, 2013; Oliveira et al., 2014; Payler, 2007).

Thus, much is known about SBR and the potential impact of different approaches on various aspects of children's language and literacy development. However, research examining SBR has tended to focus on children's participation in the verbal mode and has largely overlooked the depth of insight to be gained from analysis of children's multimodal participation (see Haggströ, 2020). Secondly, scant attention has been paid in research to the ways in which different SBR contexts within an early childhood setting afford differential participation and

shape children's interpretation of the narrative. Thirdly, whilst book repetition has been found to enhance vocabulary (Horst et al. 2011) and it is often taken for granted that children like to return to the same book multiple times, repetition is a largely under-researched aspect of SBR.

This paper's contribution to the literature is twofold. Firstly, it addresses the initial research question;

*Examining interaction through a multimodal lens, in what ways do two distinct SBR contexts in an early childhood setting afford children differential participation and modes of meaning-making in narrative interpretation?*

Secondly, the paper surfaces the complexity of SBR, illustrating that, alongside the affordance of context, children's participation and narrative interpretation in an SBR event may be shaped by the textual and modal knowledge they gain through multiple re-readings of a book.

We report on small-scale qualitative case-study research which examined young children's participation in SBR in an early childhood setting in England. Video data were analysed to investigate two case-study children's participation in SBR in two distinct contexts that are typical in many early childhood settings. These are defined here as 1) 'read-alouds', that is, teacher-led group story sessions included in the setting's routine, in which children's attendance was mandatory, and 2) 'child-initiated' SBR, where participation was volitional and adult involvement was at the discretion of the child.

## **2 Background to Dialogic Reading**

Dialogic reading, an interactive approach to SBR originally developed by Whitehurst and colleagues (Whitehurst et al., 1988; Lonigan and Whitehurst, 1998; Whitehurst et al., 1994) positions the child as an active partner in the reading, rather than a passive listener. In subsequent research, dialogic reading has been found to develop young children's expressive vocabulary (see Hargrave & Senechal, 2000; Sim & Berthelsen, 2014), knowledge of narrative structure (Lever & Senechal, 2011), and to have positive effects on children's comprehension and decoding skills (Mol et al. 2008). Furthermore, dialogic reading may be a helpful strategy to promote children's social-emotional learning (Fettig et al. 2018).

Children can explore deeper, multi-layered narrative interpretations through SBR where interaction between participants and the text creates a dialogic space in which meaning is co-constructed (Maine 2013). Indeed, children's verbal responses to literature reveal sophistication and divergence of interpretations, including analytical, personal and intertextual responses, and adapting the narrative for their own purposes (Sipe 2000, 2008). Yet interpretation of a narrative remains individual and in flux. As the reader/listener transacts with the text they bring their own experiences, memories and prior understandings to the text to construct meanings grounded in their current understandings of the world (Rosenblatt 1978).

There is variation in the ways in which SBR occurs in early childhood settings (Damber, 2015; Kindle, 2011). The dialogic approach requires pedagogical knowledge and skill that cannot be pre-planned or scripted (Justice et al. 2008). Teachers make pedagogic choices based on institutional practice norms and personal beliefs; these choices impact on how children can participate (Kindle 2013). Closed questions tend to dominate, and teachers frequently miss opportunities to build upon children's responses (Hindman et al., 2019; Siraj-Blatchford and Manni, 2008).

In a study of SRB, when talk was teacher controlled, dialogue was often reduced to children's recall of factual elements or demonstrating that they had arrived at the 'correct' meaning. In contrast, open dialogue facilitated a collaborative analysis of the narrative and co-construction of meaning (Kindle 2011). Genuine interactive dialogue during SBR, though, enhances the depth of children's narrative interpretations (Hoffman 2011) with children making complex connections between the narrative and their personal knowledge (Wiseman 2011). Furthermore, exploring children's meaning-making with visual images, Arizpe and Styles (2003) noted that children's interpretations evolved, becoming more detailed as they became better acquainted with a text (Arizpe and Styles 2003). However, scant attention has been paid to repetition in SBR.

The gaps in knowledge relate to; 1) ways in which differing contexts for SBR influence the nature of interactive dialogue and interpretations, and 2) influences of text repetition in SBR. This paper speaks to those gaps; using multimodal analysis the study exemplifies how contextual affordances shape children's participation, orientates their evolving interpretations, and it accentuates the significance of children's previous experience of the text.

### **3 Theoretical Frameworks**

Broadly speaking, the study is anchored in sociocultural-historical perspectives of human development and is underpinned by theories of affordance and multimodality.

#### **3.1 Sociocultural-historical theories**

Children's learning or development is theorised as changed or more advanced participation in a social practice, mediated through interpersonal interactions (Rogoff, 1995; Lave and Wenger, 1991), which can be enhanced for the child through joint activity with an adult, or more able other (Vygotsky, 1978). SBR is viewed as a cultural literacy practice (Barton and Hamilton, 2000) that takes place in concrete and often recurrent events (Heath, 1983) in societal institutions such as family homes, schools and early childhood settings. However, rather than a pre-existing entity that the child enters, we view the SBR event as an 'activity setting' (Hedegaard, 2012), that is co-constructed through joint activity in the dynamic relations between the human participants and cultural artefacts, shaped by institutional values and norms. Hedegaard (2014) posits that a child's participation in an activity setting evolves in the interplay between 1) their own and others' motives for participation, 2) the demands of the institutional practice in which the activity is situated, and 3) the 'material conditions'.

### 3.2 Affordance

In studying children's activity from the perspective of 'affordance', Bang (2009) extends Gibson's (1977) 'affordance theory' (which primarily focused on reciprocity between person and properties of objects), proposing that affordance for action manifests in the dynamic relations between the focal child, social others and artefacts. Similarly, Waters (2017) considers the concept of affordance in relation to sociocultural theory, arguing that action, and interaction are afforded not only by the physical properties of materials or the environment, but through powerful socially and culturally constructed conventions, rules and behavioural norms, implicitly or explicitly governing the activity. The cultural and social context of the activity setting effectively mediates affordance for children's actions, which can also create 'sociocultural constraints' (Waters, 2017, p.47). Waters (ibid) proposes the term 'interactional affordance', in which fields of 'interactional limitation' (physical features that provide for or limit interaction), 'promoted interaction' (understandings about what usually takes place in this space) and 'free interaction' (child agency) are all embedded in the wider sociocultural context. The notion of social affordance and constraint was applied to the present study's analysis to investigate the ways in which the characteristics of each SBR context shaped children's participation, meaning-making and narrative interpretation. For the purpose of this study, meaning making and narrative interpretation are defined as multimodal processes of constructing understandings of events, issues and the narrative (the storyline or events) conveyed in the book in ways that are compatible with one's current understandings of the world (Rosenblatt 1978).

### 3.3 Multimodality

We approached the study from a multimodal perspective. We accept, as a point of departure, that interaction, meaning-making and narrative interpretations in an SBR event involve the integration of multiple semiotic modes. These include human action such as gesture, facial expression, gaze, spoken language, enactments, intonation, pace, volume etc. and features of the story book, such as the print, font shape and size, image, colour, shading and light, symbols etc. (Kress and Jewitt 2003; Mills 2010, 2011; Wohlwend 2008 ). Language, spoken or written, is considered "only one mode among many, which may or may not take a central role at any given moment in an interaction" (Norris, 2004: p.2). Transmediation, involving integrated use of multiple meaning-making modes (Rowe 1998; Siegel 2006), and transduction, shifting from one semiotic mode to another (Kress, 2000), create rich semiotic ensembles and open up channels for development of new, multi-layered meanings (Siegel 2006). Transmediation involves concrete and embodied acts, the material process of meaning-making with hands, bodies and voices (Newfield, 2014). By applying a multimodal lens to analysis of children's participation, we aimed to capture a nuanced and detailed understanding of children's meaning making and narrative interpretation in each SBR event.

Together, these complementary theories provided the framework to examine children's participation in SBR and defined the position from which we respond to the research question.

## 4 Methodology

Reported here is a data subset from a broader qualitative study that adopted naturalistic multimodal data collection techniques to investigate the relationship between two young children's literate identities and their participation in literacy practices at home and preschool. Analysis of the broader data set suggested that children's participation, and their narrative interpretation differed in the two distinct SBR contexts defined above, prompting the current investigation. This research draws on video recordings of two children engaging in eight naturalistic episodes of shared book reading in one ECEC setting.

### 4.1 Study context

Data were collected at a pre-school setting in England, selected for its convenient location and the researcher's established connections. The setting followed the English Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2012) framework. All children attended the setting for 15 hours each week in either 'morning' or 'afternoon' sessions; broadly, the same curriculum was enacted in both sessions. The focal children were Amelia, aged 3:10 years, who attended the setting each morning and Bobby, aged 4:2 years, who attended each afternoon (pseudonyms). The children were recruited to the broader study following discussion with practitioners and parents indicated both children were confident in the preschool setting. Staff reported that both children seemed to enjoy stories; both were active participants in group activities, although Bobby was described as 'more assertive'. Amelia often chose to visit the book corner alone and engage with books independently. Bobby's visits were less frequent and tended to be with other children. Fieldnotes from home visits to each family documented that both children had selections of picture storybooks at home.

The project applied the British Educational Research Association's ethical guidelines (2011) and was reviewed and approved by the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. In addition to parental written consent, the study was explained to Bobby and Amelia in simplified terms and both children took up the invitation to explore the video recording equipment before agreeing to being filmed; their continuing assent was monitored through their verbal and non-verbal responses to the researcher's presence.

The setting adopted a 'focus story' approach to SBR practice. The focus story was a teacher-selected storybook integrated into the setting's provision for a duration of two to three weeks. When introducing the book to the children during a group session, Liz, the class teacher, firstly drew attention to the front cover, endpapers, and illustrations to guide children through key vocabulary and concepts. Subsequently the book was read-aloud and revisited during group activities every few days. Narrative related resources and role play props were available for children to self-access across the provision, and the book was made permanently available for children's self-selection in the book-corner, (alongside a broader selection of children's literature). Each week, one staff member was allocated to the book-corner area of the classroom and was often available to read with children during their self-chosen activity. During the free-flow play sessions, staff adopted a child-centred pedagogy model, which included semi-flexible planning and where adults' roles were to observe,

support and engage in child-initiated play and provide appropriate supervision. Hence, adult – child SBR took place in the two distinct contexts defined earlier as ‘read-alouds’ and ‘child-initiated’ SBR.

## 4.2 Data sets

Data for the broader study were gathered during a three-week timeframe and included video recordings of Amelia and Bobby participating (separately) in read-alouds and child-initiated SBR. The data set comprised eight video recorded episodes; four were read-alouds (three led by Liz and one by a substitute teacher, Kate), and four were child-initiated episodes in which the children had invited the researcher to join them in the book-corner (see Table 1). These data were re-analysed to address the present study’s research question. Three additional video data items were not considered comparable and therefore not included in the data sets. One, of Bobby, involved a ‘story acting’ session, rather than a read-aloud, and two episodes with Amelia did not involve an adult.

Table 1: Video Data Set

Teacher-led read-aloud episodes					
Episode	Focal Child	Book	Book Choice	Episode Duration	Participant overview
1	Amelia	Shark in the Dark (Nick Sharratt)	Liz	4.40	Liz, 9 children and the researcher observing. Amelia reportedly had one previous experience of the text in a group read-aloud.
2	Amelia	The Little Red Hen (Traditional Tales Series)	Liz	5.11	Kate, 10 children and the researcher observing. This was Amelia’s first experience of the text.
3	Bobby	Shark in the Park (Nick Sharratt)	Liz	3.57	Liz, 5 children and the researcher observing. This was Bobby’s first experience of this text, although he was familiar with another book in the series.
4	Bobby	The Little Red Hen (Traditional Tales Series)	Liz	3.38	Liz, 9 children and the researcher observing. This was Bobby’s first experience of the text.
Child-initiated SBR episodes					
Episode	Focal Child	Book	Book Choice	Episode Duration	Participant overview
5	Amelia	It Was a Cold Dark Night. (Tim Hopgood)	Amelia	2.57	Amelia and the researcher. Amelia requested the researcher join her in the book corner, she selected the book with which, as a previous focus story, she was very familiar.
6	Amelia	Owl Babies (Martin Waddell)	Amelia	6.27	Amelia and the researcher. Amelia joined the researcher in the book corner, selecting a previous focus story with which she was very familiar.
7	Bobby	Shark in the Dark (Nick Sharratt)	Bobby	5.00	Bobby, the researcher and 1 other child, (Phoebe). Bobby requested that the researcher join him in the

					book-corner, Phoebe also chose to join. Both children were familiar with the text as a recent focus story.
8	Bobby	The Tiger Who Came to Tea (Judith Kerr)	Phoebe	6.25	Bobby, the researcher and Phoebe . This was Bobby's first experience of the book, chosen by Phoebe.

### 4.3 Adults' approaches to SBR

Liz was a particularly animated storyteller who made extensive use of varied intonation, facial expression, and dramatic enactments of the narrative. On repeat readings, children were increasingly encouraged to participate in the storytelling, predict events, or enact a character role, for example. Kate was also an expressive storyteller. However, analysis of episode 2 (a first reading of the book), indicated she made fewer invitations for children to participate than were made in episodes 1, 3 and 4. The researcher participating in episodes 5 – 8 was a former staff member at the preschool setting and, thus, was enculturated into the setting's practice norms. Throughout the research project she aimed to enact a practitioner or 'insider' role and approached each episode with the aim of responding to the child's lead. It is acknowledged therefore, that the distinct positionality and orientations of the class teacher, substitute teacher and the researcher mean that events may have unfolded differently had Liz or Kate been involved in the child-initiated episodes, or the researcher had led the read-alouds.

### 4.4 Analytic framework

The analytic framework drew on and adapted methods from the ethnography of communication (Saville-Troike 2003) and systems for analysing classroom dialogue (Hennessy et al. 2016; Rojas-Drummond et al., 2013). Viewing each SBR episode as a complex 'activity setting' (Hedegaard, 2012; 2014), Saville-Troike's (2003) concept of 'nested' levels of analysis of communication was applied to our multimodal analysis of meaning-making and narrative interpretation (defined earlier as multimodal processes of constructing understandings of events, issues and the narrative conveyed in the book). To account for dynamic relations in an activity setting, we took a phased, yet iterative approach. We worked from the premise that children's multimodal meaning-making acts (micro level) are embedded within interactive events (meso level) which in turn, are contextualised within the SBR context (macro level). Video data were analysed directly, without transcription, using the software package, Dedoose.

The first, micro-level phase of analysis involved a detailed inductive coding of the focal children's meaning-making actions and behaviours in each SBR episode; the resultant codebook is shown in Table 2. The multimodal lens, applied over multiple repeat viewings facilitated a fine grained analysis, ensuring that details, such as a gesture or a frown, that could be indicative of children's meaning making and narrative interpretation were not overlooked. As an unobservable trait, no attempt was made to code the act of 'listening'. However, it is acknowledged that children may be deeply engaged in meaning making whilst their participation appears silent and still. Thus, direction of gaze was coded, and when viewed in conjunction with other actions and behaviours, it was considered that 'listening' or



'attentiveness' could be inferred. Concurrently, each excerpt of children's multimodal activity was coded as 'spontaneous', or 'responsive' to the adult's or a peer's actions (i.e. the integrated use of multiple modes rather than each discrete action). In instances where children's actions were responsive but then volitionally expanded upon in the flow of the social interaction, both codes were assigned.

Initial coding rendered visible the multimodal resources through which children participated and made meaning; analysis of code frequency and code clusters began to identify patterns in participation in different episodes and in each distinct context.

*Table 2: Coding framework of children's actions and behaviours*

<b>Coded Actions and Behaviours</b>	<b>Code Description</b>
<b>Facial Expression</b>	Uses facial expression to convey or express meaning
<b>Dramatizations or enactments</b>	Creates an embodied enactment or dramatization to express meaning.
<b>Gesture</b>	Uses gesture to express meaning, including pointing
<b>Intonation</b>	Use of intonation to enhance or extend meaning of verbal language
<b>Verbal Comment</b>	Makes verbal comment to express meaning
<b>Spontaneous Questions</b>	Spontaneously asks a question directed to the storyteller.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>narrative question</li> </ul>	Question relates to the developing narrative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>materiality / affordance question</li> </ul>	Question relates to the materiality or physical affordances of the book
<b>Reading behaviours</b>	Participates with intention of reading the text; through any combination of recall of narrative, interpretation of illustrations or written text
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>joining in with adult / group</li> </ul>	Joins in with the adult in the 'reading' of the written text
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>continues reading when adult pauses</li> </ul>	Fills in the missing words when the adult pauses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>responds to prompts</li> </ul>	Responds to adult prompt to read the text
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>initiates reading</li> </ul>	Spontaneously attempts to read the text
<b>Narrative prediction</b>	Uses any combination of semiotic systems to express their prediction of the narrative
<b>References illustrations</b>	Points or gestures to illustration to enhance meaning making of other modes being used
<b>References Print</b>	Points or gestures to print to enhance meaning making of other modes being used
<b>Page Turning</b>	Manipulates pages of the book in order to facilitate the expression, communication or internalisation of meaning
<b>Gaze</b>	Direction of child's gaze;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to storyteller</li> <li>• to illustrations</li> <li>• away from activity</li> <li>• to print</li> <li>• to peers</li> </ul>
<b>Distracted</b>	Attention is drawn away from the activity or interaction.

#### Initiating Participation

<b>Participation spontaneous</b>	Child initiates, through own volition, the action to represent, express or communicate meaning.
<b>Participation responsive</b>	Action or behaviour evoked by action of adult or peer.

Building on the coding process, a thematic analysis was applied to examine, at a higher level of abstraction, the nature of children’s narrative interpretations . This process generated themes, or categories of interpretation (see Table 3), which oftentimes overlapped.

*Table 3: Thematic analysis of children's narrative interpretations*

Theme	Description
Personal	constructs interpretation in relation to own experiences
Group aligned	constructs interpretation that echoes or corresponds with the collective
Close to the text	constructs literal interpretation closely reflecting the text
Divergent	constructs interpretation that deviates from the text, suggesting possible alternatives
Analytic	questions, critiques or challenges characters’ actions or motive, or the course of events.

A thematic analysis was also applied at the second, meso-level phase. Interactive events in each SBR episode were analysed multimodally through the lens of sociocultural affordance and constraint, to explore the ways in which different features, or aspects of the interaction impacted on children’s modes of meaning making, participation and influenced the nature of their narrative interpretation. Features and aspects were grouped as themes (see Table 4). This approach ensured that meso-level analysis accounted for adult and peer activity, coupled with physical / material features of the SBR, whilst centring analysis on the meaning making, participation and narrative interpretation of each focal child.

*Table 4: Thematic analysis of meso-level interactive events in SBR episodes*

Theme	Aspects / Features
Adult action and interaction	Modelling; direct questions; open questions; prompts and invitations; (verbal & gestural); pauses; direction of gaze; direct instructions; shutting down interaction; speaking over; non-response to child’s action.
Peer action and interaction	General expressions; peer to child expressions; peer to child response; general question; peer to child questions; predictions; personal views.
Spatial arrangements	Child’s proximity to book; position of book; movement of the book; control of book.
Textual features	Repetitive refrains; image and illustration; display of text / callouts; narrative complexity and structure.
Familiarity with book	Number of (known) previous readings; previous text-related group activities; availability of text and related resources; observable indicators of textual knowledge.

In the third, macro-level phase of analysis, codes and themes were examined and juxtaposed across episodes and across each SBR context to explore patterns, propensities and incongruence. Through the analytic work in this phase, understandings of sociocultural affordance and constraint in the two distinct SBR contexts were developed, and ‘repetition’ and children’s ‘modal appropriation’ were extrapolated as key features of interest.

## 5 Findings

The study findings are presented in two sections. Firstly, the results of the coding process are presented with analytic commentary to elucidate the actions and behaviours through which Amelia and Bobby participated in each episode. Secondly, brief vignettes serve to 1) contextualise the results of the coding process, 2) exemplify the nature of children’s narrative interpretation and 3) render visible the role of repetition and modal appropriation in SBR.

## 5.1 Code application and themes

Whilst not statistically comparable, juxtaposing code application in each episode indicates some propensities in the multimodal resources through which Bobby and Amelia participated and made meaning in the read-aloud (episodes 1 – 4-) and child-initiated (episodes 5 – 8) contexts, as shown in Figure 1.

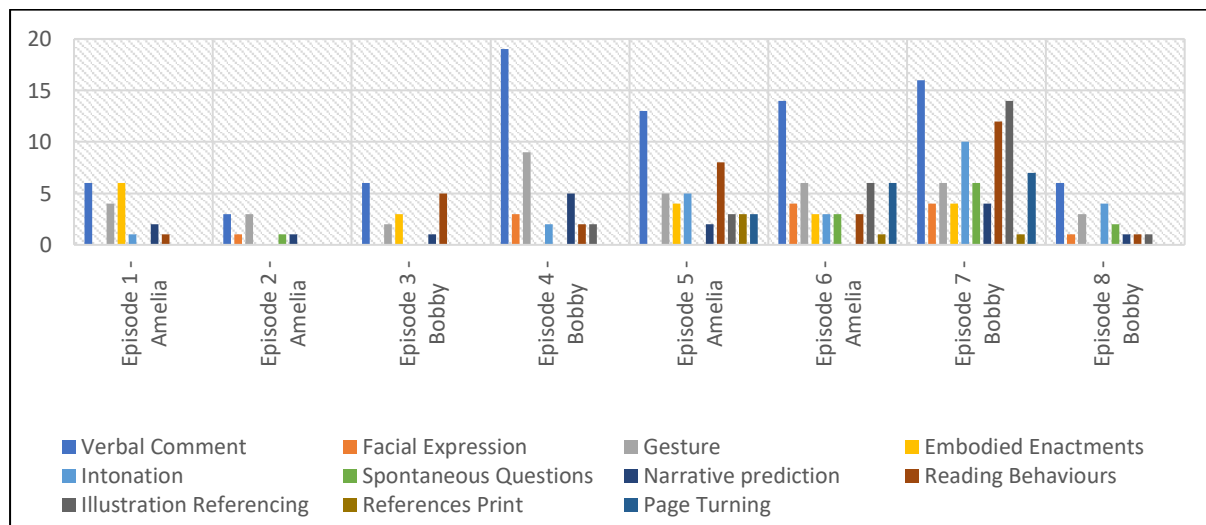


Figure 1: Occurrences of code application in each SBR episode

Figure 1 firstly exposes the greater volume of code application, and thus, level of activity in child-initiated SBR (episodes 5 – 8). In read-alouds (episodes 1 – 4), actions such as Illustration and print referencing, control of page turning, and spontaneous questioning were largely constrained. Embodied enactments and narrative prediction were evident in episodes across both contexts. However, in read-alouds, excerpts including these actions were predominantly coded as responsive, due arguably to Liz’s vibrant storytelling approach, which included prompts to children to join in and frequent invitations to guess what might happen next. In contrast, in child-initiated episodes, a greater proportion of these actions were coded as spontaneous. Furthermore, across all excerpts of activity, code application revealed a greater balance of spontaneous and responsive activity during child-initiated episodes which, during read-alouds, were predominantly responsive (see figure 2). These data suggest that children’s agency and volition to express, represent and communicate meaning increased significantly during child-initiated episodes.

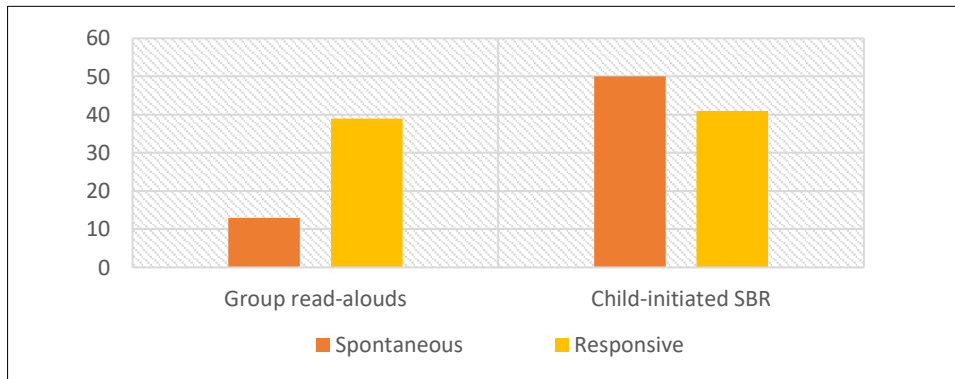


Figure 2: Occurrences of activity coded as 'spontaneous' and 'responsive' in read-aloud and child-initiated contexts

However, these data also illustrate complexity; whilst there were propensities in Bobby and Amelia's participation within each context, there was incongruence in particular episodes (see Figure 1). For example, there appeared to be relative 'stillness' in Bobby's participation in episode 8, yet he appeared absorbed in the book. In episode 4, the abundance of verbal comments was influenced, arguably, by Liz framing the story as a series of questions and by Bobby's familiarity with the book. Thus, as Waters' (2017) proposed, children's action in an SBR episode is mediated by, and embedded in the social and cultural context, affordance can be thought of as interactional, generated as human participants, sociocultural norms, physical and textual features fluidly converge. The interactional features influencing affordance, identified in the thematic phases of analysis, are exemplified in the following vignettes.

## 5.2 Vignettes

For brevity, the vignettes have been extracted from five of the eight data items, selected as they foreground events that best exemplify the arguments developed in the subsequent discussion.

### Participation in group read-alouds

#### Amelia: episode 1

*Compliant with the daily routine, Amelia joined the SBR group of 9 children and Liz, who had selected Sharett's 'Shark in the Dark' for a second group reading. After a brief recap, Liz turned to the first page and said, "are you ready now... to listen, use your eyes for looking and your ears for listening", accompanied by relevant gesture. She added, "you could join in with some of the words, let's see". As Liz read the first pages, she paused intermittently and looked around the group, inviting children to complete the sentence or join in reading the repetitive refrains. Amelia's gaze alternated between Liz, the book and the other children, she waited momentarily, seemingly assessing the participation of others before joining in with collective verbal and enacted responses. Some children pre-empted the invitation and recalled events prematurely; on such occasions, Liz encouraged children to refrain until the*

appropriate moment in the text. Amelia, however, waited until participation was explicitly invited before contributing, yet in the moments before, in anticipation her posture began to lift before vocalising “there’s a shark in the dark” in chorus with the group.

Throughout the reading, Liz modelled and encouraged children to join in with dramatic enactments of the narrative. For example, she demonstrated making an imaginary telescope with her hands, enacting the protagonist’s actions. At subsequent points she prompted children asking, “have you got your telescope?” On each occasion Amelia responded, trying to close one eye and look with the other through her hands, replicating Liz’s demonstration.

Occasionally some children initiated narrative-related comments, which Liz positively acknowledged, but did not extend with further dialogue. On the penultimate page Amelia appeared on the verge of commenting, she sat upright and took a breath, but as Liz continued reading, Amelia refrained, leaving her thought unexpressed aloud.

Bobby’s participation in read-alouds was more assertive than Amelia’s, and in episode 4 particularly, was highly vocal.

#### **Bobby: episode 4**

On joining the group, Bobby selected a space opposite Liz, with a clear view of the book. He was familiar with the Little Red Hen story and its pattern of simple repetitive refrains. Liz began by reading the first three pages aloud, but as the story progressed, she asked the children collectively what the characters would say on each page. Bobby quickly and enthusiastically responded, recalling the line using, on most occasions, a ‘matter-or-fact’ tone, rather than the exaggerated intonation Liz modelled; yet simultaneously he imitated her gestures. His gaze alternated between the page and Liz throughout. The moment the story finished, and Liz closed the book, Bobby spontaneously commented. He explained his understanding of the Hen’s actions, although he needed time to articulate it, he said; “That’s why... they didn’t let her help...(pause) they didn’t...(pause) they didn’t help her”. When Liz responded affirming his comments with verbal praise, Bobby appeared satisfied.

#### **Participation in child-initiated episodes**

##### **Bobby: episode 7**

On Bobby and Phoebe’s request, the researcher joined them in the book-corner where Bobby had selected ‘Shark in the Dark’ with which he was familiar, and Phoebe had selected ‘The Tiger Who Came To Tea’ (episode 8) which Bobby had not encountered previously. Beginning with ‘Shark in the Dark’ the researcher pointed to the title, asking both children if they would help with the reading. Bobby quickly responded, firstly by saying “shark in the park”, then self-correcting and saying, “shark in the dark”. From the first page Bobby joined in reading the text, continuing when the researcher paused, and twice initiating the reading on the turn of the page. This was interspersed with spontaneous comments and questions, for example when the researcher suggested the shark may be dangerous Bobby disagreed and said, “it’s a

good one”, and evaluating the protagonist’s actions he asked, “why is he not looking down?”. Throughout this episode, Bobby’s comments and questions initiated much of the abundant interactive dialogue. He made rich use of vocal intonation, for example he playfully conveyed terror each time he called, “There’s a shark in the dark”, which was further enhanced by his embodied enactments, i.e. leaning back, and making his body rigid. He frequently initiated enactments of the narrative, such as making a ‘telescope’ with his hands and looking in the direction conveyed in the written text. Proximity to the book meant both children incorporated the illustrations into their communicative ensembles. Bobby, for example, pointed to the illustration, whilst verbally asking, “why can’t you see that one there?” (exploring why the shark fin was only visible on one page). Illustration referencing as a communicative mode was so prominent in this episode that there was often an entanglement of hands across the pages.

### **Bobby: Episode 8**

On completing the first book, Bobby quickly retrieved the copy of ‘The Tiger Who Came to Tea’, as if concerned the researcher may have forgotten. He looked intently at the front cover, but when asked if he would like a tiger to come to his house, he simply responded with an apathetic “no”, appearing deep in thought. The researcher began to read the text, pointing to relevant illustrations and commenting. Bobby’s participation was comparatively still and quiet, less responsive to the researcher’s open questions or pauses. He made fewer comments during this episode. For example, in response to the tiger eating all the sandwiches he firmly said “no”, with intonation and facial expression suggesting outrage. Pointing to the illustrations, he said with disapproval, “he made all the mess by himself”, and nearing the story’s conclusion, Bobby responded when Phoebe asked what the mother was saying; he suggested, “no more tigers here”, using an ‘angry’ intonation and facial expression.

Throughout, Bobby’s attention appeared fixed on the text, with little interest in interpersonal interaction or dialogue; he seemed highly engaged, his gaze scanned the illustrations and his facial expression, and often narrowed eyebrows, suggested intense involvement.

During both child-initiated episodes, Amelia chose books she was familiar with.

### **Amelia: episode 6**

Amelia opened the oversized copy of Owl Babies, before indicating that the researcher should hold one side. The verbal storytelling flowed seamlessly between Amelia and the researcher, each taking on the reading when the other paused. On three occasions Amelia asked the researcher what the smallest owl said; she knew the answer but seemed amused by the researcher’s exaggerated performance of the line, ‘I want my mummy’. On the page portraying the mother owl’s return, Amelia suggested a contrasting emotional response to that of the text, she said; “maybe she (mother owl) say, ‘sorry I left you all alone’”, whilst adding an apologetic facial expression and intonation to the Mother Owl’s words. The researcher agreed, but rather than continuing the dialogue, Amelia continued to read the final lines, before announcing, ‘the end’.

## 6 Discussion

The study surfaces the complexity of understanding children's participation in SBR, as detailed analysis rendered visible the multiple factors that converge in each SBR episode. As Hedegaard (2012, 2014) posits, the data illustrate how SBR activity settings were co-constructed through joint activity in the dynamic relations between the children, the adult, the storybook and its narrative; they illustrate how Bobby and Amelia's participation was shaped by the interplay of their own and others' motives and the demands of institutional practice norms. Each activity setting unfolded in its own unique way, as different children and adults at different times interacted with picture storybooks with different features and narratives; however, we focus our discussion on three issues. Firstly, we address our initial inquiry into the differential sociocultural affordance in read-alouds and child-initiated SBR contexts. Secondly, we consider two key foci extrapolated during analysis, the role of repetition and modal appropriation in children's participation.

### 6.1 Sociocultural affordance in read-alouds and child-initiated SBR contexts

Amelia and Bobby both appeared to perceive distinct affordances in read-alouds and child-initiated contexts which shaped their participation and the nature of their narrative interpretations. Reflecting Kindle's (2011) findings, during read-alouds, the children's participation was largely teacher-directed and collective, through which a single, 'correct' interpretation of the narrative was communally expressed. Whilst Bobby's participation in read-alouds was more assertive than Amelia's, both children orientated themselves to group participation, seemingly committed to presenting the expected response.

Liz clearly valued children's active involvement during read-alouds; she modelled narrative enactments encouraging children to join-in, she phrased elements of the text as closed questions or paused mid-sentence urging children to complete repetitive refrains. However echoing Hoffman (2011), the intention, arguably was to elicit a single collective response. This approach certainly held children's attention but discouraged dialogue that diverged from the set interpretation. Read-aloud episodes, therefore functioned as 'team events'; Amelia and Bobby perceived the implicit expectations and consistently participated with the group, aligning with the communal interpretation. In episode 1 for instance, prior to taking any action, Amelia's gaze moved between Liz and other children, seeking cues to inform her participation choices, ensuring she 'got it right'. Her desire to conform was further evident when she refrained from commenting, exemplifying how her perception of the social constraints of the SBR context shaped her participation. Children's occasional spontaneous comments in read-alouds tended to 'stay close' to the book, demonstrating the 'correct' understanding, as exemplified in Bobby's comments in episode 4, explaining the Hen's actions. Thus, across the read-alouds, Amelia and Bobby both appeared keen to participate as group members, enacting their 'belonging' through communal participation and sustaining the group interpretation. These episodes could then be described as 'dialogic' insofar that there was often a two-way verbal and gestural exchange between Liz and the children, although predetermined and communal.



In contrast, during child-initiated episodes, divergent interpretations emerged; Amelia and Bobby indulged in personal transactions with the narrative, pondering alternative possibilities through multimodal dialogue; these episodes unfolded quite differently. In part this may be attributed to the distinct orientation of the researcher, who 'endorsed' children taking the lead, thus adding to the shaping of the interactional affordance. However, they did so spontaneously, without hesitation suggesting that the researcher's approach was within the practice norms of the setting. Throughout three of the child-initiated episodes multimodal dialogue flowed, evident in the more balanced coding of self-initiated and responsive actions; in parallel Bobby and Amelia's narrative interpretations became more expansive. Exemplifying Rosenblatt's (1978) reader response theory, during episode 6 (Owl Babies) Amelia offered an adapted version of the narrative more compatible with her personal understandings of babies being left alone. Similarly, in episode 7, Bobby confidently voiced his disagreement with the researcher's view of the shark as dangerous. This alternative position, acknowledged and validated by the researcher, subtly altered the direction of the collaborative storytelling. The spatial arrangements of child-initiated contexts meant that children's proximity to the book afforded illustration referencing. When using pointing in the communicative ensemble, Bobby was able to replace more complex vocabulary (shark fin) with, "that one", thus lessening the verbal load and facilitating his questioning and interpretation.

The practice norms in child-initiated episodes evidently afforded fluid interactive, multimodal dialogue through which interpretations could emerge, develop and adapt, enabling children to take ownership of their interpretations and express divergent and personal understandings. However, the potential affordance for fluid interactive dialogue was not necessarily taken up, as seen in Bobby's participation in episode 8; nonetheless Bobby's personal, subjective interpretation was still evident when he adopted a more reticent mode of participation. Without the perceived expectation to seek and align with the communal understanding, Bobby's few comments, intonation and facial expression clearly portrayed his disapproval of the tiger's behaviour. Thus, nuancing understandings of dialogic SBR, interactive dialogue was evidently a medium through which children co-constructed more complex narrative interpretations, however, it was not essential for deep-level involvement with the text.

This study revealed, as Waters (2017) suggests, that children's participation in both SBR contexts was shaped by perceptions of socially accepted behavioural norms, rules and conventions; in addition, it reveals the affordances for differential narrative interpretations. However, whilst the read-aloud context could therefore be construed as constraining, Bobby and Amelia's experiences in these episodes was discernible, and arguably, significant in repeat readings of books in subsequent child-initiated episodes.

## **6.2 Repetition and modal appropriation**

Whilst there was evidently greater affordance for interactive multimodal dialogue during child-initiated episodes, across both contexts, findings tentatively suggest that the dimensions of children's meaning making ensembles, and the depth of their narrative

interpretations developed with repeat readings. Owing to the 'focus story' approach to SBR described earlier, repeated engagement with a text was always available to the children in this setting.

During episode 8, Bobby's comparatively quiet and still participation was volitional; yet his focused gaze, facial expression and his occasional brief comments suggested deep involvement with the text. As Pennac (2006) stresses, non-response and quiet engagement are 'rights' of the reader. The potential affordance for interactive dialogue was available during both child-initiated episodes with Bobby, however during this first encounter with 'The Tiger Who Came To Tea', he adopted a quiet and contemplative approach, suggesting that, for Bobby some previous knowledge was requisite for narrative related interactive dialogue. Put another way, Bobby needed to get to grips with what was happening in the story before he was ready to discuss it.

Amelia, during both child-initiated episodes, chose very familiar texts, in which she constructed and explored divergent interpretations, suggesting alternative directions she felt the narrative could, or should have taken. Her comments relating to the Mother Owl's return during 'Owl Babies' possibly revealed, as Sipe (2000) suggests, an interpretation that was both analytical, in her evaluation of the situation, and personal, that aligned with her understandings of parental duty of care. At age 3 years-old, it was her familiarity that enabled Amelia to jointly 'read' the text with the researcher. Her verbal storytelling followed the written text, yet she played with gesture, intonation and facial expression, sometimes conveying an alternative connotation to that of the researcher.

As noted by Arizpe (2001), this study suggests that narrative interpretations develop, becoming more complex as children become more familiar with the text. Narrative and textual familiarity developed through repeat readings potentially afford deeper level interpretation and may enable children to construct interpretations that are socially compatible with their current understanding of the world (Rosenblatt, 1978), or that explore alternative possibilities'. However, acknowledging the limitations of this small-scale study, further focused research into the role of repetition in young children's literary meaning-making and narrative interpretation is requisite.

Analysis of children's participation through a multimodal lens revealed how Amelia and Bobby's participation transcended each discrete episodes, as they drew upon their experiences of the book and appropriated semiotic modes across contexts. Use of intonation and dramatic enactments of the narrative were predominantly responsive during read-alouds, and in contrast were often more spontaneous during child-initiated episodes. Reviewing readings of 'Shark in the Dark' in both contexts revealed that many apparently self-initiated elements of Bobby's meaning-making ensembles, in fact replicated or extended the dramatic enactments modelled by Liz during the read-aloud. Jewitt (2009) proposes that all semiotic modes are socially and culturally constructed; whilst Bobby's actions during the child-initiated episodes were volitional, oftentimes they were not novel, but appropriations of previously experienced versions of the narrative, remixed into a new meaning-making ensemble. Liz's modelling of transmediation of sign systems (Rowe, 1998; Seigel, 2006; Newfield, 2014), where meaning represented in the pictorial and written text was recast into

representation through dramatic embodied enactment, was a process which, arguably developed children's repertoires of semiotic resources. Bobby's appropriation of the enactment of looking through an imaginary telescope, for example, prompted him to question the protagonist's actions as he explored another layer of narrative interpretation. This suggests that experiences in the adult-led read-alouds developed not only children's textual knowledge, but also their knowledge of modal affordance and the possibilities for transmediation of meaning. Through repetition and modal appropriation, Amelia and Bobby created an interplay between read-aloud and child-initiated episodes; by providing semiotic tools, Liz became a virtual co-constructor in their meaning-making in subsequent episodes.

Thus, children's participation and narrative interpretations in SBR are complex and multifaceted, this study illuminates how the affordance for active participation, interactive dialogue and deeper level narrative interpretation can be thought of as cumulative. Opportunity for repetition and appropriation, coupled with contextual affordance enabled meaning making to evolve into divergent and individual interpretations. Rather than the read-aloud context constraining children's meaning-making and narrative interpretation, these findings emphasise their significance and value; Liz's animated storytelling and the opportunity for repetition, afforded by the setting's 'focus story' system, provided mechanisms that enriched subsequent episodes.

## 7 Conclusion

The two contexts examined in this study are typical in many early childhood settings, thus, these findings have implications for practice. We propose that for the potential of SBR in supporting young children's literacy to be fully realised, practitioners need to conceptualise children's participation in SBR not as single events, but rather as a meandering journey of participation with a storybook and its narrative, emerging and developing over time. Teacher-led read-aloud episodes, albeit less dialogic, were evidently valuable in children's subsequent engagements with the text. Thus, practices and provision that promote broad and ongoing experiences with picture storybooks may enable children to engage more deeply, creatively and critically with the narratives they encounter.

Previous research examining dialogic SBR has reported on both the gains in children's literacy attainment outcomes and the deeper levels of meaning achieved through narrative related dialogue. The gaps in research evidence related to: 1) ways in which differing contexts for SBR influence the nature of interactive dialogue and interpretations, and 2) influences of text repetition in SBR. This study contributes to the literature by exploring SBR activity settings through a multimodal lens in two distinct contexts in one preschool classroom; it surfaces the complexity of SBR and presents a more nuanced view.

The study revealed that whilst the interactional affordances of each distinct context shaped children's participation and narrative interpretation, those distinct contexts also became interwoven in children's journeys of participation with the storybook across repeat readings. Repetition across contexts was found to afford modal appropriation which supported children's volitional multimodal meaning making and deeper, multi-layered interpretations.

Hence, this paper highlights the importance of assimilating a repertoire of approaches to SBR in early childhood settings to enhance children's participation and deepen their engagement with literature.

This research worked with a limited data set, capturing the detail of just two children's participation in eight SBR episodes; however, whilst not generalisable, these findings are theoretically interesting because they provoke critical reflection regarding what is known about dialogic SBR and the processes through which young children make meaning and interpret storybooks. The nature of children's participation in SBR is multifaceted and whilst this paper has begun to surface that complexity, more extensive research is now requisite.

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## Featured Books

Hopgood, T. (2010) *It Was a Cold Dark Night*. Collins

Kerr, J. (1968 / 2006) *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*. Harper Collins

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