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ABSTRACT

The behaviors manifested by mothers of readers and mothers of nonreaders were observed as they taught their children two cognitive tasks. As a methodological control, both groups of mothers were required to teach two other children, one similar to and one different in ability from their own child. The subjects consisted of 40 first grade children, their mothers, and 80 additional first graders. Twenty of the mothers had children classified as problem readers and 20 had children classified as successful readers. Of the remaining first grade children, 40 were children with reading difficulties and 40 were successful readers. Each problem reader was matched with a successful reader for IQ, age, and sex. A mother initially taught her child two cognitive tasks; she then taught the same cognitive tasks to a child of the same reading ability as her own child and to a child with a different reading ability from that of her own child. The tasks consisted of teaching the child to match 12 pairs of line-drawn faces and to fit pegs of different lengths into holes of varying depths in such a manner that all the pegs were level across the top. The most significant findings was the intrusive, controlling, and negatively reinforcing teaching strategy of the mothers of nonreaders. (WR)

TEACHING STYLES OF MOTHERS OF "SUCCESSFUL" READERS AND "PROBLEM" READERS IN THE FIRST GRADE[1]

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The influence of the parent on the child's cognitive development and subsequent academic performance has been highlighted by the development of early childhood intervention programs which emphasize parental training procedures (Gordon, 1970a, 1970b; Gray and Klaus, 1968; Karnes, et al., 1970; Schaefer, 1969), and by research whose focus is on maternal teaching styles (Bee et al., 1969; Feshbach, 1973a, 1973b; Hess and Shipman, 1967). A consistent finding of these research studies were socio-ethnic differences in mother's reinforcement style observed in a parent-child teaching situation. In general, mothers from less economically advantaged backgrounds tended to make greater use of negative reinforcement relative to positive reinforcement than mothers from more economically advantaged backgrounds. In addition, this relationship between social class and reinforcement style was obtained not only for mothers' reinforcement of children's behavior but also for children's reinforcement of each other's behavior (Feshbach, 1973a; Feshbach and Devor, 1969). This held true across a number of different cultures, middle class mothers and middle class children displaying more positive reinforcement patterns than lower class mothers and children regardless of whether the culture was American, English, or Israeli (Feshbach, 1973b, 1973c).

Since negative reinforcements are likely to discourage exploratory behaviors in the child and foster avoidance responses incompatible with

effective learning and since the socio-economic differences that have been found in reinforcement styles are consistent with the socio-ethnic differences that have been observed in academic achievement (Hess and Shipman, 1967; 1968; Bee et al., 1969), it seems reasonable to conclude that reinforcement style may be one of the factors mediating socio-ethnic differences in cognitive performance and academic achievement.

The more frequent use of negative reinforcement by lower class families may reflect the greater stress, frustration and environmental pressure to which poorer families are exposed. Poverty, however, does not lead inevitably to stress, negative reinforcement and academic non-achievement, and poor performance in school and general learning difficulties are not necessarily the exclusive domain of the disadvantaged child.

Middle class children also have learning difficulties and these learning difficulties cannot be explained only by socio-economic differences. Personality patterns, variations in response to situational stresses, and cultural expectations are other possible sources of differences in patterns of reinforcement. However, it is expected that whatever the source of reinforcement style, variations in reinforcement patterns can be expected to be associated with variations in cognitive performance.

To test the generality of these assertions, one of the variables we examined was the variations in maternal reinforcement patterns that exist within a particular social class and to link the variations in reinforcement style with variations in the child's cognitive performance. In addition, the present study attempted to identify other significant parental teaching behaviors which might also mediate the child's cognitive

and academic competence such as the mother's attempts to orient and organize the task for the child; her directive and controlling behavior; her communicative style and her intrusiveness into the task.

These behaviors were observed in the context of having mothers of readers and mothers of non-readers teach their children two cognitive tasks. As a methodological control, both groups of mothers were required to teach two other children, one similar to and one different in ability from their own child.

METHOD

Subjects

The sample consisted of 40 first grade children, their mothers and 80 additional first graders, comprising a total of 120 children and 40 adults. Twenty of the mothers had children who were categorized as problem readers, while the other 20 mothers had children who had been categorized as successful readers. Of the remaining first grade children, 40 were children with reading difficulties while 40 were successful readers.

Each problem reader was matched with a successful reader for IQ, age and sex, and all children were of at least average intelligence with no manifest neurological impairment. Three-fourths of the sample in each group were male and the total sample was drawn from schools in predominantly middle class areas. The designation of successful and problem readers was established by the Early Prediction and Prevention of Reading Disabilities project at UCLA. This project collected and made available data on the children's IQ., reading ability, and teacher evaluation of the child's competence and classroom performance.

Procedures

A mother initially taught her own child two cognitive tasks, she then taught the same co nitive tasks to a child of the same reading status as ..er own child and finally, she taught the same two tasks to a child of a different reading status than her own child. The mothers were observed individually with each of the children for approximately a ten minute period. The range of observation time for each individual mother-child pair was from 50 seconds to 12 minutes.

Experimental Room

The experimental room was an empty classroom, made available to the present study, in a Los Angeles public school. A large wooden screen with a one-way mirror was placed in a corner of the room behind which the two observers were seated during the experimental sessions. In front of the screen a small table with two chairs was placed for the mother and child. The mother-child dyad sat facing the one-way mirror so the observers could easily view the mother-child teaching interaction.

Experimental Tasks

For the first task, the parent was asked to teach the child how to match 12 pairs of simple line-drawn faces. This task contained twenty-four plaques with a "funny" face on each plaque. The second ask, also a relatively non-academic one was similarly presented. This latter task, somewhat more complicated than the initial one, consisted of nine cylinders or pegs of different lengths fitting into holes of varying depths. The purpose of this task was to fit the pegs into the holes in such a manner that all the pegs were level across their tops.

A reliable behavioral scoring schema based on minute to minute time samples was developed which permitted the observation and scoring of the

following maternal behaviors: pre-task orientation time, non-verbal organization, positive reinforcing statements, negative reinforcing statements, controlling and directive statements, autonomy fostering statements, specific statements, general statements, specific statements after error, specific statements after success, manual guidance.

Post Test

For the post test each child was readministered the first of the two tasks. The child's completion time and number of items correct was recorded.

Reliability

During the experimental session two observers recorded the mother-child teaching interaction. One observed the mother, and the other the child. Observer reliability, obtained on 14 mother-child dyads prior to the initiation of this study yielded an overall correlation coefficient of .89 for all observed categories with a range of .81 to .98 for the individual categories.

Scoring Procedures

Although there were no differences between the two groups of mothers in time spent in the instructional sequence, there were individual variations in teaching interaction time. Therefore in those observations where time was a meaningful factor it was decided to convert the raw data information into rate of behavior per minute scores.

Results

A 2 x 3 x 2 analysis of variance with repeated measures was used to evaluate the results. The factors were mother category (mothers of non-readers, mothers of readers), child-group (own child, other non-reading child, other reading child), and task (Task I, easy task; Task II, difficult task) with task constituting the repeated measure.

Results for the rate per minute observations scores for both groups of mothers in the teaching interaction with their own children, other non-reading children and other reading children are summarized in Table 1. In accordance with expectation, the teaching styles of the mothers of the readers and the mothers of the non-readers differed systematically on several dimensions. The mothers of the non-readers were significantly more controlling and directive than the mothers of the readers ($p < .05$), they intruded significantly more into the task ($p < .001$), they gave significantly more negative reinforcement ($p < .001$) and they gave more negative feedback after the child's error ($p < .01$). On the other hand, the mothers of the readers organized the task more non-verbally ($p < .05$) and spent more time on pre-task organization of Task II, than the mothers of non-readers, who spent more time on the pre-task organization of Task I, the easier task.

The means for children's performance time on the post-test and the means for items right on the post test are presented in Table 2. The longest completion time scores were obtained by the children who were non-readers and who were taught by the mothers of the non-readers. The lowest completion time scores were obtained by the children who were readers and who were taught by the mothers of the readers ($p < .001$). In addition, however, the children who were non-readers and who had been taught by the mothers of the readers received shorter completion-time scores than the children who were readers and were taught by the mothers of the non-readers. On items correct on the post-test, children who were taught by the mothers of the readers had more items correct than children who were taught by the mothers of the non-readers.

Discussion

The major findings of this study indicated that the teaching style of mothers of children with different academic competencies differed. These findings are consistent with those theorists who relate the socialization practices of the parent with the cognitive functioning of the child (Feshbach, 1972, 1973a, 1973b, 1973c; Hess and Shipman, 1968, 1969; Bee et al., 1969, Brophy, 1970).

Mothers of non-readers spent less time orienting the children to the task, organized the task less, were more controlling and directive, used more negative reinforcement, and were more task intrusive than the mothers of the readers. The teaching style of the mothers appears to have had a disruptive effect on the performance of the children they taught. This appears especially evident in the poorer performance on the post test by the academically more competent readers who had been taught by the mothers of non-readers.

The most significant finding in the present study was the intrusive, controlling and negatively reinforcing teaching strategy of the mothers of the non-readers. This was a strategy almost designed to assure the child's own minimal contact with his environment. It was the mother who interacted with the task materials rather than the child, and at best, the child was only a marionette in the controlling hands of the mother.

Although Piaget's research has not stressed the role the parent plays in the cognitive development of the child, the conclusions of this study are consonant with his theory which stresses the child's activity in acquiring the cognitive universals. In the view of Piaget, the process of cognitive development is a continuous interaction between the child and his environment. The parent who limits the child's exploration

of his environment by his controlling and directive style, who intrudes into the child's ongoing activity, who gives negative feedback thereby not giving specificity to the child's response, may severely and adversely affect not only the child's immediate academic activities, but his general problem solving and coping behavior as well.

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Footnotes

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2. This study was conducted by the first author in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy Degree in the Department of Education, UCLA.

TABLE 1

SUMMARY TABLE OF MOTHERS' DEPENDENT MEASURES FOR

MOTHERS OF READERS AND MOTHERS OF NON-READERS

FOR TASK I AND II COMBINED

	Mothers of Readers (N=20)			Mothers of Non-Readers (N=20)			
	Own	Other N R	Other R	Own	Other N R	Other R	
§ Pre-Task Orient. Time	22.33	24.83	27.38	21.13	21.75	27.85	
§§ Non-Verb. Organization.	0.42	0.39	0.41	0.33	0.31	0.30	*
§§ Control. & Directive	0.13	0.08	0.10	0.24	0.14	0.12	*
§§ Manual Guid.	0.06	0.06	0.05	0.33	0.42	0.36	***
§§ Positive Reinforcement	0.48	0.46	0.55	0.40	0.52	0.58	
§§ Negative Reinforcement	0.12	0.04	0.04	0.26	0.14	0.09	***
§§ General Statements	0.20	0.16	0.19	0.22	0.23	0.18	
§§ Specific Statements	0.27	0.25	0.28	0.26	0.29	C.32	
§§ Negative info. after Child's Error	0.24	0.19	0.18	0.32	0.24	0.30	**

§ Mean duration score

§§ Rate per minute scores

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$

TABLE 2

MEAN DURATION TIME AND ITEMS
CORRECT ON THE POST TEST
FOR
READERS AND NON-READERS

	Taught by Mothers of Readers N=20			Taught by Mother of Non-Readers N=20			
	Own	Other N R	Other R	Own	Other N R	Other R	
Post-Test Time	156.55	170.45	137.65	352.55	308.50	232.50	***
Items Right on Post Test	12.00	11.30	12.00	10.90	10.00	11.80	*

* $p<.05$

** $p<.01$

*** $p<.001$