



Poverty, affluence and the Socratic method: Parents' questions versus statements within collaborative problem-solving



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ABSTRACT

Parents' rhetorical questions to preschoolers are ubiquitous within collaborative problem-solving, and central to Vygotskian pedagogy. This perspective privileges questions as a discourse structure, important for emergent metacognitive self-regulation. Few studies investigate effects of poverty on parents' collaborative talk, particularly frequency of questions relative to statements, or factors such as parenting-stress and children's language ability. Analyses of 25 parents' scaffolding language during a construction task revealed suppressed questioning among low-SES parents, and among only those High-SES parents reporting high parenting stress. Correlations controlling for child age and language ability revealed associations between parenting stress and less frequent questioning as a discourse style. Discussion focuses on the question of how exposure to rhetorical questions helps children internalize language as a thinking tool.

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The Socratic method is a well-known concept of dialectical teaching, based on the principle of sequential, targeted questions, often rhetorical, that we normally associate with college level philosophy, debate or advanced critical thinking. However, it may have its earliest appearance in early child development under conditions of high quality teaching and parenting (Feholt and Lecusay, 2010; Whitby, 1992; Zucker et al., 2010). In the present study we explored parents' use of scaffolding language during a collaborative problem solving activity with their preschoolers, and focused on the relative frequency of questions compared to statements across levels of family socioeconomic status (SES).

Within any task-oriented exchange between an adult and child, the distinction between a question and a statement turns on a mere grammatical inflection (e.g. "That piece fits there." versus "Does that piece fit there?"). However, this grammatical simplicity in practice belies a profoundly different communicative orientation that may have important pedagogical implications (Bailey et al., 2013). We analyzed dyadic (parent-child) collaborative activity in a context where children engaged with conceptual challenges that required planning, strategic thought and self-monitoring—areas recognized as key facets of metacognition (Neitzel and Stright, 2003; Stright et al., 2001). Parent-child dyads were recruited from high and low SES preschools and were invited to collaborate on the construction of a marble-run assembly. The term *scaffolding* in this study

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describes parent language that has the inherent *potential* to help children become aware of how they think about facets of a problem.

Metacognition, in its many forms, is important for early intellectual achievement because a child's awareness of mental processes establishes an intellectual foundation required to consciously and strategically plan future action (Henry and Norman, 1996; Justice et al., 1997); monitor goal directed activity (Welsh, 1991); and evaluate results against previous mental representation (Zimmerman, 2007). The quality and pervasiveness of adult to child questioning may be central to this process (Gauvain and Rogoff, 1989; Milligan et al., 2007; Neitzel and Stright, 2003). Questions may serve a particular important role in supporting emergent metacognitive ability because they implicitly train children to become routinely conscious of what they know and do not know, and to evaluate their own language, their plans, strategies, and past action (Birbili and Karagiorgou, 2010; Ely et al., 2001). Recognition of this function is also present in the early education literature (Dickinson and Smith, 1991; Zucker et al., 2010).

Despite the ubiquity of questions within parent-child discourse, the precise description of how questions function at the cognitive level has only fully emerged with growing appreciation of Vygotsky's theory of scaffolded learning within the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1986). Questions within the ZPD, because of their grammatical structure, oblige children to engage with a conceptual problem that has been framed for them by the adult collaborator. This process of co-construction, according to Vygotskian theory, is what underlies children's deeper *internalization* of key metacognitive processes, such as self-monitoring, planning and strategic thought. We argue, as others do, that questions within scaffolding language are critical because only questions *explicitly* request some kind of analysis from the child. Moreover, questions to children may model a linguistic form that over time is internalized as an intrapersonal thinking tool that can extend to new contexts of problem solving, and be part of a growing ability for intellectual self-regulation (Chouinard, 2007).

Many landmark scaffolding studies that have explored adult-child collaborative language have incorporated questions into their coding systems (e.g. Gauvain and Rogoff, 1989; Jacobs, 2004; Neitzel and Stright, 2003; Radziszewska and Rogoff, 1988; Ruffman et al., 2002). The large literature on parent-child discourse tacitly privileges questions as a linguistic form within scaffolding. Direct statements can also provide scaffolding, by pointing out salient features of a problem, alerting a child to mistakes and opportunities; and, when in imperative form, command action or attention. Most studies, however, do not formally report separate analyses for the frequency of questions versus statements, especially as a ratio that may reveal important pedagogical orientations within the context of adult scaffolding.

Outside of the child legal testimony and suggestibility literature, frequency of statements, versus questions, is rarely explored. There is evidence that among adults that rhetorical questions have more influence on critical thinking than direct statements (e.g. Burnkrant and Howard, 1984), but among children this distinction is not as well established. Available research suggests that favoring questions over statements during joint tasks may occur as a function of maternal elicitation style (Haden et al. (2009) and parent SES, with higher rates among more affluent parents (e.g. Howard, 2008; McGillicuddy-de Lisi, 1988). Questions versus statements from parents may also vary according to children's abilities. de Falco et al. (2011), for example, reported that parents of children with Down's syndrome used more direct statements and fewer questions during dyadic play than parents with typically developing children. However, other research has documented the reverse pattern in other contexts. For example, Robinson et al. (2009) reported that mothers of children who had lower self-regulation ability and poorer attention, tended to use more questions, particularly in the form of hints and prompts about strategy, compared to other dyads. Similarly, Tompkins & Farrar (2011) found that mothers of children with specific language impairment increased their use of elaborations and questions during autobiographical memory and story narrative activities, when responding to their children's own contributions. However, mothers' frequency of statements did not show this reciprocation effect, suggesting the possibility that questions have a higher status in parents' spontaneous support of collaborative learning.

1. How may socioeconomic status affect parents' questions?

There is an extensive literature on family characteristics associated with parent-child talk during collaborative activity (e.g. Huston et al., 1997; Sun and Rao, 2012), particularly how low SES predicts fewer routinized questions that require children to reflect on what they know, and how to articulate this awareness (Freund, 1990; Hall et al., 1988; Neitzel and Stright, 2003). However, these studies do not compare questions as a grammatical structure against statement forms. Though a very simple distinction, few researchers have formally analyzed the relative frequency of parents' questions and statements in a comparison of high and low SES dyads.

Deeper analysis of "poverty" and "affluence" is also needed to better understand conditions that may impact parents' supportive language with children. In particular, parenting stress has been shown to be an important proximal factor associated with lowered ability to provide intellectually rich discourse to children (Demers et al., 2010; Thompson and Foster, 2013; Thompson and Williams, 2006).

Thus an important set of questions is, firstly, whether there is suppressed scaffolding discourse overall among low SES parents; or whether are there SES differences in the rate of questions relative to statements during collaborative discourse. Secondly, parenting stress, particularly that associated with difficult to manage children, or situations of tenuous attachment bonds, may play a role in the quality of intellectual discourse. Other researchers have identified more specific areas of risk. Noel et al. (2008) for example, reported that children from low SES families who reported high levels of stress had suppressed

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