



Preschool teachers' reference to theory of mind topics in three storybook contexts: Reading, reconstruction and telling



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We explored teachers' mental-state discourse with preschoolers.
- Three storybook contexts were compared: reading, reconstruction and telling.
- Mental-state discourse appeared more during telling and reconstruction.
- Teachers should integrate all three interactions in their pedagogical practice.
- Teachers can use books to promote children's ToM.

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ABSTRACT

The study investigated preschool teachers' references to Theory of Mind (ToM) topics in three storybook contexts: reading, reconstruction, and telling. One hundred teachers introduced and discussed three picture books with groups of five children. The findings indicate that teachers used more mental-state utterances, especially cognitive mental states, during telling compared to the two other contexts, and more during reconstruction than during reading. They referred to false belief more during reconstruction and telling than during reading. The findings can assist in guiding teachers how to read and tell stories with children while integrating ToM topics.

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1. Introduction

In Western countries, reading books is a routine activity of preschool teachers with children (Gosen, 2012) which helps enrich their language and develop their literacy skills (Mol, Bus, de Jong, & Smeets, 2008). Interest in the additional potential of books for promoting children's social understanding in general, and Theory of Mind (ToM) in particular, is growing. Shared reading is recognized as being valuable for ToM development. Two additional contexts – reconstruction and telling of storybooks – may also elicit conversations on ToM topics and contribute to children's socio-cognitive development and social skills.

The goal of the current study was to investigate and compare how preschool teachers use storybooks as a tool for discussing mental states with 4–5 year-old children in three different storybook contexts: (1) *storybook reading*, where the teacher reads the story's text to the children; (2) *storybook reconstruction*, in which the teacher is familiar with the book's text but reconstructs the story to the children using a wordless version of the book; and (3) *storybook telling*, in which the teacher uses a wordless version of the book to tell the story. These three contexts differ in their reliance on the book's text and illustrations and might therefore reveal differences in teachers' conversations with children on mental states.

We examined the frequency of teachers' mental-state talk, referring to different types of mental-state terms (cognition, i.e. knowledge and beliefs, desires and emotions) and to central mental-state aspects (false beliefs, mental causality and different points of view) during interactions with small groups of children.

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The findings may assist teachers to better integrate the three contexts into their ToM discourse during storybook interactions with children, using books for promoting children's social understanding.

1.1. ToM and its development during early childhood

ToM is an essential aspect of people's social understanding, and is defined as the ability to understand, explain and predict human behavior by attributing mental states to self and others (Meltzoff, 2011). This ability includes understanding several types of mental states, mainly cognitive mental states, desires and emotions. Understanding cognitive mental states includes, for example, understanding knowledge, i.e. what it means for someone to know something and how knowledge is acquired (Flavell, 2004), and belief, i.e. comprehending people's thoughts and that these may differ from person to person (Wellman, 2012). Desire refers to what people want or are attracted to (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995), and emotions consist of people's inner feelings.

A major change in ToM ability occurs between the ages of 3 and 6 years, when children begin to understand complex mental states such as contrasting desires (e.g., a particular sticker is one child's favorite and is the least liked by another child) (Moore et al., 1995), and hidden emotions (e.g., when a child is disappointed by a birthday present he receives but conceals what he really feels and overtly expresses happiness) (Harris, 2005). A crucial development in ToM, which occurs between the ages of 4 and 5, is gaining the ability to attribute false belief, i.e. to recognize that others can have beliefs about the world that differ from yours and also from the real state of affairs. For example, a person may have a false belief about the location of an object because he or she did not see that it was moved to a new location. Research shows that 4–5 year-old children who saw the removal of an object can understand the other person's false belief, but 3 year-olds cannot yet differentiate between their own true belief regarding the object's location and the other's false belief (Wellman, 2012).

ToM development has consequences for children's social functioning. Children with more advanced ToM are better in resolving conflicts with friends (Dunn & Brown, 1994), their pretend play is more complex and they are more popular with peers (Astington & Barriault, 2001) than children with less advanced ToM. Reading and discussing books with children can enhance ToM development (Adrián, Clemente, & Villanueva, 2007). Thus, teachers who regularly read books with children can contribute to the important development of ToM (Astington & Edward, 2010).

1.2. Mediating ToM topics during shared reading

The socio-cultural theory of (Vygotsky, 1978) is instrumental in determining preschool teachers' role in enhancing children's cognitive development in general, and ToM in particular. Teachers can assist children's development by engaging in activities in which the teachers provide the children with the optimal assistance and mediation for expanding their abilities. The nature of this assistance is determined by the child's "zone of proximal development" which describes the difference between what a child can achieve independently and what he/she can achieve with expert guidance. Vygotsky emphasized the centrality of adults' verbal mediation in bridging between children's actual and potential level of functioning. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) suggested the term "scaffolding" for describing adults' support of children's cognition by means of giving instructions, asking questions, letting children do what they can and guiding them in the more difficult parts of a task.

Sipe (2008) relied on Vygotsky's theory when elaborating on teachers' scaffolding during shared reading with 4–8 year-old children. Teachers' scaffolding assists children in understanding storybook narrative elements, such as inter-textual relations (e.g., linking the verbal text and the illustrations), comparing the story to other stories, or reflecting on a relevant personal experience. By doing this, teachers provide children with opportunities for constructive meaning-making with books which encourage multiple and creative interpretations and promote cognitive development.

Bruner (1986, 1990) emphasized that stories are a powerful means for creating meaning of people's behavior and interactions. Stories are about people who act in certain ways in accordance with their mental states (e.g., their beliefs, desires, and emotions). Physical events play a role in stories chiefly by affecting the mental states of the story's characters (Bruner, 1991). Thus, Bruner (1986) presented a dual "landscape" model of the storybook reading experience. The model consists of the action level which involves the plot and focuses on the story characters' behavior, and the consciousness level which involves the mental states that underlie the characters' behavior.

In line with Bruner's model, Peskin (1996) found that young children are capable of understanding story characters' actions before being able to comprehend their thoughts and beliefs. She explored children's understanding of false beliefs in fairy tales, e.g. *Little Red Riding Hood*. The findings indicated that 5 year-old children, but not 3 year-olds, understood the wolf's deceptive intention when pretending to be Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother.

These findings suggest that mere exposure to a book's text is not sufficient for ensuring young children's understanding of the characters' ToM (Slaughter, Peterson, & Mackintosh, 2007). Thus, in line with Vygotsky's theory which assigns a central role to the adult mediator and Bruner's and Sipe's notions of scaffolding, it is important that teachers engage children in conversations about books' stories, drawing children's attention to the characters' mental states and elaborating on their mental processes.

1.3. Adult–child mental-state talk: mental-state terms and mental-state aspects

References to mental-state terms and mental-state aspects in adult–child mental-state discourse during shared reading are positively correlated with children's ToM. The frequency and diversity of mental-state terms in conversation during shared reading are linked with children's ToM (Dunn, 2006). Specifically, adults' usage of cognitive terms (e.g., think and guess) is strongly linked with children's false belief task performance at the age of 3–5 years (Adrián et al., 2007). Books whose central theme is cognitive and which include the character's false belief encourage adults to refer to this theme while using cognitive mental states (Adrián, Clemente, Villanueva, & Rieffe, 2005). Furthermore, references to emotions and desires during shared reading foster emotional and ToM development (LaBounty, Wellman, Olson, Lagattuta, & Liu, 2008).

In addition to mental-state terms, researchers have discovered that reference to three central mental-state aspects during conversations with children about books is important: false beliefs, mental causality, and people's different points of view. In conversations on false beliefs, it is important to explicitly refer to book characters' thoughts and beliefs, as well as to the distinction between the characters' mental state and reality. For example, "The queen thinks that Snow White is dead, but she is living in the forest" (Adrián et al., 2007). References to mental causality include elaborations on feelings, desires and thoughts that underlie the characters' behaviors (LaBounty et al., 2008). This is accomplished by asking "why" and "how" questions about the characters' mental

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