

Supporting language and literacy in the early years

This article analyses how storytelling, as part of a self-reflective assignment, could develop young children's language and literacy skills. Throughout this analysis, there will be reference to the story 'A Squash and A Squeeze' by Julia Donaldson and Axel Scheffler (2003) to assist in explaining ideas and theories. Firstly, we will be discussing the benefits of storytelling, then we will be focusing on the importance of the adult in developing children's language and literacy. The concept of 'rhyme', and how rhyme in storybooks can assist children's oral skills will be discussed, and finally the benefits of using props when storytelling will be considered. The research undertaken can improve students' and practitioners' understanding of language and literacy, which in turn, could enable settings to better support young children's oracy, reading and writing skills.

Neuroscience, which is the study of how the brain develops, demonstrates how crucial the brain development is in the first years of childhood. At birth, the brain is highly malleable and full of potential (Whitehead, 2010). The brain systems must allow babies to acquire any and all languages to which they are exposed, but its millions of brain cells (neurons) are not linked by the imperative neural pathways (synapses) that make adequate emotional development and complex thinking possible (Kuhl, 2010). The vital connection is triggered by daily experiences of being cuddled, read to, sung and talked to, played with and generally stimulated. Reading stories to children, therefore, will stimulate these pathways developing their understanding of language and literacy (Whitehead, 2010). Kuhl (2010) believes that children's brains are perfectly poised to decode speech in a way that the adult brain cannot.

Darling-Hammond (2019) claims that high-quality early education is vital for securing children's long-term academic success. Giving children the opportunities to engage in meaningful language and early print activity of reading stories can develop a firm foundation for reading and literacy skills.

Poor language, speech and communication skills can have an effect on the child's behaviour, mental health, social and emotional development, even into adolescence and adulthood (Raban and Scull, 2013; Welsh Government 2017; Goldfeld, 2017). As literacy is vital to school success in all subject areas, children who do not grasp the fundamentals of literacy in the early years may endure long-term struggles with studies. They are likely to experience frustration, anxiety and difficulties in self-regulating emotions, which in turn, could lead to reading difficulties due to avoiding literacy tasks (Welsh Government 2017; Goldfeld, 2017), whereas learners who speak and write effectively are prepared to play a full part in life and work. Rich experiences of speaking and listening throughout story telling activities will support children's reading and writing skills too (Welsh Government, 2019).

Hart and Risley (2003, cited in Welsh Government, 2019) believe that the first 3 years of a child's life are key in helping them to develop all aspects of their needs to communicate, and that reading stories and responding to children increases their capacity for language and later literacy. Therefore, responding to children who may say, 'It's a chicken', when I was reading about a hen, supports their vocabulary by

encouraging them to ask questions. Answering children also extends their knowledge and vocabulary in addition to supporting their understanding.

The speaking styles we imitate early in life last a lifetime (Kuhl, 2010). Dr Montessori wrote 'Because humans have language, they have power to transform themselves their communities and their environment. Language is used by humans to communicate, to share ideas and to hand these ideas on to future generations' (cited in Feez, 2010). However, as Language skills are passed down each generation and research demonstrate that children from disadvantaged families are more likely to have poor language skills than children from advantaged families (Welsh Government, 2017). Those already living in poverty may continue indefinitely since well-developed speech, communication and language skills are vital for children's successful learning in school and future education and employment (Welsh Government, 2017).

According to the National Literacy Trust (2017) most parents and children prefer to read stories from printed books. However, children from disadvantaged backgrounds look at or read stories on a touchscreen more frequently. This should be encouraged, as tablets may be able to support children with their language and literacy skills. Applications (apps) can help to develop phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence and early marking, which may be beneficial to children whose parents are not able to offer this support to their child on their own. Even though adults cannot and should not be replaced by digital media, children using tablets with the support of an adult can bring their language and literacy skills on, especially children from disadvantaged backgrounds where the adults may not use as many words. They may also support the pronunciation of words and spelling if the apps speak slowly and clearly.

A study carried out by Hart and Risley on 42 families of children aged 7 months until the children were 3 years old, revealed that the children of professional families said 30 million more words over that time than children from families living in poverty. It was not because of their resources or care. It was due to the interaction of the parents and the child. The professional families spoke 2000 words an hour and the families in poverty only spoke 200 words an hour. If words are not repeated back to children neuros shrink and die (Fitzgerald, 2014); therefore, reading stories and responding to children who call out animal names and repeating words keeps the neuros alive and builds on the children's vocabulary. Ensuring that children from disadvantaged families use language and literacy applications on their tablet with and adult is vital in supporting their speech and language skills.

Whitebread (2012) maintains that Vygotsky believed that children's learning takes place through social situations, such as when they interact with their friends, teachers and other experts. Therefore, by reading stories and talking about them maximizes the children's ability to interact with other children and adults. According to Smidt (2013), Vygotsky suggested that in the developing child, higher psychological functions appear twice. Inter-mental, which is between mind and mind in other words, by sharing ideas or concepts, and intra-mental, meaning only in the mind of the individual. Therefore, through sharing the story and allowing children to ask questions once shared becomes available internally to the child. Children can make some sort of

mental map or image or thought of what was shared, and this is now available to them without intervention (Smidt, 2013).

Repetitive sayings in stories enables children to join in. Pausing before saying the repetitive phrase, such as 'Wise old man won't you help me please?.' allows children to remember what is coming next and repeat the words. This is a format of the 'Language acquisition support system' that Bruner believed parents employ to facilitate their children's acquisition of language (Smidt, 2013). Kuhl (2010) claims that this ability to mimic vocally may also rely upon the brain's social understanding mechanisms; this is what enables the human mirroring system for smooth social interactions. Keenan (2016) believes that they pick up words by hearing other people and imitating their behaviour. Bandura (cited in Keenan, 2016) as well as Meltzoff and Moore (1999, cited in Whitebread, 2012) believe that children's learning took place through observation or imitation. Therefore, by empathising the words in stories children should hear them clearly and be able to join in repeating them. Thereby, the adult is scaffolding the children's language, which assists the child to gain complex language sooner than they may on their own (Bruner, 1983).

Infants, however, must begin life with brain systems that allow them to acquire any, and all, languages to which they are exposed. Infants can acquire language as either an auditory-vocal, or a visual-manual code, on roughly the same timetable (Petitto and Marentette, 1991, cited in Kuhl, 2010). Vince (2016) also believes that it is not possible to decipher language and make sense of what is being said to you in a set time and he suggests that your brain is primed to work it out subconsciously.

According to Keenan (2016), Chomsky suggested that language was innate as the rules of language were too complicated to be obtained by children in the short time it took them to learn a language. Whereas Kuhl (2010) states that children copy and absorb the speech they hear from people surrounding them. Motherese and caretaker speech used to talk to children is different to that used to talk to adults; it gains the child's attention and therefore aids them to learn quickly. The caregiver speech is often significantly more coherent and more beneficial than Chomsky suggests.

Encouraging children to join in with rhyming stories helps them to pick up on sounds, syllables and rhymes in the words they hear and promotes good phonological awareness (Murray, 2012). Phonological awareness lets children recognize and work with the sounds of spoken language. In pre-schoolers, it means being able to pick out rhyming words (Johnson, no date). Brown (2014) maintains that phonemic awareness is instilled in oral language and provides the bases for reading development. Children who struggle to hear and use phonemes orally will have a challenging time learning how to relate these phonemes to graphemes when they see them in written words. This pre-phonics problem interferes with the learning of letter and sound connections.

The repeated phrase 'Wise old man won't you help me please, my house is a squash and a squeeze', is similar to playground songs, and chants that show evidence of complex rhythms and phonological patterning, as well as the use of alliteration and assonance. Rhymes like these encourage children's willingness to engage in social language play, this is another example of Bruner's 'Language acquisition support system' (Bruner, 1983 cited in Smidt, 2016). Using props, such as toy animals can

encourage children to later play with them and retell the story or even just say the rhyme. This open-ended process of trial and error without worry of failure, enables children to learn and grow (Bower, 2014).

A study of 400 children by Bryant and Bradley, carried out in 1985, discovered that children who had good rhyming skills were likely to develop into better readers and speakers in their future. Goswami and Bryant (2016) claim that children make faster progress when they use rhyme to make analogies. For example, if children recognise the similarity between self and shelf, rug and jug, egg and leg, man and plan and so on, then they can use rhyme analogy to anticipate that these words will be pronounced in the same way (Bower, 2014).

According to Neaum (2018) research demonstrates that playful and supported participation in literacy activities strengthens young children's early literacy learning. Christie and Roskos (2013, cited in Neaum, 2018) recommend that settings should provide children with opportunities to play with literacy and role-play. Using props such as toy animals when reading a story will give children this opportunity to use the animals in their play to retell the story themselves afterwards, supporting their dramatic and literacy play. This play can involve children using private speech. Vygotsky believed that self-directing speech is central to all cognitive development (Bee and Boyd, 2010). Providing this opportunity of using the toys as prompts to help children retell the story supports their first steps to reading (Smidt, 2013).

To conclude, children do not grasp language accidentally; they absorb and copy the speech they hear around them. There have been a few authentic reports of children raised without human contact, that when they were found they were entirely without speech (Aitchison, 2007). We can establish therefore that adults play a vital role in supporting children's language skills. Children from families where language skills are poor, can support their child with the use of digital media. However, this must not replace the adult as social interaction is vital in supporting children's development. Reading stories in fun, song-like ways with enthusiasm, helps to keep children's interest and supports them to remember the words, giving them opportunity to sing when in free play. Ensuring words are spoken slowly and clearly help children to hear the phonemes.

Repeating phrases slowly and clearly and encouraging children to join in helps them with their phonemic awareness. Having good oral skills will support good reading skills. Pausing throughout stories to allow time for the children to say the words and using the words can support oral language development, which provides children with the bases for understanding text and communicating effectively (Brown, 2014).

Preschool children need rich and varied oral language experiences. They base phonology on the sounds they hear and not on visual experiences. Reading stories clearly and empathising words provides a quality oral learning environment, which will have an enriching effect on phonological skills (Goswami and Bryant, 2016).

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