

## **The importance of storytelling when supporting children's language development**

There is a growing concern that many young children nowadays are starting nursery and school with a language delay. This paper intends to discuss the importance of storytelling as a resource to be used by practitioners in order to support children in their language and literacy abilities. Furthermore, this paper will discuss in more detail three specific aspects of storytelling and how these aspects support children in their language development. According to Crerar (2018), more than 25% percent of children aged four and five years old in the UK are starting school without the ability of being able to communicate in full sentences.

In Wales, primary school teachers state that it is a regular occurrence to see young children having difficulties with their speech and language and falling behind other children in their class (Save the Children, 2016). This can have additional effects on children's education, as further research by Save the Children (2015) demonstrates that children who start education with a speech and language delay are often still behind in literacy when they finish primary school at age 11. The Hanen Centre (2016) supports this, stating that children can fall behind in their literacy if they are not provided with the support they need from a young age, in order to be able to participate fully in conversations and communicate during activities. The Hanen Centre (2016) continues to say that if children with language delay do receive the support that they need from practitioners and other primary caregivers, their language and literacy can improve. This intervention into their early language development is critical for the further development of the literacy skills that are necessary for every child to succeed in their future on both an academic and personal level.

Having poor language and literacy skills creates a negative impact on children in a variety of ways. 57% of teachers say that children who struggle with speaking full sentences find it harder to make friends in school; 85% say that children are struggling with expressing their thoughts and emotions as a consequence of language delay; and, 84% say that language delay impacts on the child's ability to learn to read (Save the Children, 2016). I Can (No date), the children's communication charity, further supports these findings and portrays that children will struggle throughout many aspects of their life including, education, social relationships, future employment. This also puts children at risk of mental health problems and even committing criminal offences in the future; all as a result of having poor spoken language abilities. Approximately 1.4 million children in the UK have a language delay and communication problems that they will not grow out of, and that equates to about two or three children in every UK classroom (I Can, No Date; Welsh Government, 2020). Bishop

and Leonard (2014) further support that language delay can result in long-term problems for children.

Furthermore, 75% of teachers say that a lack of concentration in the classroom is another consequence of children starting with a language delay. 70% of teachers agree that these children also struggle to follow basic activities set to them and struggle with listening to simple instructions, while 52% also believe that having a speech delay can cause the child to be less likely to enjoy school (Save the Children, 2016).

The Welsh Government (2020) and The Borgen Project (2015) say that almost 400,000 children do not have books at home and that children who do have books at home are 6 times more likely to have a higher than expected reading age than those who do not. Children who grow up surrounded by books have a major boost in their literacy and numeracy development compared to those who do not. Children who do not have access to books are more likely to have lower reading and writing abilities, to struggle with phonological awareness, poor communication skills and are more likely to drop out from school (The Welsh Government, 2020; The Borgen Project, 2015).

Storytelling has been around for thousands of years (Mendoza, 2015) and has many benefits on a child's literacy skills, including enabling children to become better listeners and readers while also expanding their vocabulary (Agosto, 2016). Oral storytelling is portrayed as an activity that is debatably hardwired within us and in the social world the 'organising principle' of our experiences and understanding is narrative (Bruner, 1990). According to Hibbin (2016) storytelling not only has benefits for literacy development but also a child's psychosocial development and creates an element of empathy and self-expression. Nishioka (2016) continues to explain the benefits that storytelling also has on language skills. Storytelling has benefits on many aspects of a child's holistic development. Storytelling is defined as an interactive art used to engage the listeners imagination by using words and actions to create images, storytelling can be done in a variety of ways and does not always even require a book (National Storytelling Network, No Date).

Rhyme is a major benefit to children through storytelling. Read, Macauley and Furay (2014) say that rhyme develops a child's ability to retain words when taking part in reading. Rhyme enhances a child's phonological abilities and vocabulary learning, and it can actively aid in the prediction of upcoming words (Read, 2014). The use of rhyme is used widely in the education of children (Lefebvre, Bolduc and Pirkenne, 2015). Nursery rhymes play a part in this and aids in a child's spoken language and vocabulary abilities, therefore building on

their ability to communicate through oracy (Pourkalthor and Tavakoli, 2017). According to the Welsh Government (2015), children from six to twelve months of age begin to benefit from the use of rhyme in their language development. Welsh Government (2019) also add that rhyme builds on a child's reading and listening abilities. Scholastic (No date) agree, stating that children who are exposed to rhyme at a young age find it easier to learn how to read and that a child having the capability of hearing rhyming words allows a child to tell the difference between phonemes.

Rhyming also links with Froebel's educational theory (1837, cited in Nishida, 2019), who believed that by taking part in a close relationship and by creating rhymes helps to stimulate and create connections between brain neurons; this helps to expand the capacity needed in order to increase a child's brain development (Norman, 2015). This is supported by the Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education (DfE), 2017) in England, which defines the importance of dedicating time in the curriculum to music and rhyme to aid the development of all angles of learning. This is also supported in Wales' Curriculum for Wales (2015) which states that practitioners must allow time in the curriculum for rhyme in order to build on a child's oracy skills and development in multiple learning areas.

Repetition further supports a child's language development. Research at the University of Sussex (Bealing, 2011) outlines that a child who reads the same book again and again is more likely to retain more and obtain new vocabulary than children that read a new book each day; this repetition of storybooks is beneficial for a child's language development. Reading Bright Start (No date) portrays that repetition allows for the practice that is required by children in order to grasp new skills. Repetition also aids in the improvement of speed, boosts confidence, and reinforces the required connections in the brain that support children to learn. Lucarevschi (2016) further mentions that storytelling also brings opportunities for developing relevant and meaningful learning, particularly for bilingual learners mainly due to the story itself becoming the focus, rather than its use as a tool to develop reading skills.

As well as rhyme, Froebel's (1837, cited in Nishida, 2019) theory also supports repetition. Norman (2015) states that Froebel believed by telling rhymes to children, then repeating them over and over, enables children to create close relationships, all played a part in the journey to more complex thoughts and learning abilities within literacy, such as story making. Tovey (2017) further supports the Froebelian theory of the importance of rhyme and repetition together in storytelling in order to support children's development, by explaining how enjoyable it is for the children to take part in such activities. Curriculum for Wales (2015) and the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017) both allow for time to be devoted to

repetition in the curriculum in order to build on children's oracy skills as well as a child's development in multiple learning skills. Feltis, Powell and Roberts (2011) say that repetition has a beneficial effect on a child's story- grammar ability in line with the number of times a story has been told to them; the more it is told the better the ability. Hattie and Yates (2014) and Weinstein, Madan and Sumeracki (2018) state that results from cognitive research into processes of learning provide evidence for the positive benefits of repetition to memory development, things become automatized after exposure to repetition, this then extends to literacy skills (Bygate, 2018). Repetition is seen as an imitation skill associated with language; the better at imitating a child is, the better they are as an early talker too and this has an impact on a child's holistic language development (Saxton, 2012).

Onomatopoeia is another benefit to a child's language ability. Onomatopoeia is a part of literacy that is used for children to enhance their ability in recognising the sounds of language as it translates the sounds that surround us into written words (Nashville Library, 2016). Onomatopoeia is 'the naming of a thing or action by a vocal imitation of sound associated with it, as in buzz and hiss' (Machado, 2010, p. 281). Fleta (2017) says that using sound patterns and words that mimic sound in children's story telling can lead to increased language outcomes, leading to language learning. Sasamoto and Jackson (2016) say that onomatopoeia is both a saying and a showing word allowing for expression in storytelling. Onomatopoeia is used to keep a child's attention, it helps to keep them engaged in the story, take pleasure from the story and leaves them wanting to hear more (Bland, 2013).

The use of onomatopoeia encourages a child's phonological awareness by being able to clearly hear the different phonemes in each word; this is closely associated with a person's ability to read and a child's oracy development (Wang, 2015). Gillon (2017) says that phonological awareness is a foundation skill needed for writing and that the use of literacy devices in book reading with children is necessary in order to develop a child's writing skills as well as oracy and reading. Hong (2019) states how Froebel's theory (1837, cited in Nishida, 2019) also links to onomatopoeia, by saying that it engages a child's imagination and creativity skills and keeps their attention. These skills then enable a child to develop their oracy and literacy skills before continuing to develop their creative writing skills. Onomatopoeia also links to Chomsky and his language acquisition theory (1965, cited in Saxton, 2012). Chomsky believes that we do not learn language, but that grammar grows inside the mind based on the information it is fed (Saxton, 2012). Chomsky is therefore suggesting that if fed the correct literary devices, the grammar and literacy skills will grow within the child. Saxton (2012) continues to say that phonology, vocabulary and grammar

are levels of language that work together in order to develop, with literacy devices such as onomatopoeia, rhyme and repetition we can aid in the holistic language development of children.

Vygotsky's (1978, cited in Eun, 2019) zone of proximal development theory and Bruner's (1978, cited in Bates, 2016) scaffolding theory support the importance of children having the support they need from practitioners being knowledgeable about children's language and literacy, and so understand the level they are at and what is required to help them develop further. Yuill and Little (2018) portray the importance of effective support via the means of scaffolding and the influence that a child's primary caregivers provide for each child's development. This support from knowledgeable practitioners is essential to a child. Therefore, practitioners' understanding of each child's language and literacy skills, and how to use activities such as storytelling to develop further knowledge, is essential in order to aid in each child becoming the best of their ability (Welsh Government, 2016). Storytelling can support many different aspects of a child's learning and language development and is therefore an essential aspect of practitioner knowledge to understand and appreciate storytelling as a resource (Flanagan, 2016).

To summarise, many children are affected by language delay in the early years and storytelling in any form has many benefits to a child's language and literacy skills, writing, oral and reading. Rhyme, repetition and onomatopoeia are all useful literacy devices that benefit a child's development when used through storytelling. The way in which the story is delivered is important in order to keep a child's attention and interest to make sure they are gaining skills and developing from the experience. Storytelling is therefore an effective tool that should be used by practitioners and primary caregivers in order to improve and child's literacy skills and abilities and therefore reduce their probability of having speech and language delay prior to beginning school.

## Reference List

Agosto, D. E. (2016) 'Why Storytelling Matters Unveiling the Literacy Benefits of Storytelling', *Children & Libraries: The Journal of the Association for Library Service to Children*, 14(2), pp. 21–26. doi: 10.5860/cal.14n2.21.

Bates, B. (2016) *Learning theories simplified : ...and how to apply them to teaching*. London: Sage.

Bealing, J. (2011) "'Again, again!' Why repetition in reading helps children learn more', *Broadcast: News Items*. Available at: ["Again, again!" Why repetition in reading helps children learn more : Broadcast: News items : University of Sussex](#) (Accessed: 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2020).

Bishop, D.V. M. and Leonard, L. B. (eds) (2014) *Speech and Language Impairments in Children*. London: Psychology Press.

Bland, J., (2013) *Children's Literature and Learner Empowerment: Children and Teenagers in English Language Education*. A&C Black.

Bruner, J. S. (1990) *Acts of meaning*. London: Harvard University Press.

Bygate, M. (2018) *Learning language through task repetition*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

Crerar, P. (2018) 'Children starting school 'cannot communicate in full sentences'', *The Guardian*, 31<sup>st</sup> July. Available at: [Children starting school 'cannot communicate in full sentences' | Education | The Guardian](#) (Accessed: 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021).

Curriculum for Wales (2015) *Foundation Phase Framework*. Available at: [foundation-phase-framework-revised-2015.pdf \(gov.wales\)](#) (Accessed: 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2020).

Department for Education (DfE) (2017) *Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage*. Available at: [Statutory framework for the early years foundation stage \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#) (Accessed: 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2020).

Eun, B. (2019) 'The zone of proximal development as an overarching concept: A framework for synthesizing Vygotsky's theories', *Educational Philosophy & Theory*, 51(1), pp. 18–30. doi: 10.1080/00131857.2017.1421941.

Feltis, B., Powell, M. and Roberts, K. (2011) 'The effect of event repetition on the production of story grammar in children's event narratives', *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 35(3), pp. 180-187.

Flanagan, S. (2014) 'How does storytelling within higher education contribute to the learning experience of early years students?', *The Journal of Practice Teaching and Learning*, 13(2-3), pp.162-184.

Fleta, T. (2017) 'The Sounds of Picturebooks for English Language Learning', *CLELE Journal*, (5)1, pp. 21-43.

Gillon, G.T. (2017) *Phonological awareness: From research to practice*. New York: Guilford Publications.

Hattie, J. and Yates, G. (2014) *Visible learning and the science of how we learn*. New York: Routledge.

Hibbin, R. (2016) 'The psychosocial benefits of oral storytelling in school: developing identity and empathy through narrative', *Pastoral Care in Education*, 34(4), pp. 218–231. doi: 10.1080/02643944.2016.1225315.

Hong, H. (2019) 'Writing as defamiliarization processes: An alternative approach to understanding aesthetic experience in young children's poetry writing', *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 19(2), pp. 175–205. doi: 10.1177/1468798417712338.

I Can (No Date) *The prevalence of speech, language and communication needs*. Available at: [Scale of the issue \(ican.org.uk\)](https://www.ican.org.uk) (Accessed: 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021).

Lefebvre, P., Bolduc, J. and Pirkenne, C. (2015) 'Pilot Study on Kindergarten Teachers' Perception of Linguistic and Musical Challenges in Nursery Rhymes', *Journal for Learning through the Arts*, 11(1). Doi: 10.21977/D911112856.

Lucarevschi, C.R. (2016) 'The role of storytelling on language learning: A literature review', *Working Papers of the Linguistics Circle*, 26(1), pp.24-44.

Machado, J. (2010) *Early Childhood Experiences in Language Arts, Early Literacy*. 11th ed. Belmont: Cengage Learning.

Mendoza, M. (2015) 'The Evolution of Storytelling', *Reporter*, 1<sup>st</sup> May. Available at: <https://reporter.rit.edu/tech/evolution-storytelling#:~:text=There%20is%20evidence%20of%20written,over%20time%20changed%20into%20script>. (Accessed: 19<sup>th</sup> November 2020).

Nashville Library (2016) *Onomato-what-a? Books that utilise onomatopoeia*. Available at: [Onomato-what-a? Picture Books that Utilize Onomatopoeia | Bringing Books to Life - Nashville Public Library](#) (Accessed: 24<sup>th</sup> November 2020).

National Storytelling Network (No Date) Available at: [What Is Storytelling? – National Storytelling Network \(storynet.org\)](#) (Accessed: 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2021).

Nishida, Y. (2019) 'Something old, something new, something borrowed, and something Froebel? The development of origami in early childhood education in Japan', *Paedagogica Historica*, 55(4), pp. 529–547. doi: 10.1080/00309230.2018.1546330.

Nishioka, H., (2016) 'Analysing language development in a collaborative digital storytelling project: Sociocultural perspectives', *System*, 62, pp.39-52.

Norman, A. (2015) 'Rhyming with Froebel', *Early Years Educator Eye*, 2<sup>nd</sup> July. Available at: <https://www.earlyyearseducator.co.uk/Features/article/rhyming-with-froebel#:~:text=Froebel%20believed%20that%20repeating%20and,literacy%2C%20such%20as%20story%20making>. (Accessed: 21<sup>st</sup> November 2020).

Pourkalhor, O. and Tavakoli, M., (2017) 'Nursery rhymes and language learning: Issues and pedagogical Implications', *International Journal of English Language & Translation Studies*, 5(1), pp.111-116.

Read, K., (2014) 'Clues cue the smooze: rhyme, pausing, and prediction help children learn new words from storybooks', *Frontiers in psychology*, 5, p.149.

Read, K., Macauley, M. and Furay, E., (2014) 'The Seuss boost: Rhyme helps children retain words from shared storybook reading', *First Language*, 34(4), pp.354-371.

Reading BrightStart (No Date) *Let's Do It Again . . . and Again! Why is Repetition Important to Learning?* Available at: <http://www.readingbrightstart.org/articles-for-parents/lets-repetition-important-learning/> (Accessed: 21<sup>st</sup> November 2020).

Sasamoto, R. and Jackson, R. (2016) 'Onomatopoeia–Showing-word or Saying-word? Relevance Theory, lexis, and the communication of impressions', *Lingua*, 175, pp.36-53.

Save the Children (2015) *Ready to Read*. Available at: [Ready to Read: Closing the gap in early language skills so that every child in Wales can read well | Resource Centre \(savethechildren.net\)](#) (Accessed: 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021).

Save the Children (2016) *Concern over children in Wales struggling with speech in school*. Available at: [Children In Wales Struggling In School | Save The Children](#) (Accessed: 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021).

Saxton, M. (2012) *Child Language: Acquisition and Development*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Scholastic (No date) *Time to Rhyme*. Available at: <https://www.scholastic.com/parents/books-and-reading/reading-resources/developing-reading-skills/time-to-rhyme.html> (Accessed: 21<sup>st</sup> November 2020).

The Borgen Project (2015) *How poverty affects children's language skills*. Available at: <https://borgenproject.org/poverty-affects-childrens-language-skills/#:~:text=Decades%20worth%20of%20research%20has,on%20standardized%20language%20development%20tests> (Accessed: November 1<sup>st</sup> 2020).

The Hanen Centre (2016) *Starting early: Why it's so important*. Available at: [Language Delay – Why Starting Early is so Important \(hanen.org\)](https://www.hanen.org/Starting-Early-Why-Starting-Early-is-so-Important) (Accessed: 18<sup>th</sup> March 2021).

Tovey, H. (2017) *Bringing the Froebel Approach to your Early Years Practice*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Oxon: Routledge.

Wang, X. (2015) *Understanding Language and Literacy Development: Diverse Learners in the Classroom*. Malaysia: Vivar Printing Sdn Bhd.

Weinstein, Y., Madan, C., and Sumeracki, M. (2018) 'Teaching the science of learning', *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 3. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-017-0087-y>

Welsh Government (2015) *Stages of Speech and Language Development*. Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/inline-documents/2019-05/stages-speech-and-language-en.pdf> (Accessed: 21<sup>st</sup> November 2020).

Welsh Government (2016) *Continuing Professional Development Principles for the early years and childcare workforce in Wales*. Available at: [Early-years-CPD-principles.pdf \(socialcare.wales\)](https://socialcare.wales/Early-years-CPD-principles.pdf) (Accessed: 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2021).

Welsh Government (2019) *Languages, Literacy and Communication*. Available at: <https://hwb.gov.wales/storage/4373f5ea-f77e-4b10-a20f-4b06eb02f6a0/drastatutory-guidance-languages-literacy-and-communication.pdf> (Accessed 21st November 2020).

Welsh Government (2020) *Talk with me*. Available at: <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2020-01/speech-language-consultation-document.pdf> (Accessed: November 1<sup>st</sup> 2020).

Yuill, N. and Little, S. (2018) 'Thinking or feeling? An exploratory study of maternal scaffolding, child mental state talk, and emotion understanding in language-impaired and

typically developing school-aged children', *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 88(2), pp. 261–283. doi: 10.1111/bjep.12194.