

The importance of storytelling in supporting children's language and literacy in the early years.

There is growing concern that many young children are starting in early years' settings with poor language development. The National Health Service (NHS) (2019) supports this statement, claiming that 50% of children are entering settings with speech and language delay. The Royal College of Speech & Language Therapists (2019) add that speech, language and communication is currently the most primary type of need amongst pupils in school. It follows that language delay also has an effect on young children's learning, thinking, communication skills, and reasoning (The Communication Commitment, no date). Perkins et al. (2013) point out some potential factors that could impact upon children's language development such as poverty, stress, and psychosocial deprivation - the lack of social and intellectual stimulation from a caregiver to a child which can have detrimental effects on brain development and behaviour (Fox et al., 2018; Humphreys et al., 2020). Lytle and Kuhl (2017) and Roulstone et al. (2010) agree, stating that social interaction from an early age plays a crucial role in children's language development. This supports Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory as stated by Coole et al. (2012); lack of social interaction from a caregiver during the early years can prevent children from achieving esteem needs and self-actualization later in life.

Dickinson et al. (2012) suggests socially interacting with children through reading and exploring books together, as reading with children can have a positive impact upon language development. This, in turn, leads to success later in life as pointed out by Lowry (2016) and Metsala and Ehri (2011). Department for Education (2012) supports this claiming that reading to children every day can have a significant impact upon their future cognitive development and reading skills. Huettig et al. (2019) and National Literacy Trust (2017c) point out other potential advantages to reading with children stating that it helps them with handwriting, opens them up to new ideas, feeds their brain and it assists the development of vocabulary as well as phonological awareness. However, not all children get the opportunity to have books read to them at home as National Literacy Trust (2017a) points out that three quarter of a million school children in the United Kingdom do not own a book. In addition to this, parents can seek support through parenting programs supported by BookTrust, a charity based within the United Kingdom who dedicate themselves to getting children to read (BookTrust, 2019). Accordingly, this can be detrimental to children's reading and language development as research by National Literacy Trust (2017b) found that children who do not own books are four times less likely to read below their expected level for their age. In contrast, children who do own books are 15 times more likely to read above their level. Gov.uk (2016) and Clark and Teravainen (2017) supports this, stating that the gap between reading and writing levels are at its worst since 2010. Moreover, the gap between reading and writing have increased since the coronavirus pandemic due to the closures of schools and libraries (Engzellhis et al., 2021). This is supported within a survey conducted by the National Literacy Trust (2020) which states that Covid-19 created barriers to some children obtaining books due to school and library closures as well as a lack of quiet space at home. Therefore, it is important to read to children daily as Armbruster et al. (2010) point out that it can build phonemic awareness, vocabulary, reading skills, listening skills and writing.

Lack of books within children's home environment could be related to poverty. King (2011) claims that children living in low-income households tend to lack environmental exposure to influential elements of a child's literacy development such as books, printed materials, and the modelling of verbal skills. Research undertaken by the National Literacy Trust (2015) found that children from low-income families have less access to age-appropriate books. Hartas (2013) and Sharkins et al. (2016) support this stating that poverty including family income and parental educational level can have a negative effect on children's language development and can result in academic achievement deficits throughout the individual's life. Harkness (2015) and Perkins et al. (2013)

point out the impact of poverty can have on children's language development stating that children will struggle with phonological awareness, have difficulty understanding more abstract language, and they present lower reading and writing skills. In addition to this, children from low-income families hear on average thirty million words than children from affluent families (Zauche et al., 2016).

Niklas et al. (2016) note that the first three years of a child's life sets the foundations for their later literacy competencies. In addition to this, Kalb and Van Ours (2014) and The University of Melbourne (2012) recommend reading aloud to children from birth as it can have a significant effect on their reading writing and oracy skills later in life. According to Murray and Egan (2013), reading to children from birth provides several benefits as it teaches a baby about communication, builds listening skills, memory and vocabulary skills. This statement is supported by Chomsky who is a credible linguist (Barman, 2012) whose theory of language development argues that children are born with an innate ability to develop language (Aljoundi, 2014; Dialing, 2014)

According to Weih (2015), children need the 'right books' to read and explore in order to aid language development. In addition to this, Bartan (2018) states that pre-school children should be presented with stories containing; large font, dominant pictures, funny sounds such as 'clickity clack', stories that can be read within 5 minutes and finally stories with happy endings. Furthermore, reading books containing these elements are enjoyable for children and the orator who is reading the book, and can also support oracy development. This is supported by Frey (2015) who claims that listening actively develops children's oracy skills and produces good future readers, and by Knight (2017), who notes that enjoyment leads to engagement. An example could be how picture books absorb children's attention which then leads to a positive association with books.

Books containing funny sounds, such as 'clickity clack', promotes the use of onomatopoeia. Nuckols (2020) and Karina (2017) states that onomatopoeia is the act of creating or using words including sounds that are similar to the noises the words refer to. Laing (2017) points out that onomatopoeia is dominant in children and it is used in most languages of the world. It follows that onomatopoeia is an ideal way for children to learn the sound of language because it changes sounds in the world around us (Carling and Johansson, 2015). Accordingly, onomatopoeia is popular within children's books giving rhythm to text, and it makes stories more interesting and livelier for children as pointed out by Laing (2019). Asmaa and Sofia (2016) supports this claim stating that reading books containing onomatopoeia are good to read aloud to children as they are fun to read and you can encourage them to join in and make lots of sounds. According to Department of Education (2020) encouraging children to partake in a reading activity can support children's reading development later.

Pie Corbett supports the use of engaging children during storytelling activities through the use of words and actions stating, "if children learn stories orally, it improves the quality of their writing and develops their self-confidence". Accordingly, Pie Corbett created the process known as 'Talk for Writing', based on the idea that children cannot progress in writing skills until they can say words (Talk4Writing, no date). The aim of 'Talk for Writing' is to develop children as readers, writers, speakers and listeners (Talk for Writing, 2019). Furthermore, Dockrell et al. (2015) carried out an evaluation on Talk for Writing, involving 10 schools over the period of 18 months. The findings of the study found that Talk for Writing had made an impact on children's writing skills and that the schools involved were enthusiastic about implementing it into their daily practice.

Mullen (2017) points out how rhyming books also provide children with the opportunities to join in during a story telling activity. According to National Pass Centre (2012), rhyme is the repetition of similar sounds in two or more words. Bower (2014) believes that rhyme and repetition can have a significant role in children's early literacy development. Neaum (2012) and Frank (2020) support

this claim, stating that hearing rhyme from an early age can expand children's vocabulary, which enables them to form words. In addition, experiences with rhyming stories helps children develop their auditory memory. All of these skills lead to success in children's ability to learn to read. Welsh Government (2017) and Read et al. (2014) add that rhymes improve children's cognitive development as listening and learning the pattern of rhyme enables children to memorise words and later predict words. It follows that developing an auditory memory from an early age is important for children's language acquisition and development of their speech as earlier mentioned by Lytle and Kuhl (2017) and Roulstone et al. (2010) Read et al. (2014) carried out a study where two groups of children aged two to four years heard a rhyming and non-rhyming version of the same story. The findings of the study were the children who heard the rhyming story performed better in remembering the animals after the activity had concluded. However, Ike et al. (2018) disagrees with the use of nursery rhymes within the early years, claiming that some rhymes introduced to children are cruel and violent. Furthermore, Dincel (2017) completed a study where forty-eight nursery rhymes were sung and investigated. The findings of the study presented that fifteen out of the forty-eight rhymes featured punishment, animal cruelty, robbery and violence. In addition to this Dincel protests that the content of nursery rhymes should be examined as to whether they have a negative effect on children. Ike et al. (2018) agrees with this as they state, young children lack the appropriate cognitive maturity to interpret and understand what they are hearing leading to fear within children and potential violent behavior.

Mordsley (2017) suggests that books containing rhymes also encourages intonation. Nolan (2020) explains that intonation is the rise and fall of a person's voice when they speak. Pourkalthor and Tavakoli (2017) supports this claim stating that rhymes teach children how to pronounce words correctly as well as teaching children intonation and correct punctuation. Intonation and facial expressions engage the audience as well as teach children how to make connections between nonverbal cues.

Another important area for the progress of pre-literacy development is book-handling skills as pointed out by Irwin et al. (2012). According to Saracho and Spodek (2009), book-handling skills can be developed through role modeling whilst reading aloud to children. Welsh Government (2017) support this claim stating that children learn how to use books from observing adults turning pages, pointing to pictures and holding the book the correct side up. This statement supports Vygotsky's social constructive theory as he believed that children learn through observing and interacting with more knowledgeable others (Niklas et al., 2016).

Gilles (no date) and Booktrust (2020) suggests carrying out a storytelling activity at children's level, holding books the correct way up and facing the children, before introducing the title, author and illustrator. When reading aloud to children, images in books should be visible to them. Furthermore, Lewis (2019b) suggests pointing to images throughout the story and asking children questions. Mart (2012) point out that adults should read slowly and pause occasionally allowing children to digest the book and to ask questions throughout as some practitioners may read fast due to lack of confidence This suggests that more training on reading aloud to small groups of children would be of benefit during level two and level three qualifications. Xu and Warschauer (2019) add that asking children questions during a storytelling activity can generate rich discussions and helps them to gain a deeper understanding of the book as well as developing their critical thinking skills. However, McCarthy (2018) argues that practitioners do not allow children enough time to answer questions stating that the average time practitioners pause after asking a question is 0.9 seconds. Wasik and Hindman (2018) agrees, nothing that practitioners need to allow children time to process a question as everyone processes information at different speeds. Tofade et al. (2013) supports this stating that practitioners need to allow children to have thinking time enabling them to understand and answer the question, supporting the 10 second Elklan strategy. According to Elks (2021) Elklan is an accredited training program provided to

early years practitioners to enable them to support children with a speech and language delay. Research conducted by Rezmer et al. (2020) carried out interviews with children allowing a minimum time of 10 seconds for them to answer open ended questions. Furthermore, the findings of the study found that the children were unresponsive for 5 seconds or longer after a question had been presented to them. However, 96% of the children answered the questions within the 10 second window proving that the 10 second strategy is ideal for allowing children to process and respond to the question.

To conclude, socially interacting with children from birth through story telling can support early language and literacy development supporting their handwriting skills and phonological awareness (Dickinson et al., 2012; Murray and Egan, 2013; National Literacy Trust, 2017c). It follows that some aspects of storytelling can have a positive effect on children's language and literacy development. Firstly, onomatopoeia is a fun and lively way to teach children to learn the sound of language as stated by Lang (2019). Secondly, Bower (2014) noted that rhyme can have a significant role in children's early literacy development. It follows that it can also support children's auditory memory which can have a positive effect on children's language acquisition and speech (Wasik and Hindman, 2011) . Finally, book-handling skills are seen to be important for the development of children's pre-literacy skills (Irwin et al., 2012). It follows that children learn book-handling skills from observing adults holding books the correct way up, turning pages and pointing to picture. In addition to the findings of the research more training would be of benefit to early years practitioners on the importance of effective story telling within the early years.

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