

How Shared Stories May Promote Children's Early Literacy and Language Development in a Digital Era.

This paper discusses how adults could promote children's developing literacy and language skills with shared stories. Firstly, I will discuss theories of language development and how shared stories could promote this. I will then focus on how interaction can promote literacy and language development with a focus on questioning. I will then evaluate various methods of storytelling, that will include stories from books, oral storytelling, and the use of digital media. Finally, I will discuss the benefits of sharing traditional fairy tales to promote literacy and language skills and how this can be supported by using digital media.

Language Development.

According to Dickinson et al. (2012), storytelling is an effective way of enabling children to acquire language. Wells (1986, cited in Engel, 2016) and Dickinson et al. (2012) indicate that children under four years old, that hear stories regularly, have higher outcomes in literacy development. While this is not conclusive evidence, Hutton et al. (2017), High et al. (2014) and Carroll (2013) suggest that children who participate in shared reading have more opportunities to develop their language and emergent literacy skills as it improves cognition.

Lally and Manglione (2017) state that children's brains develop the foundation for their future language development within the first three years. Lenneberg (1967, cited in Ying, 2017) believed that there is a critical period from early infancy to puberty that language can be acquired, as the brain loses plasticity for learning language as it ages.

According to Kessler (2010), the nativist theorist Chomsky (1996) believed that humans have evolved to be the only living beings that have language skills and their ability to learn language is innate. Lally and Manglione (2017) believe that babies are born with a social competency to develop their own communication skills. Smidt (2016) agrees that they are already born with an ability to find patterns within language that will eventually be used to apply their own generalisations when communicating. Engel (2016) and Welsh Government (2015a) support this, stating that babies concentrate on a gesturing face at an early age and mimic facial movements and sense emotions of others. Farrant and Zubrick (2011) believe that this joint

attention encourages eye contact and therefore the foundation for communication that leads to language development.

However, it could be argued that interaction and communication with significant adults is what scaffolds young children's language acquisition as supported by Vygotsky (1978) and the zone of proximal development theory (Abtahi, Graven, and Lerman, 2017). McLoed et al. (2016) suggests that if children are struggling with communication, it is likely that they have not received enough support to develop their skills. However, Dickinson (2012) states that if adults try to direct children's attention to learn words for items that they have no interest in children may learn fewer words, therefore, adults should consider occasions of joint attention, such as storytelling, as optimal times to promote young children's vocabulary. As stated by Department for Education (2016), and Millard (2018, cited in Alexander, 2008) communication within a story enables vocabulary to be extended, leading to improved reading. As children hear more words and realise their meaning from the adult that is scaffolding the language, they build their vocabulary (Dickinson, 2012; Farrant and Zubrick, 2011). This links to Bruner's spiral curriculum, where children's vocabulary can be improved with familiar stories as they are introduced to new words by the reader in a familiar context (Mahan, 2020; Johnston, 2012).

The interaction that sharing stories affords also promotes questioning, and according to Kessler (2010), questioning links to Tomasello's research. He views human cognition skills necessary for language acquisition and that communication is considered mutually beneficial. Therefore, questions that are asked within story telling are understood by the children as a strategy to help them, and they are usually eager to respond. O'Madagain and Tomasello (2019) state that this joint attention develops children's cognition.

Welsh Government (2014) state that questioning progresses literacy, and cause and effect within a story can help children to visualise outcomes of events to develop their ability to tell stories and how they could have alternative endings (Charney, 2002, and Worth, 2008), both cited in Berkowitz, 2011). According to Krishnan and Johnson (2014) and Dickinson (2012), this promotes children's use of 'what' and 'where' questions that are part of expected outcomes for 4–5-year-olds in Wales' play-based curriculum, the Foundation Phase (Welsh Government, 2015b). Health visitors and childcare staff should therefore encourage parents to understand how they can help their children by promoting a positive view on how they can support their developing literacy skills with shared stories (Welsh Government, 2014).

Evaluation of Books and Oral Storytelling to Promote Children's Literacy and Language Skills.

Bookstart Wales is an initiative that provides books to children in their early years, so they are afforded the opportunity for shared reading (Booktrust, 2019). Families and settings are provided with packs of books and parents are encouraged to mimic storytelling behaviours modelled by practitioners. According to Roberts et al. (2005, cited in Maples Edwards, 2012) children's literacy outcomes in low socioeconomic areas are poorer as their parents may not be able to afford to provide books. The Department for Education (2016) explains that the widest attainment gap between children receiving free school meals and their peers is in reading and writing. However, Ofcom (2018) states that digital media use is rising, and children are taking devices to bed with them to use independently as they fall asleep. This suggests that they are not read a bedtime story and that technology used today may limit family interaction. Hall, Levy and Preece (2018) believe that shared stories within a family promotes more than children's language and literacy skills as it becomes part of family routine and encourages feelings of closeness. The positive interactions that shared reading affords can motivate children to learn and children usually exhibit no preference between digital or printed stories if they have adult interaction (Kucirkova, 2019; Lally and Manglione, 2017).

However, Medlicott (2019) believes that adults that rely on books for direction when telling stories may also not fully engage with children. As Puffin Books (2017), Liang et al. (2016), and Christensen (2014) suggest it is intonation, in the form of voice, gaze, body position and gesture, that enhance children's experience of stories. Oral storytelling may enable children to engage more as they focus on the intonation in the story teller's facial expressions, drawing them into a story (Krishanan and Johnson, 2014; Berkowitz, 2011). Cekaite and Biork-Willen (2018) and Berkowits (2011) suggest that adults can use intonation to make stories more enjoyable, building drama and suspense. Directing children's attention to significant aspects of the story may help them to dramatize when they are retelling it (Cekaite and Biork-Willen, 2018). Conversely, without a book, children may not connect written print to stories, as stated by Stanberry (2020), this could possibly have a negative impact on their developing oracy and emergent writing skills (Welsh Government, 2015b). As stated by Welsh Government (2014), adults should be made aware that it is their time and attention that will scaffold children's literacy skills. According to Millard and Menzies (2016), school staff sometimes believe that a lack of time is a common reason that language and literacy may not be developed fully.

However, even though Gregor (2010) states that oral storytelling remains an important part of development, the new curriculum in Wales has introduced the digital competence framework that aims to promote children's skills that can be applied to other areas of learning, including communication (Welsh Government, 2008).

Evaluation of Digital Media to Promote Literacy and Language Skills.

Berkowitz (2011) states that digital media can help children to develop speaking and listening skills. Digital media such as tablets can be useful tools for promoting literacy if scaffolded by adults, who can provide children with instructions on using the device, and verbal support to discuss stories (Neumann and Neumann, 2015). However, Kucirkova (2019) suggests that adults usually focus their interaction on discussing instructions when using devices with their children rather than the story content and this may not develop their language skills fully. Strouse and Troseth (2014) argue that parents may not scaffold their children's digital media use effectively when using digital stories, as they do not stop and pause for discussion as they would when reading a book. Suggesting that a lack of parental engagement in digital reading means children are unable to connect what they are learning to the real world, and this may have a negative impact on language development.

However, Chassiakos et al. (2016) suggest that digital media programmes that interact with children may improve their learning. If children are able to make a bond with a familiar character, then this can be their more knowledgeable other that scaffolds children's learning. Giles (2002), cited in Aguiar et al. (2018) suggests that children can also use media characters to replicate social opportunities similar to real friendships. Children need to form friendships to develop their skills needed for adult relationships, such as security and empathy (Aguiar et al., 2018). However, if children have received no response from interaction with a screen or watched programmes that they are unable to relate to in their real life, such as talking animals, then they may feel disassociated from the content as stated by Strouse and Troseth (2014).

Bringing Traditional and Modern Storytelling Together to Promote Literacy and Language Skills.

According to Cekaite and Björk-Willén (2018), Bettelheim (1976) believed that traditional fairy-tales, such as the Three Little Pigs or Little Red Riding Hood are popular and suitable for young children as they attract children's attention, offering a dilemma, a solution and an opportunity for children to feel emotions. Christensen (2014) states that language, such as

‘Once upon a time’ and ‘never to be seen again’, ‘The End’, often seen in traditional fairy-tales, signals to children the order of the story. Christensen (2014) and Berkowitz (2011) agree that traditional fairy tale stories are familiar, as they enable spontaneous, confident, reading that is enjoyed, and this encourages children to participate fully. Therefore, as McInnes (2010) believes, if children perceive activities as self-directed play, then they will develop their skills to their full potential. This should be considered by practitioners when planning to provide children with activities that enable them to revisit stories within continuous provision (Welsh Government, 2015b).

According to Agosto (2016), this could be done by suggesting children re-enact stories. They could be provided with props such as pictures of parts of the story, or puppets that can improve recall ability and strengthen story sequencing skills. This can help children recognise story structure as stated by Lisenbee and Ford (2018), and children should also be provided with items to develop emergent writing skills if they decide to try and write about the stories (Byington and Kim, 2017).

According to EYFS Spotlight (2019), children can also incorporate their knowledge of traditional fairy-tales with the use of digital media. Children can use these resources to retell the stories with images or take characters on a directional journey allowing development of their coding skills. EYFS Spotlight (2019) state that children can also relate this to real life by giving each other directional instruction further developing their literacy (Welsh Government, 2008).

According to Welsh Government (2018) using digital media can enhance children’s critical thinking skills and sequencing skills, and as stated by Clark (2016) and Chase, Hye Son, and Steiner (2014), sequencing helps children to understand the order of stories so that they make sense. As stated by Pie Corbett (2010), following a narrative story in sequence can be an important strategy for children to develop their own story telling skills enabling them to recognise the structure of a story such as story maps, gestures, and language to promote sequencing (Corbett, 2011)

Liang et al. (2016) agree that digital media can benefit children’s ability to structure the narrative of a story as it interests children in a more interactive experience. As stated by MIT Media Lab (2014) and O’Byrne et al. (2018), digital media can promote opportunities to create

and share stories. According to Donaldson (2015), this is experiential learning that is supported in the new curriculum (in Wales) and practitioners should provide children with exciting opportunities that engage their interest to develop their literacy skills. while also promoting their digital skills (Welsh Government, 2008).

Conclusion.

To conclude, it should be considered that hearing stories has a positive effect on children's literacy development, and shared stories should be introduced at an early age to promote initial language acquisition with adult modelling as children develop their literacy skills. Adults should endeavour to deliver stories in fun, exciting ways for children so they can benefit from the many advantages an enjoyment of shared stories can bring to their development. In this digital era, it can be acknowledged that children's developing digital competency can be used to enhance their literacy skills from an early age if scaffolded effectively by an adult.

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