

**‘Supporting children’s language and literacy development through shared book reading’
- Leading Practice underpinned by research.**

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Introduction

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This paper looks at the crucial part research plays in leading practice in the Early Years. It draws on the experience of leading a small-scale research project to enhance language and literacy development within an early years setting. The early years are a time of intensive language acquisition and providing a language-rich environment is important for both language and literacy skills (Kapalkova et al 2016). This paper considers how knowledge of current research of the development of language and literacy skills in early years strengthens practice to support development, whilst at the same time offering validity to qualitative research carried out within a setting. In the following sections the role of leadership will be discussed followed by a discussion of the importance of drawing on research to underpin practice. Then the role of collaborative action research to support children’s language and literacy development is presented, as well as a discussion of some of my research project findings. In the last section I address the importance of strengthening links to home to ensure parental involvement. I finish by drawing some conclusions in relation to our work as practitioners in early years settings. Throughout the research project and in this paper all ethical considerations were followed in line with BERA (2018) guidelines.

Leadership of practice

The roots of the pedagogy and curriculum of any early years setting stem from the underlying philosophies that as MacNaughton (2003:114) describes ‘explain why we do what we do’. In the U.K. the framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets the criteria for curriculum and practice (DfE 2017). However, settings choose their own way to follow and implement the framework (DfE 2017). A guiding philosophy is crucial as without one, Tanner and Tanner (1975:63) warn the curriculum can be ‘a product of ad hoc decisions’. Strong leadership values and actions are fundamental for implementing a clear guiding philosophy that underpins practice.

In Melhuish and Gardiner’s (2018) study strong leadership is noted as being essential for good quality provision. This supports Robbin and Callan’s (2009:2) belief that ‘there is a significant relationship between the quality of a setting and its leader’. Siraj and Hallet (2013) identify how an effective leader must understand their own philosophy, values, visions and principles in order to share them with others. While visions are what we hope to achieve, values are our belief of what is important (Martin and Henderson 2001). Leaders cannot provide quality provision alone; their vision and values must be shared among practitioners and, as Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2003) recognise, leaders sharing their philosophy, knowledge and understanding with others is a key factor in best practice. Hallet (2013) recognises that early years leadership often revolves around a group of practitioners working together, inspiring one another with the shared goal of the benefit of the children in their care. Thus, as Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007:28) describe, true leadership embraces a ‘commitment to collaboration’ with shared understanding. Manning-Morton (2014) highlights that it is fundamentally important for all practitioners to understand why we do what we do, what we are trying to achieve and how we will achieve it. The curriculum and pedagogy we develop for children reflects our values and beliefs about the way that children learn.

Research underpinning practice

Our understanding of how children learn is enriched from years of complimenting and contrasting research, and it is important to recognise how this not only informs our practice but how we should continue to review research and undertake research ourselves (Robert-Holmes 2014). It is also pertinent to acknowledge the difference between evidence-based practice and evidence-informed practice. Evidence-based practice is, as it sounds, practice based on the evidence of research which as Epstein (2009) warns can restrict scope of practice. On the other hand Epstein (2009) advocates for evidence-informed practice, where practice is enhanced by previous research but not limited by it. De Florio-Hansen (2016:2) agrees explaining how it is best to

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improve practice through using research by concentrating on ‘the foundations of different approaches’ and choose the tools for research and teaching that best fit each individual situation depending on ‘not only goals, standards and objectives, but also by unique teachers and learners’, who work in concrete specific contexts. As Gillen and Cameron (2010) argue, this is crucially important when drawing on research in the early years because children develop holistically within environmental and social contexts making it impossible to definitively deduce a single point that benefits development in isolation. This explains the many limitations often listed in research, however leading evidence-informed practice overcomes these limitations.

Leading practice through action research to support children’s language and literacy development

I carried out a small-scale action research project in the full-day care Montessori early years setting, which I lead, over a period of six weeks. The setting has places for sixty three children aged from birth to five years and employs twenty members of staff. Set in a rural location, in a relatively affluent area, only a small proportion of children who attend are considered to be disadvantaged however an increasing proportion of our children have additional needs particularly in the area of language development. The rationale behind the project stemmed from my awareness of research, such as Roulstone and colleagues (2011), that highlights how strong communication and language development in the early years is linked to positive outcomes for children later in life. Children are spending more time in early years provisions due to the U.K. government providing free entitlement to early years education, for disadvantaged two year olds and all three and four years olds, in recognition of the benefit early years provision can have (DfE 2016). However, despite Sylva and colleagues’ (2004) findings that early years provision benefitted all areas of children’s development, Melhuish and Gardiner’s (2018) Study of Early Education and Development (SEED) found no proven benefits to speech and language development from attending an early years setting in comparison to being in a home environment. These findings illustrate that there could be a gap in provision with regard to prioritising children’s speech and language development to ensure the best possible outcomes for all children.

Thanks to knowledge of this research and a passion for championing the development and learning of all children, I recognised the need to assess and improve the speech and language provision for the children in my care, many of whom have speech and language delays. As I continued to research the topic, I discovered studies, such as Terrell and Watson (2018), that highlight how language development is related to all areas of learning, especially literacy. The link between communication and language as a basis of literacy and the ‘importance of literacy in children’s long-term attainment, social and cultural life’ is reaffirmed in the recent review by Pascal et al (2019:8). Further investigation led to finding research that established such a strong link between language and literacy that supporting either area of development through specific activities was deduced as having a positive effect on both areas of development (Metsala 2011). So, for example, leading activities that specifically support language development will indirectly benefit literacy skills and vice versa.

Callanan and colleagues’ (2017) extensive study showed that high quality adult-child interactions are essential for speech and language development. However, in a busy early years setting one-to-one adult-child conversations can be interrupted or may be rare, as found in Boyd (2014). This has been a factor raised many times during reflective practice meetings within my setting. Other research, such as Flynn (2016), recommends creating an environment that offers opportunities for talking; Bain and colleagues (2015) agree as they found it is important for settings to make a conscious effort to provide and enhance opportunities for language and literacy development. Although organising activities that create opportunities for children to talk to one another are important, as King and Dockrell (2016) highlight, sustained conversations between young children

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are infrequent. This leads to the importance of creating situations where children can have sustained conversations with practitioners.

The more I read, the more I found studies that had been carried out on the subject of language and literacy development and the more I developed an understanding of the importance of shared book reading with children (Lonigan et al. 2013, Hindman et al. 2008, Justice et al. 2010). Sharing a book with a child provides a wealth of opportunities to promote both language and literacy skills. This led me to evaluate exactly how much shared book reading occurred within the setting and a gap was identified in provision. Despite some story reading taking place some children missed participating in this activity due to their daily routine or attendance patterns. Among these children were many who desperately needed extra support in developing their language and literacy skills. Further academic investigation led me to discover that Hindman et al. (2008) found that just reading a story to a child is not enough to support development. This finding was echoed by both Mol et al. (2009) in their meta-analysis and Pollard-Durodola et al. (2011) in their investigation of strategies used by speech and language therapists to promote language development. The way in which an adult interacts with children during book reading determines the learning gained, raising the point that if a story is simply read out loud learning opportunities are being lost (Hindman et al 2008). Alarming, Terrell and Watson (2018) deduced that practitioners should be specifically trained in techniques by speech and language therapists for children to benefit. Whilst noting this as a point for discussion with the speech and language therapist who supports some of the children in our setting I recognised a need to immediately evaluate and strengthen our current provision.

The importance of looking at and leading practice in the quality of the shared book reading experience lead to the development of the research question 'Supporting language and literacy skills – how does the introduction of small story times enhance provision in an early years setting?'. Reviewing others' research in and around the topic of language and literacy, such as Boyd (2014), as well as literature relating to research techniques informed my methodology and methods to be used, a perfect example of De Florio-Hansen's (2016:2) 'choosing adequate tools'. The tools chosen were action research using observations, a journal and practitioner interviews.

Leading practice through collaboration

This action research could only be successful with the co-operation and collaboration of other practitioners. Leading practice in early years for several years has led me to build and value a learning community within the setting with a strong team culture as advocated by Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007). The setting follows the Montessori philosophy of free-flow, active learning with children self-choosing from the prepared environment throughout a four hour work cycle (Pound 2005). Practitioners observe and guide children, when needed, presenting activities to them to suit their interests and level of development. The children are never interrupted when engaged in play or work as Pope (2002: unpaginated), drawing on the words of Greenwald (1999), states 'interrupting children when engaged in purposeful activity interferes with their momentum, interest and inner workings of thought'. Hence the practicality of building the story times into the daily routine was reliant on the practitioners gathering the children at moments when they were not engaged in other learning. It required the practitioners to understand the benefits that were hoping to be gained from the research and finding a way to introduce a group time in a way that was sympathetic to the Montessori work cycle. Smith and Langston (1999:73) describe this as a 'collaborative' approach, in any setting one practitioner can act as a change agent but for a change to truly work all practitioners involved must be supportive. By sharing the knowledge I had gained from my academic research of language and literacy development the other practitioners could also see the benefit to be gained from introducing shared story reading times. Throughout the research all the practitioners involved reflected in the journal giving them opportunity to fully

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experience the research for themselves, adding their observations of the benefits they noticed (Mukherji and Albon 2010) This helped me portray my goal of improving language and literacy development illustrating Kotter’s (1995) acknowledgement of how communicating goals when leading practice gains support from others who will also be instrumental in making it happen.

Findings of action research

The findings from the action research helped lead practice to further support language and literacy development. As is the process of academic research, I analysed the data gathered and findings emerged that drew correlations to previous research (Robert-Holmes 2014). The importance of practitioner strategies in supporting children’s language and literacy development were highlighted in the action research project. Drawing from Hindman et al.(2008), if practitioners are not aware of this then opportunities for learning would be lost. When reading stories myself and observing others, the findings showed that we were naturally using such strategies. We introduced new vocabulary and encouraged the children to name and label pictures in books. Having regular exposure to new words and having the chance to use them cements their understanding (Harris et al. 2011). We asked questions at a level to support each child’s level of understanding and development enabling us to scaffold their learning. Being attuned to a child’s current level of development and adjusting the reading and questions appropriately is advocated in Terrell and Watson (2018) and Kaderavek et al (2014). We modelled and extended language which furthers expressive language skills by increasing the benefits of learning new vocabulary extending the positive effect to literacy skills as found in Massey (2012). Massey (2012) explains how children learn new words through incidental and elaborated exposure and gradually store them in their memory. When children hear new words from listening to conversations or everyday activities and routines this is referred to as incidental exposure. Elaborated exposure is gained by leading practice that incorporates purposefully introducing new words through stories, conversations and activities where meaning is given to the words through adult guidance (Justice et al. 2005). The small story times introduced in this project allowed elaborated exposure to new vocabulary and gave the children a chance to repeat and use the words, through questions posed and conversations led by the practitioners.

Recognising that the skills of the practitioner in using techniques during story reading play such a crucial part in supporting language and literacy skills I led a professional discussion with the practitioners who were not involved in the research to share my knowledge and what our research had found. I also partnered up the practitioners for story times so that less experienced practitioners were able to observe the techniques modelled in practice (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002).The practitioner’s role in supporting speech and language in this way falls in line with Bruner’s (1983) socio-interactionist view of how children learn language. Bruner (1983) suggests humans have an inbuilt Language Acquisition Support System (LASS), a natural desire to interact combined with supportive adults in a social context who build children’s language learning. Exposing children to a variety of language within a meaningful context and adapting language patterns to the level of the child scaffolds learning (Bruner 1983).

Certain elements emerged from the findings and from many daily reflections. Whilst reading stories in daily practice, I noticed how the layout of the book, the size and style of the print impacted on how likely I was to point out the print to the children. In Justice et al’s (2017) research they identified four categories of strategies that support literacy skills, they were print organization including tracking words from top to bottom and left to right; development of meaning of print such as letter knowledge including capital and lower case letters; knowledge of words including word length and pointing to one word at a time. The action research showed that these strategies were only rarely seen in the small story time sessions and, although not all strategies can be included at all times, this highlighted a possible missed learning opportunity. It emerged from the action

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research that our story times did not promote many opportunities for pointing out text, not only due to the presentation of the text but also due to the seating position of the children. When the children sit in front of the adult they were only being shown the pictures and then the adult turned the book to read the text. This demonstrates that group story reading may have limitations in comparison to individual shared story reading in terms of highlighting text. This observation has led to some of the shared story times taking place with a few children gathered round a table so that they have the opportunity to see the text as well as the pictures. I also recognised the importance of undertaking a review of the books on offer to the children in the book corner and shared this observation with the other practitioners. This has led to an increase in the number of books with different sized font to emphasis words such as big, crash, splash and lift the flap books that emphasise speech.

Links to home - supporting parental involvement

The increased interest in books and stories that the children in my action research showed spilled over into their home life. Parents commented on how the children talked about the stories they had shared, were using more vocabulary and were wanting to look at books more at home and bring them to nursery to share. The link to home was clearly enhanced as children also spoke about their home life during the story sessions showing how the opportunities created for talking was enhancing language development. Milburn et al. (2013) found that the strongest effect to language and literacy development stemmed from a combined home and school approach. Similarly Higgins and Katispataki (2015) found encouraging parental involvement in their children's learning is shown to have positive effects on children's development and educational outcomes. These research findings, although crucial to remember, are not new. As Nutbrown and Clough (2006) detailed The Rumbold Report of 1990 highlighted the importance of parental involvement in children's education recognising the value of parents as their child's first educator. This report led to the recognition of the importance of a strong equal partnership between parents and practitioners with regard to children's learning; this is an overarching principle of the current EYFS (DfE 2017:6). Mathers et al. (2014) also reflect this listing family-practitioner partnerships as a key dimension of a high quality setting resulting in better outcomes for children.

The importance of parental involvement and the opportunities that shared book reading provides to enhance language and literacy development made sharing the increased understanding and developments in practice with parents an obvious next step. At home, in many cases, children could have the opportunity to share books one on one with their parent. Indeed Bain et al. (2015), drawing on Wells 1987, state that reading to children is recognised as the most beneficial activity parents can do to develop communication skills. These individual shared book reading opportunities could also provide fantastic opportunities to benefit literacy skills such as highlighting print, phonetic sounds, capital letters and long and short words as found in Justice et al. (2017).

The end of my action research project coincided with the start of the Covid-19 lockdown meaning the majority of the children would no longer be accessing early years education and would be spending time at home with their parents. This led to me compiling a simple 'Shared story reading tips' document based on my knowledge gained from academic research blended with findings from the action research project. I shared this with parents to help them maximise the benefits to shared story reading at home. This also supported the setting in fulfilling the obligation to promote the children's learning while they were at home (DfE 2020). To make the techniques that would suit each specific child accessible and practical for parents to use I incorporated the techniques into the next steps information shared virtually with parents and presented some on-line story reading sessions demonstrating strategies to highlight literacy development. These sessions were well received by parents and I am hopeful that by leading practice in this way, through

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sharing knowledge of my own and others research, children’s language and literacy development have continued to progress during the unprecedented Covid-19 lockdown situation.

Conclusion

This paper has considered how leading practice involves a sharing of knowledge, vision and understanding amongst early years teams to provide quality provision. It demonstrates the role of research in underpinning leadership of practice, drawing on the example of introducing small group story times to promote children’s language and literacy skills. This paper considers how gaining an increased understanding around an area of development, from reviewing others’ research as well as conducting action research ourselves, can provide the foundations to enhance practice and build provision in a collaborative way, with both other practitioners and parents, for the children in our care.

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