

Language and Literacy in the Digital Age

Reading stories with children is a staple in most early years settings, Massaro (2017) describes reading aloud to children as a valuable source of language immersion that sets the foundations for a child's literacy development. Humans have always told stories to pass on knowledge and entertain children through the generations, telling stories helps the brain to retain and recall information by captivating the emotions and curiosity of the listener and inviting them on a journey, a good storyteller is able to introduce concepts like feelings, morals and help children make sense of their world, inspiring them to use their imaginations and feel connected to themselves, and others. (Ragu, 2018) Similarly, Vygotsky's theory of enculturation (Rajendra, 1991) where learners are guided by interactions with more knowledgeable others to internalise social and cultural norms, supports the benefits of reading stories to children outlined above, when an adult reads to a child, not only are they teaching them how to listen and engage with literature, but they are also passing on information that is important to the child. Ingber and Eden (2011) cite a deficit in deaf culture awareness as a barrier to children with hearing loss developing the ability to sequence and tell stories, hearing caregivers and educators not being able to connect with the deaf experience and communicate meaningfully with that child, may be unable to fully convey meaning in a way that makes sense for them living a life where their sensory perception is so different. This research supports how important enculturation is to a child's learning. Early years workers should provide adequate support to children with additional needs to make sure they feel included and supported in the learning environment, so they are able to feel safe, comfortable, and secure enough to participate fully and freely (Welsh Government, 2023).

This essay will analyse two storytelling activities, one features a traditional book, and the other will be using a digital story.

Engaging with stories provides a groundwork for language and literacy development (Cekaite and Björk-Willén, 2018) and The New Curriculum for Wales asks practitioners to provide children with experiences that will develop knowledge and skills in listening and reading, speaking, and writing, and in literature, so they are able to articulate themselves with confidence, and communicate well with others. The Early Years practitioner featured in the

video has chosen to provide one of these experiences through the medium of storytelling, which (Hargrave and Sénéchal, 2000) ensure us is a fun and developmentally appropriate activity to share with young children, that can raise the literacy levels of children who are considered to be underperforming in that area of learning, a potential reason for this is that the enjoyable experience will help learners to develop a good attitude towards literacy, and allow them to explore new concepts in a way that is both fun and meaningful to them. The storyteller is making efforts to read the story in a way that is fun for children to watch to enhance the learning potential of the activity, their posture and body language is alert and active to match the rhythm of the story, they change their facial expression to convey the emotional narrative and alter their tone, so it sounds interesting. Petrová, Zápotočná, Urban and Urban (2020) agree that interactions that empower children to actively engage in the shared exploration of books are an effective tool in developing early language and literacy in children. The sharing of stories also encourages metacognitive language, which with appropriate adult feedback can help develop knowledge and understanding of the concepts in the text. The storyteller occasionally stops to ask the listeners to recall the characters with her, this allows for the children to consider potential consequences and give their own reasons for them.

(Aukrust and Rydland, 2011) argue that good quality talk exposure promotes the development of a rich vocabulary and can even scaffold the acquisition of a second language in bilingual children. When the words children are using are presented within a rich and complex discourse, it affords children the opportunity to make connections that deepen their understanding of the words they are hearing. A story, with the potential for fun, emotional connection, and visual experience, could be that rich and complex resource for children to learn from, working with this theory, the storyteller has dressed in a costume and have used props that feature in the story, like the broom and cauldron to add to the fun of listening . Furthermore, Collins (2010) found that exposure to storytelling in nursery children, was a predictor of success in literary comprehension in those children's futures. As they experience repeated readings of stories, they learn incidental words, alongside explicit teaching that grows their vocabulary, storytelling is the talk exposure that generates the same results as Aukrust and Rydland (2011) The book chosen to be read -Room on the Broom by Julia Donaldson- features language that children may not yet be familiar with, like bounded and clambered, but read alongside the detailed pictures with expression, listeners can understand

from the context, and ask the storyteller to clarify for them. During the traditional story, the storyteller presents the page of the book being read in a sweeping motion Infront of the listeners so they can get a better look at the pictures. Cekaite and Björk-Willén (2018) refer to this as the 'lighthouse gaze' and found it to be useful in storytelling to help children understand the text and the words within it, linking words to the pictures as the story is being told. The storyteller is unable to do this in the digital version, but instead, encourages the children to make space so they can all take a good look and checks visually and verbally if the audience is happy.

The book is full of rhythm, rhyme and repetition , Harper (2011) found that a child's ability to blend sounds, decode words and spell phonetically, was improved if that child had engaged with nursery rhymes.

Research from Vloedgraven and Verhoeven (2007) supports this theory, they found that rhyming helped children to identify and segment phonemes, which is a vital aspect of phonological awareness needed to spell and read words.

The inability to process the phonology of oral language is seen as an underlying issue that prevents children developing reading and writing skills according to Alves, Pinheiro and Reis (2015), who determined that intonation, rhythm, tone and expression during storytelling can support children's understanding of oral language that will help them to understand rhythm and speech patterns that can help them to decode words phonetically which will help the development of literacy skills. Moritz, Yampolsky, Papadelis, Thomson and Wolf (2012) support this discussion with their research that indicated children with more rhythmic skill as a result of musical activities which allowed them to be better able to perceive and manipulate intervals in time were better prepared for phonological segmentation skill at the end of kindergarten. The storyteller ha considered these points when choosing a book that features so much rhyme that children are able to recall and join in with.

The storyteller also adjusts her pace and adds gestures as clues to the parts of the book that all the listeners can join in with, there are frequent chances for the children to search together, tap the broom and 'WHOOSH' away, this sing-song response is known as a Choral Response (Nag, Snowling and Asfaha, 2016), a technique designed to promote the retention of knowledge, by asking or queuing up a group to recite a phrase, or a key piece of vocabulary or an answer unison. (WETA, 2023) argue that this strategy strengthens fluency and builds

confidence in children, the support and motivation of their peers speaking out loud together reducing and self-doubt, however, Stoffelsma and Van Charldorp (2020) warn that choral response can limit engagement as an individual with the potential risk of limiting language development.

Learning to read is likened to deciphering a code by Schwartz and Sparks (2019), This generation of children are digital natives who are growing up with digital technologies such as mobile phones, smart televisions, social media, and automated services, as part of their everyday lives. Learning how to code digitally is a part of digital literacy, which is included as part of the new curriculum, which makes the digital story as much of a valuable early years' experience as the traditional story, despite the barriers to efficient digital literacy in the early years, including the cost of providing and maintaining appropriate ICT equipment and staff being adequately trained to deliver learning opportunities around that equipment noted by Aubrey and Dahl (2013) during the digital story, the storyteller takes longer than they would to turn the page of the book and find their place as they are not as fluent digitally as younger children will eventually be, or potentially are already, this could potentially interrupt the flow of the story and make it less appealing to the audience, this is an example of the barrier to quality digital experience through the adult not being skilled enough in that area.

Furthermore, Schwartz and Sparks (2019) tell us that children who were taught to connect sounds to symbols strengthened their neural pathways and became stronger readers than children taught standalone words who were unable to decode the phenomes and identify them easily in different words. Research has found that when the brain is at peak elasticity in the Early years, these connections are made more easily (Harvard, 2023) and adding digital stories- facilitated by an enthusiastic adult- to nursery settings as educational strategies could be used as a learning tool to further develop early literacy. This view is supported by Green (2011) who found Preschool teachers who integrated digital stories into the classroom helped learners use technology to support the development of writing skills by engaging them in activities that allow them to construct their own learning in a way that is meaningful to them as digital natives. Green (2011) goes on to say that digital storytelling can bridge the gap between traditional learning that educators are accustomed to and digital learning that children will need to acquire to be successful in their futures.

Reich, Yau, and Warschauer (2016) found in their research that digital books can support literacy development if the resource is chosen well, a quality e book should be free of excessive animations and games to avoid distracting the audience, for this reason, the digital story chosen is displayed on the screen, providing supporting visuals as the adult tells the story. The storyteller reading the digital book, pauses between chapters to connect with the audience and ask simple questions, Reich, Yau, and Warschauer (2016) would consider this technique to support the use of digital books in the Early years as they found that when an adult who is actively participating in the storey ,and facilitating discussion to further the listeners comprehension, children learn as well as they do with physical books. This view is supported by Moody (2010) who found that emergent literacy skills could be supported by quality electronic books, even if the child is struggling in this area of development, as the sounds being connected with the words allow children to comprehend the storey, even if they are reading independently. Moody (2010) goes on to say that electronic books were found to have even more of a benefit to children learning a second language, assisting them in connecting visual meaning to the written and spoken word. The storyteller could improve their practice by researching literacy applications and delivering stories on a hand held tablet that can be handled and shared more like a traditional book, with challenges that could extend the knowledge of the children being read to while tapping into their knowledge and enjoyment of digital equipment, even offering opportunities to take charge of the learning, which will improve their confidence and self-esteem.(Bruner, Wood and Ross, 1976).

Helping children to find joy and emotional connection through storytelling is an invaluable skill for Early years workers to have according to the research explored in this essay, the benefits to developing reading, writing and oracy skills ,even if the story is being shared through a digital medium and not a person with a physical book, is reason for more time and respect to be given to the art of telling stories and to build a shared imaginative world with the children in our care so they can access the information, confidence and creativity they need to succeed in their futures.

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