

Language and Literacy in the Digital Age

According to Collins (2010), Whitehurst *et al* (1994) and Welsh Government (2017) the activity of storytelling is foundational for children's literacy, language and social development, and one can go as far to say that it is one of the oldest forms of teaching (Maureen *et al*, 2021). Stories can be told through traditional picture-books, oral make-belief, and digital interactive screens; however, Jackson (2022) believes it makes little difference in what format it is read as their literacy is developed through the speech they hear (Montag *et al*, 2015).

Jackson (2022) compared Early Years children's vocabulary in a recent study, stating that children who were never read to had heard approximately 4,500 words by the age of 5 years, resulting in limited knowledge of language and word meaning, whilst children who were read five books a day had been exposed to approximately 1,500,000 words by the age of 5 years, resulting in a wealth of rich oral language experiences. Therefore, it must be understood that reading to children does develop language comprehension and vocabulary as well as holistic development, emotionally and socially says Poveda (2003), with a leaning towards a greater future academically states Department of Education (2010). With an influx of digital technology, tools and practices needed within our every-day societies it is vital basic technology vocabulary and concepts are understood by Early Years children and are taught in present settings through storytelling (O'Byrne *et al*, 2018). Because of this, both traditional and digital story times carry importance and value.

However, Balcazar (2019) and Coyne *et al* (2004) maintains the belief that images within traditional and digital storybooks are crucial as they build language skills through connecting words to meanings, they help to identify sequences, such as beginning, middle and end, whilst giving space to make predictions for what might happen next in the story, and can act as visual cues to bring more in-depth understanding of the narrative, people's expressions, unwritten details, settings and character development, which in turn improves reading, writing and oral comprehension. Both traditional and digital reading can also adequately teach children phonological and alphabetical knowledge says Storch and Whitehurst (2002).

These features listed are some of the reasons why White (2005) believes reading should be prioritised within every child's daily routine.

There are a wide variety of traditional storybooks tailored to suit different ages and abilities, focusing on different formats, illustrations, themes and subject matter says White (2015). For example, picture-books - where text and illustration tell the story; participation books - where children have commands to follow, such as 'clap your hands'; concept books – expanding children's understanding of an idea or theme; folktales – learning about diversity, cultures and experiences often through moral concept or themes; poetry books – encouraging children to rhyme with playful words and learning through repetition; information books – written on particular topics and interests, such as cars, animals (UCCE, 2022). Estyn (2021) recognises the importance of storytelling, reporting that children's oracy, writing and reading can be developed through literacy activities such as reading. However, whilst focusing on varied content is exciting for children, Gov Wales (2018) encourages practitioners to follow the child's lead and interests whenever possible. It is proved through research that children's learning is more effective when practitioners expose them to books and literacy tasks that they are more personally interested in says Lowry (2016).

Reading is invaluable for children's literacy development; therefore, it matters how it is read or presented states Chibana (2015). Froebel agrees that reading should be a joyous, meaningful and relevant activity (Tovey, 2013). Practitioners should prepare for storytelling moments, considering when and where to read, the selection of suitable materials and props that can enhance children's attention and imagination, whilst being fully present as the reader (Nicholas, 2022 and Snow, 2004). If the storyteller is captivated by the story the children will be also says Glassner (2017). Conversation throughout storytelling gives wider understanding to children, giving them space to process information and ask questions when they are unsure of details or vocabulary (Montag *et al*, 2015).

Bettelheim (1967) believed that for a story to fully captivate a child's attention, which would then result in literacy and communication development, it must entertain and inspire curiosity. Within both the traditional and digital storytelling activities there were both expression and excitement used by the storyteller, which would cause the children to feel engaged and involved in the activity, whilst allowing them time to learn and imitate these

expression and emotions. This learning through observation and modelling agrees with Bandura's social learning theory (Horsburgh and Ippolito, 2018).

The view of participation and co-operation was used throughout both storytelling activities, giving children space to ask questions and have more in-depth conversation about certain parts of the content. For example, emotions and feelings during the traditional storytelling activity, and foods within the digital version. This encourages language practice, the fine-tuning of children's attention, and listening skills, as well as broadening understanding and knowledge of the topics read about (Johnson, 2015). This is agreed by the Theorist Vygotsky, in that children learn from the more knowledgeable other (Gupta, 2006). This can include children learning from the storyteller as well as the other children participating in conversation during both activities.

The storyteller, during the traditional activity, encouraged children to use their imaginations, for example, "imagine a rocket ship going whoosh up into the sky". According to Fredericks (1997) imagination encourages children to overcome problems by creating solutions, discover meaningful ideas, and form multiple perspectives of a situation. This scaffolds children in mastering skills such as language, writing and reading. Vygotsky agrees (Agbenyega, Tamakloe and Klibthong, 2017).

Whilst analysing both the traditional and digital storytelling activities it is noted that there is a lack of paused moments. The late Mark Twain, a lecturer and writer, once said, and I quote, 'No word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause' (Twain, 2018), which argues a need. According to Koretsky (2017) pauses during storytelling give way to emphasising points, gives moments for children to process information shared, can add tension and suspense where needed, which can result in child engagement, focus, learning and literacy development.

Another critique noted in the digital activity was the pace of the storytelling itself. The presenter needed to keep up with the images and movement on the screen, which resulted in what seemed a rushed reading time. It gave little space for children to ask questions, share personal thoughts, or to feel involved in the storytelling, which could result in a lack of literacy learning and understanding (University of Michigan, 2017). It is gravely important that practitioners are well organised to present a digital book, that they are prepared to pause

the screen for interactive moments and are confident in the materials read and technology used, which will enhance opportunities for children's development through more quality times of interaction (Robin, 2016).

Robin (2008) argues that digital storytelling should be used more in early years settings, as it encourages children to express their ideas and knowledge in a personal and meaningful way. According to Iversen and Brodersen (2008) digital storytelling not only develops computer interactions, but it also supports traditional communication skills, encourages collaboration, and strengthens literacy. If the storytelling has been made interactive the children learn to share ideas, ask questions, and express opinions through excitement and fun, whilst providing within classroom pedagogy, opportunities for development within oracy, writing and reading (O'Byrne *et al*, 2018).

Medlicott (2019) believes that whilst storytelling can be entertaining and fun for children, it is also informative. However, Maureen (2021) believes the focus of reading should not be primarily to share information. Despite that, it can be agreed that reading can give children understanding and insight into both past and present situations, which can help them to develop empathy and the ability to understand varied feelings, as well as extending vocabulary and patterns of language (Barton and Barton, 2017). Pacey (2022) maintains the importance of not confining storytelling to traditional reading books, but exploring interactive digital books, video and audio books, as well as singing nursery rhymes, learning chants and reciting poetry, as these can all spark communication, literacy learning and improve muscle memory.

Korpilahti *et al* (2016) states that Early Years practitioners are continuously questioning which factors need to be recognised when deciding on the most accurate support needed for individuals with literacy delays within Early Years to support them in language development. He believes if well-defined demographic, biological, environmental and genetic factors can be taken into consideration, along with language screening, assessment and analysis of outcomes, it may help to provide the relevant care for the right children.

According to McElroy (2013) babies hearing is developed substantially by 30 weeks gestation, meaning babies are listening to their mother's voice throughout the final 10 weeks

of pregnancy. Furthermore, a study by the Pacific Lutheran University (Clements, 2012) argues that new-born babies can demonstrate notions of familiarity and recognition from what they have heard from inside the womb, For example, noticing a familiar theme tune from the mother's much watched TV programme. This research shows that babies are born prepared and capable of learning, for example, language, such as the process of differentiating sounds (National Science Foundation, 2022). As a result of such studies and research, Gov Wales (2015) believes there are different stages of speech and language development throughout the early years from birth onwards, from babbling, to speaking single words, to learning fuller sentences. By 24 months, the average child has developed a basic vocabulary of 50 words (Rescorla, 1989).

Studies have proved there is a significant difference in gender vocabulary, in that females are more advanced in their language skills to males by the age of two years (Boyd, Richerson and Henrich, 2011), however language delays can often be caught up by the age of 5 years says Rescorla (2013). Biological factors could include a pattern of speech and language difficulties throughout family history (Choudhury and Benasich, 2003), Early Gestation age (Weindrich *et al*, 1998), low APGAR score, which is an assessment of baby's condition at birth (Stanton-Chapman, 2002 and BMJ, 2019), and being male can all influence language development (Campbell *et al*, 2009). According to Hackman and Farah (2009) and Horwitz (2003) environmental factors such as parental education level, family size, socio-economic family status, working or non-working parents, and high parental stress can all impact on children's language and literacy development. Korpilahti *et al* (2016) believes that childhood speech, language and communication difficulties are formed in the earliest stages of development, and Gov Wales (2022) states they can have a long-term impact on adult life.

Wellcomm is an intervention toolkit used here in Wales to support any children within the early years who have been observed in having a speech and language delay (GL Assessment, no date). Areas of concern are identified, such as language, communication and interaction delays, and a profile is written up on the individual so that specific intervention activities can be done with those children. Through a study done by Seager and Abbot-Smith (2017) it was concluded that Wellcomm interventions show accuracy in assessment for school-aged children with literacy and communication delays.

To conclude this assignment, I have realised through much reading and research how the importance of storytelling, in all the different formats, can encourage oracy, reading and writing in the Early Years. It was noted too, that the enthusiasm and engagement of the storyteller, or lack of, can have negative or positive effects on children's literacy development. A quote I read recently by a teacher and storyteller named Njoki McElroy sums it up, "Storytelling is an act of love. Sharing stories connects us to each other. When I tell my story, it connects to your story" (Stahl, no date). Connection, conversation and time through storytelling with trusted adults will encourage children to develop and flourish, particularly in words, writing and reading.

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