

Language and Literacy in the Digital Age

To begin, Medlicott (2019) considers reading with young children, suggesting it is an important activity within early years; a vital experience to entertain and inform; to develop empathy and, to expand vocabulary and language patterns. This can be done with/without a book; picture books; textbooks; books with flaps and textures; with props; actions; songs, and rhymes; poetry and/or digitally. The benefits of storytelling are many, and link closely with a child's language, literacy, and communication development, including skills such as reading, writing and oracy. Children hearing stories read aloud frequently, means they are given chance to grow and flourish within this area, comprising of an ever-growing ability to use these skills creatively for example, their imagination for narrative role play. (Montag, Jones, Smith, 2015; Bruce, McNaire, Whinnett, 2020).

Many children are beginning this journey from birth, suggesting the linguistic input has already begun because their caregivers are talking to them frequently. Babies are already beginning to understand language from infancy, showing interest in facial expressions and tone of voice; moreover, expressing early speech through a range of sounds and noises for example, cooing and babbling (NHS Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children, 2020). Bruner believed the role of the adult in supporting language acquisition is vital and he considered games such as 'peek-a-boo' would begin the process of developing this skill, and furthermore, storytelling becomes a powerful source (Nursery World, 2016). Dewis Cymru (2018) and Welsh Gov (2018) suggests storytelling in the early years allows for a better chance of success in later life, including better outcomes in all subject areas in school.

Research suggests that parental involvement in early reading is vital, including access to resources at home. Children who have access to traditional books, even a small number (20) can benefit from good outcomes within school and value reading for pleasure. A longitudinal study showed evidence of children who owned up to 20 books and they were achieving higher in education than those that had none; of those that had no books at home, 58% were below reading level; 80% of children who read above reading level, owned their own books (Department for Education, 2012).

However, the digital world is ever developing and therefore, reading and writing is shifting from printed materials to digital/online, but the concern is that practitioners are not adequately integrating information and communication technologies into the reading and writing activities of children today. This suggests they lack in the skills, strategies, and dispositions to enable this change and, it is vital in society today that practitioners are learning these skills to develop children into the professionals of the future (Yamac, 2019). Yet, according to Estyn (2018), 23 schools were visited when researching for the digital preparation competency framework; evidence displayed findings of many staff having been involved in discussions regarding the digital plans for their schools, including foundation phase practitioners feeling knowledgeable enough to support children digitally. One might question, if more research needs to be done in a wider range of schools and locations across the country including relevant training.

Furthermore, it can be noted that Welsh Gov (2020) champions digital literacy, making this country one that leads the way in demonstrating that its entire educational system is in favour of this; with strategies and policies in place, suggesting how they planned to improve this area in schools by 2021; within their plan, it was noted there would be an on-going increase to the access practitioners and children are having to the digital world, ensuring they are engaging with these learning experiences. Research suggests the Welsh government's strategy, aids more than 1,500 state schools and 540,000 children and practitioners throughout the country; believing to make a generation of exceedingly-skilled, digitally literate young people equipped with creative, communication and collaborative skills (Darley, 2021). This supports the new Donaldson Curriculum, as digital skills are expected to be used cross all areas of development including language and literacy (Audit Wales, 2022).

Now to consider the skills and behaviours attached to storytelling: in the 2 videos attached to this assignment, there is one traditional, and the other, digital. There is both differences and similarities between both, including positives and negatives:

Firstly, enthusiasm (dramatic) is demonstrated, and this kind of storytelling is established more so in the traditional video compared to the digital version. According to O'Neil and Banoobahai (2016), it is vital that practitioners within early years display strategies that will enhance language ability; enthusiasm can influence language and literacy, powerfully

because it is captivating to an audience. According to Farmer (no date), storytelling is the simplest and most fascinating of dramatic and imaginative activities; like the digital story, Farmer encourages the importance of retelling a story in one's own words, focussing on key visuals and vital moments. However, the enthusiastic techniques he describes associated with this, such as heightening and lowering volume, pitch, and tone; expressions and actions; repetition; rhythm and pace, were displayed much better in the traditional story.

Within these videos, the practitioner took lead, modelling these skills and behaviours. However, as the story progressed, children began to join in. This links to Vygotsky's theory, who demonstrates the importance of a more knowledgeable other, and this allows children to see and hear what skills and behaviours are used to create an engaging storytelling experience. The scaffolding influences children to imitate their more knowledgeable other (John, 2021). Nursery World (2016) also agreed, suggesting that adult support enables children to slowly find independence within language and literacy.

Secondly, there was pointing, and both stories reveal this. However, there could be a significant difference. Compared to the traditional storytelling which had many words, the digital version had very little text. In the traditional version, the pointing could be acknowledging the existing text, however, the digital version, pointed out the moving images and visuals. According to Gallagher (2022) and Kight (2017), storytelling with simply pictures and no words is enjoyable and leads to engagement; it can benefit children by encouraging conversation; a compelling source for them to learn and discover new vocabulary, because the pictures can be stimulating, which promotes talking and reflecting. On the other hand, the children were not given time and space to explore this level of engagement, therefore this opportunity was missed by the practitioner. The fast pace did not allow room for children to engage fully; it was rushed and had very little interaction between the practitioner and the group of children. For example, she was not fully listening and embracing the children's thoughts, feelings, and questions; she was trying to engage, but perhaps was limited by time, therefore the storytelling session is over very quickly, ready to move on to the next activity with the children.

Research suggests that although child participation within the storytelling activity is important and valued, for example sharing their thoughts about what is being pointed out; it is slowly reducing and eroding. This is because western societies are under pressure more

and more to concentrate on measurable outcomes which often means creative methods are being undervalued or lost, to deliver a centralised curriculum for children in preparation for standardised assessments (Cremin, 2017). Nevertheless, The National Literacy Trust (2022) suggests practitioners should be providing a storytelling culture within early years, one which encourages and influences children to share their thoughts and feelings, allowing them to explore their own imagination and creativity, attempting unfamiliar vocabulary, and developing self-confidence through their own speech for example, a child might want to express their idea about text or pictures practitioners are pointing at – why is the writing big? Why are the children sad? Why is the bear chasing them? In the digital video, the practitioner could have allowed the children to be more involved for example, pressing pause to answer questions in depth; standing up and creating more repetitive actions to join the children in; pausing to ask questions to the children or to give them time to process their own thoughts about the images that she was pointing at.

It is evident that within the traditional storytelling activity, the practitioner similarly shared Bruna's viewpoint; his constructivist theory focussed widely on the ways in which children make sense of the world around them; the experiences are vital and he believed storytelling was invaluable suggesting children should be given a range of stories to become creative with their own ideas and allowing the space for it, for example a child in the traditional story realised the picture she was pointing out did not relate to Autumn, therefore there could not be a snowstorm to match; however, he decided they should all pretend to be a snowstorm, spinning around in the woods (Nursery World, 2016).

Thirdly, location was a key element. In the traditional storytelling video, much thought had been considered on the importance of location. According to Ron, (2021) in the Visual Storytelling Institute, location is crucial for it demonstrates a vivid image to the audience of the story being told, for example: before finding the pretend bear and the story book, the children were coming from exploring real life grass, a river, mud, the woodland; listening to the sounds; the smells; the textures; and suddenly, they find themselves by a big, open den – the cave, and a teddy bear waiting for them with an associated story. This situation meant the children would be able to associate the location with the storytelling experience, including the multi-sensory approach and first hand-experiences such as, feeling the mud and listening to the river, making it more unforgettable and enjoyable, and generating a

sense of connection to the characters, because the environment created the correct atmosphere (The National Strategies, 2008; Learning through Landscapes, no date).

On the other hand, the digital version lacked in this area because the storytelling experience was indoors; yes, there was an artificial plant which could be associated with the outdoors, but there were no sounds, no textures to feel beneath their feet or to touch with their hands; no smells associated with the outdoors, like plants and trees. Furthermore, the images portrayed reality but, what if the children have never seen a river; or mud; or a woodland, what then might these images even mean to them? The bear was half hidden behind her and who really was that bear, because she didn't engage with it or introduce him as part of the story, like in the traditional version. There was no real connection between location and the story demonstrated.

Now to link theory to practise: Piaget was an early theorist that understood the value of sensory play, suggesting that environmental experiences are important to a child's cognitive development; he believed that when the senses are stimulated their neurological pathways are created which supports learning, including language development whereby children begin to communicate effectively (Wild.Kind Compassionate Playschool, 2020). Piaget also considered the thought processes of young children, the knowledge they already have and how this can be developed. For example, the digital version which was carried out indoors but with real life imagery; perhaps after the story the children could go exploring outdoors to make connections to the new information they have just absorbed. On the other hand, before the traditional story was read, the children first explored the river, the grass, the mud and so further to this knowledge, scaffolding could be offered by the adult. Piaget believed this was to support them in the process of absorbing new information and encouraging them as they begin to make sense of the world around them (Early Years Education Guidance Blog, 2020).

Finally, considering both methods of storytelling, one may appreciate that both approaches have value; demonstrating strengths that could powerfully influence language and literacy development in young children. According to Future Learn (no date), with traditional storytelling, the original storyline's narrative is the primary focus, whereas digital storytelling can carry an integral element to the narrative, enhancing the experience for children, for

example, moving imagery, sound effects and music, all which creates effective stimulation that is both multi-sensory and engaging.

To conclude, it is evident that storytelling plays a vital role in the ongoing development of early language, literacy, and communication skills such as reading, writing, and speaking. It is clear this process begins from birth and the more exposure to storytelling experiences within early years increases the chances of success throughout school and into later life. Research suggests parental input is vital and that children perform better if they own their own traditional books, however, the Welsh Government and the New Donaldson Curriculum recognise the importance and value of the digital age and bringing this ever-growing change into all areas of learning, including language and literacy development. The concerning fear might be that practitioners are not adequately trained to use the digital element to its full capacity and potentially, further training could be beneficial. Going forward, as an early year's practitioner and a mother of 2 young children, I will certainly continue storytelling with traditional books; however, this assignment has reminded me of the digital age that we live in, therefore, developing my own skills will be a priority.

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