

## **How Can Storytelling Help Develop Children's Literacy and Digital Literacy Skills**

Montag, Jones and Smith (2015) suggest that the language children hear through storytelling can be classified as part of adults' child-directed talk, claiming that this type of conversation is what leads to the child developing early language. Harper (2011) suggests that a child's mastery of spoken language is stimulated by hearing stories read aloud. Pourkalthor and Tavakoli (2017) agree, concluding that the act of listening is required to be able to communicate, which in turn helps to develop language, including vocabulary and speaking. Neaum (2017) believes that language acquisition starts from the first days of life, through talking, which could be done through story telling. Larson and Marsh (2015, p. 5) state that literacy is the ability to comprehend text and symbols, agreeing with this statement, Whitehead (2010, p. 149) further notes that being able to read and write in either one or more languages is the definition of literacy. Welsh Gov (2019) however, describe literacy as having the capabilities to not only read and write a language but also to be able to listen to and speak the language enabling effective communication. Neaum (2012) and Agosto (2016) suggest that storytelling is beneficial to children's literacy, claiming that children can increase their vocabulary and oracy whilst learning to listen and develop their reading skills. Maureen, Meij and Jong claim that for storytelling to be beneficial to literacy development, it must be combined with a play-based activity.

Whitehead (2010) states how repetition, rhythm and rhyme are types of language play that can be initially shared with infants to engage them in literature. Although Brock and Rankin (2008) agree with this statement, they also suggest that playing rhymes to a foetus in utero can be the earliest form of developing language in babies. Crystal (2010, p.13) also agrees, stating how after 6 months in utero the baby has developed pathways which enable it to hear muffled sounds, but it can recognise rhythms in what it hears, which is why these are the first features of language that they acquire. Crowley (2014) claims that engagement with young children enables them to develop their vocabulary quicker and often results in them having increased comprehension. Bower and Barrett (2014) agree, stating that reading, writing and oral language all benefit from the use of rhyme and repetition.

Tancock (2014) claims that language play such as rhyming can allow children to develop patterns within their speech, which can further support their reading, through use of expression and understanding meanings. Sharma and Cockerill (2014) claim that the word sound patterns that children become aware of through rhyming can aid their phonological awareness as it allows them to break words down into syllables, which can be advantageous when it comes to reading and writing. Brock and Rankin (2008) agree, stating that children should be introduced to rhymes before they are introduced to phonic structure as hearing these similar sounds can give them a solid basis on which they can develop phonological awareness before formal phonics instruction begins. Neaum (2012) explains how enjoyment can be felt through listening to rhyming stories, further adding that this is the start to infants tuning in to sound, including the language that they hear around themselves. This in turn can improve their acquisition of language and can start them on the path to becoming literate. Whitehead (2010) explains how play through language can be slightly rude, but this can however motivate the child's interest in literature. The traditional story read by the practitioner contained the word 'poo' and 'burp', both of which are considered rude in society, but children can find amusing. Crystal believes that engagement in literature should be motivating and engaging and that children should have fun with books to aid their literacy (Crystal 2010). Harper (2011) claims that the building blocks to phonemic awareness is within rhyming and that by interacting with adults who are using rhymes, children can develop their language and literacy skills. As can be seen in the traditional story telling video, the practitioner is reading a book which includes 'end-rhyme'. Bower and Barrett (2014) insist that adults that read aloud to children need to be aware of the different rhyming types. Claiming that it enables them as practitioners to effectively scaffold the child's learning, as they are becoming confident and more familiar with rhyme as a direct result from the interaction with a more knowledgeable other, as is supported by Bruner's theory (Aubrey and Riley, 2022, p.146). If a child has confidence in their abilities with rhyming, it can in turn lead to them furthering their language development (Bower and Barrett 2014, p. 123), this is also a requirement in the curriculum for Wales, that children are confident, capable learners (Welsh Gov 2022). However, Goouch and Powell (2015) claim that not all practitioners within early years settings have the knowledge to provide this support to babies and young children, as they found that most of the talk happening in the baby room was instructional speech and the

practitioner did not have the time to give quality care to the children, including storytelling and meaningful conversation. Lindon and Brodie (2016) agree with this sentiment, claiming that adults can help children develop confidence in their literacy skills in the early stages of childhood, through enthusiastic storytelling and increasing their awareness of rhymes and rhythms. Whitehead (2009) agrees stating that rhymes can introduce children to the idea that words with similar sounds will also have similar spelling. The practitioner in the story telling videos did not point to any of the end-rhyme words within the text. However, Whitehead (2009) encourages drawing attention to the rhymes within print as it enables the child to see that words have end sounds as well as beginning sounds, this is a way to scaffold their literacy development. Pourkalhor and Tavakoli (2017) recognise that when children listen to rhyming patterns, it can help to improve their listening ability which in turn can improve their language skills, Neaum (2017) agrees with this, noting that alerting children to rhyme within language, through actively engaging their listening skills, is a way to develop their language and literacy abilities. Read, Macauley and Furay (2014), found that children were able to retain words from stories read aloud that contained rhyming better than they could from stories that contained no rhyming, thus strengthening the child's vocabulary. A connection was also noted between the adult reader and the level of predictiveness that comes from rhyming, which again made the words unforgettable. It can be observed during the traditional storytelling activity, that the practitioner does not allow any pauses in reading to allow the children to guess what words may complete the end-rhyme of a sentence. An opportune moment could have been on the page where the 'mummy' is tapping the top hat. The practitioner could have paused just before saying the end-rhyming word 'cat', as there were picture prompts on the page that the children could have used to affirm their guess.

Whitehead (2010) shares that children require moments that allow them to have conversations about books, as it can be an opportunity for them to process their own feelings and thoughts about the story. The practitioner can be observed during the storytelling videos, asking the children questions about the books they have just heard being read. Skinner believed that children learn through positive reinforcement, it can be seen when the children give answers to the practitioner's questions, she rewards them with praise, which is believed to help the children

develop (Lindon and Brodie, 2016). Whitehead (2010) states that early literacy requires the child to ask adults and peers meaningful questions about the text and language, using them as linguistic informants. This type of learning is supported by Bruner, as the adult or the peer is seen to be scaffolding the child's learning (Aubrey and Riley 2022). Brock and Rankin (2008) state that questions are frequently used as a prompt to get children to speak, claiming that choosing to use open questions rather than closed questions can encourage the child to answer using a wider range of vocabulary. The practitioner in the digital story telling video can be seen asking 'how' questions, which promotes longer more complex phrases to be used by the children. Agosto (2016) claims that asking questions following storytelling can aid children's critical thinking skills, cognitive abilities and their comprehension of written texts, by encouraging them to think about how the story might relate to their own life experiences. Lenhart *et al.* (2020) agree, stating that during storytelling, the children's opportunity to gain more vocabulary and learning is enhanced by the practitioner asking questions.

Welsh Gov (2022) state that children should be encouraged to ask questions to be able to evaluate situations and information. As their learning progresses, they should have the abilities to ask more complex questions, which can aid their literacy development. The practitioner is seen in the videos to be asking the children questions, but she does not ask the children whether they have any questions themselves about the materials that have been read. This is something that the practitioner could do in future to encourage breadth of conversation among the children. Certain content of storybooks can allow children to construct their own questions, for example, in the digital story, 'The Tiger Who Came for Tea', the children may question whether that situation could appear in real life. The children may question scenarios in books relating them to real life experiences. For example, in the traditional story telling video, the children may be asking themselves questions about who dressed up as what at their fancy dress party (Whitehead, 2010).

Whitehead (2009) further states how children can process and verbalise their emotions by beginning to ask questions about the human condition, doing so through the characters and scenarios they hear in stories. The act of asking questions and encouraging the children to ask questions during storytelling, can have a positive effect on their comprehension. Modelling in this way can benefit children by enabling

them to create their own stories as their literacy progresses (Theobald, 2016). It is thought that by asking questions during storytelling, it can interest and intrigue the children, deepening their knowledge of the characters and premise, enabling them to present their own ideas to the story (Cekaite and Bjork-Willen, 2018). During the traditional storytelling video, the practitioner can be observed asking the children who they might see on the next page, as she does this, she turns the book away from the children or closes it to add an element of surprise. This is something that cannot be done during digital storytelling as the screen may limit the possibility.

The practitioner can be seen in both videos using props or puppets. Whitehead (2009) maintains that the use of props supports the portrayal of the story and can support children's memory, enabling them to tell the story again with the possibilities of adding their own ideas. Cekaite and Bjorn-Willen (2018) suggest that the use of props focusses the child's attention, engaging them in listening which is beneficial to their literacy learning. Whitehead (2010) suggests that storytelling that is supported using props can help develop oral language in early years settings, especially in children with EAL and WAL. Brock and Ranking (2008) describe how the use of puppets during storytelling could encourage talk and further storytelling from children themselves. This fun element to storytelling is engaging for children which is a key element to develop their literacy (Whitehead 2010). The use of soft toys as props, such as the tiger that the practitioner used, can represent the main character of the story. Whitehead (2009) suggests that this can encourage the child to retell the story to the toy, improving their oracy competency as they take on the role of the more able reading partner. In the traditional storytelling video, the prop used by the practitioner was a stick, symbolic of a wand. Neaum (2012) states that by children using one thing to represent another shows their wider cognitive abilities as they engage in literacy practices. Sylla, Coutinho and Branco (2014) believe that the use of props can be beneficial to children's language, enabling them to create and act out their own stories. Belfiore (2013) agrees stating that when brought in to play based learning, puppets can help children with remembering what they have just heard, improving their comprehension and their competence in retelling stories orally. Griemann (2017) maintains that the use of props during storytelling adds another layer of interest which appeals to the child, which Neaum (2012) states is a fundamental element to the child's literacy development. However, Griemann (2017)

acknowledges that adults might not feel comfortable using props as they may feel that they do not match up to the practice of other adults. Brodin and Renblad (2020) ascertain that children's reading and writing, and communication improves when props are used for storytelling.

To conclude, rhyming, asking questions and using props all play a beneficial role in improving children's oracy, reading and writing. It is fundamental that the practitioner models each element to scaffold the child's literacy development.

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