Language and Literacy in the Digital Age: Storybook Assignment – Kim Jonuscheit

Shared storytelling is an approach in early years settings which increases children's awareness of sounds, grammatical rules of the language, and how books and stories are organized from an exceedingly early age on (Ezell & Justice, 2005). Young children will develop their oracy, reading and writing skills. To achieve this, interacting with children where the adult reader is sensitive to children's active participation and engagement as well as responsive to any concerns is more beneficial in children's language and literacy development through books (Arnold et al, 1994). Therefore, in the following discussion three crucial elements of shared storytelling will be evaluated: Reading environment, social involvement, and intonation based on the books "Panda's Guide to Mental Wellbeing" (2023) by Lisa Edwards and "The Panda Problem" (2022) by Deborah Underwood.

Firstly, the reading environment is important to make shared storytelling valuable for young children. Hence why, the space should be quiet and used with diverse objects, for instance, blankets and pillows where young children feel safe in and can focus. Additionally, sufficient lighting is another important aspect of beneficial storybook telling where students see the prints and illustrations (Ezell & Justice, 2005). These aspects have been considered and executed by the storyteller reading the traditional book "Panda's Guide to Mental Wellbeing" as well as the digital book "The Panda Problem". According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943; 1954) survival or physiological needs must be met to fulfill higher needs such as safety, love and belongness, esteem and self-actualization. Thus, by ensuring that the reading environment is a safe space for young children where they feel seen, safe, connected and belonging to the group, the children can fulfill their highest need of being their best selves.

Additionally, the physical arrangements are as important during shared storytelling. Hereby, the reading adult is displaying the book how they would read it, so children can make seating adjustments. Since it is crucial for all reading participants to have sufficient access to the reading material, the storyteller in the video is sitting on eye-

level with the young children and holding up the book accordingly (Ezell & Justice, 2005). One can argue that sitting higher than the children is more beneficial because all reading participants can see the book and follow the story. However, in this case the storyteller chose to sit on the floor with the young children to make them feel safe and increase the adult- child relationship since the traditional book “Panda’s Guide to Mental Wellbeing” can be more personal and intriguing for some students. Questioning supports students in their understanding of a concept, in this case the concept of mental wellbeing and healthy habits. Additionally, students feel more accepted, respected, and safer to express themselves which influences students need to fulfill their highest need, according to Maslow (1943; 1954). There are various stages of questioning, starting with the ‘what?’ and ‘who’ questions at 2 years old. At age 5 questions and discussions are used for investigation.

Secondly, social involvement during storytelling is valuable for young children’s development in literacy and language. Social interaction is created in an early year setting when adults and pupils are communicating with each other for instance when an adult is reading a storybook with young children and by questioning, they are invited to engage in discussions and social interactions. This way, students are more likely to actively participate in the shared- reading experience. Moreover, to create meaning and a positive attitude towards reading and storytelling, the experience itself should be engaging by being critically challenged but also fun and interesting. Here, a specific reading style is of importance (Ezell & Justice, 2005). Reese and Cox (1999) highlight three diverse occurring reading styles: performance-oriented reading, describer and comprehender reading style.

The performance-oriented reader will, as the name suggests, have conversations with the audience before and after the reading with no interruptions during the reading. Contrary to that, the storyteller with a descriptive reading style will lead conversations on a lower level during the storytelling where events of stories or illustrations are being described. Furthermore, the comprehender reading style describes a storyteller who will create conversations with the students during the reading which focuses on reasoning, predicting and inferring story events.

The last reading style is practiced by the storyteller in the recording reading the traditional and digital book. Before starting with reading the story, the storyteller gives students time to look at the illustrations and predict what the content of the book may be about. Next, while the storyteller is sharing the story of the “Panda’s Guide to Mental Wellbeing” with the children, questions would be asked such as what the students are grateful for. Additionally, the storyteller would ask the students to predict what event will happen next, especially during the digital book “The Panda Problem.” After finishing the books, the storyteller would give the children a task where they work with the book and create meaningful connections between themselves and the story. For instance, at the end of the “Panda’s Guide to Mental Wellbeing” book, the storyteller asks the students to work in groups on creating healthy daily routines based on Panda’s suggestions, creating a list of gratitude and what makes them the happiest and why. When the students are done, they share their ideas, thoughts, and insights with the whole group. Whereas, after reading “The Panda Problem” the storyteller asks the students to write an ending to the story where the Panda introduces an even bigger problem to the narrator. These tasks support students in developing their reading, writing and oracy skills.

Moreover, children’s active participation in discussions should be positively reinforced and acknowledged to build their confidence and abilities. As Skinner (1957) states, positive reinforcement will influence a child’s behavior and will increase such in the future. This will help create a safe environment where students can make mistakes and take risks to grow. In addition to that, students become encouraged critical thinkers and problem- solvers that hold space for positiveness for each other for instance through jokes, laughter, and smiles. The students learn that emotions and feelings are welcome and accepted and their growth and well-being is valuable (Ezell & Justice, 2005).

Highlighted by Vygotsky’s (1978) social-interactionist theory which influences the present research on language and literacy development, young children learn and develop from more knowledgeable others by socially interacting with them. Hereby, a specific concept will get introduced to the children by interacting with more knowledgeable others and with repetition, children will internalize the concept. For instance, introducing young children to the concept of healthy habits and mental

wellbeing, students learn about the topic, develop an understanding of it and internalize it. However, in order to understand and internalize a concept fully, the more knowledgeable other challenges the students by questioning them about the new concept. Through scaffolding the adult facilitates the young children with their learning and working in their zone of proximal development (ZPD). Thus, students' language and literacy skills are increasing during shared storytelling. Especially in infancy, speech ability develops over an extended period of sensitive listening. Even observing and playful social interactions support infants with their first development of language and literacy (Whitehead, 2010).

Contrary to that stands Chomsky's Theory of Language Acquisition (1998) in which he suggests that language learning is innate and that every child can fully understand the language since they were born, especially the grammatical rules due to their 'Language Acquisition Device' (LAD) which will encode the rules of the language and which abilities are needed.

Thirdly, the reading style itself during the shared storytelling is valuable for the reading participants. To engage students fully in storybook telling, diverse expressions and intonations are vital to bring the story alive and enhance the student's enjoyment and engagement of the story. "It is not what you say. It is the way you say it" (Crystal, 2016).

According to Crystal (1998) language play is beneficial for students' language and literacy development. He recognizes that language play is diverse and includes for instance wordplay, jokes, and riddles in different media like literature, drama, and digital media. Language play differs in creativity of the language users where they can manipulate language to deliver certain emotions, situations, and relationships. In addition to that, it can enhance linguistic and cognitive skills including vocabulary development and problem-solving abilities. Crystal (1998) also emphasizes the cultural and social aspects of language play and how it is influenced by those.

Furthermore, language play promotes asking 'why?' and 'what?' questions, modeling the tone of voice by reading with diverse expressions and challenging students to be critical thinkers and problem-solvers. Intonation is crucial to engage students. Hereby, the storyteller is varying the pitch of one's voice and vocal techniques to conquer

different feelings, characters, and plots. For instance, talking in a high-pitched voice when the character in the book is excited or when the storyteller is imitating a small bird to add interest to the character (Ezell & Justice, 2005). While reading the digital book “The Panda Problem,” the listener can clearly hear a difference between the narrators' voice and the Pandas voice. The pitch of the narrator's voice is lower than the panda's voice, whereas the pitch of the storyteller's voice imitating the aliens is even higher. Contrary to the digital book, in the traditional book the storyteller varied the pitch of the voice to emphasize specific words, for instance the emotions and feelings of the panda and her cub since there are no characters to imitate as much as in the digital book.

Moreover, changing the pace of reading is another beneficial element to show emotions or a change of atmosphere (Ezell & Justice, 2005). For instance, when the characters are angry or stressed, the storyteller reads faster. While reading the digital book “The Panda Problem,” the storyteller changes their pace of reading several times especially when the panda creates problems, the narrator would read in a faster tempo when they are surprised and slower when they are overwhelmed. Furthermore, sharing emotions of students is another essential element of shared storytelling. Meaning, if the students are laughing because of a certain scene, the storyteller shares that emotion with the students and laughs with the children (Ezell & Justice, 2005). Through this, students not only learn and develop their language and literacy skills, but they also increase their social and emotional skills and their sense of belonging in a group setting.

However, Chomsky (1998) is critical of Crystals theory of language play (1998). Crystal (1998) states that through the various approaches of language play, questioning and imitations, students develop their language and literacy skills. But Chomsky (1998) clearly highlights in his theory of language acquisition that language is natural, that every human being is born with the ability to learn a language and the LAD supports them with the understanding.

Also, Bearne et al. (2007) notes that pupils demonstrate sufficient proficiency in reading and utilizing digital literacy from a premature age on even without exposure to digital media. Merchant (2007) agrees that young children are challenged to become problem-solvers who design strategies for reading digital texts with ease. Critiquing Chomsky (1998), Bearne (2004) highlights the skills and abilities pupils develop as young

students since children not only have to decode printed letters on paper but also learn about the different digital media like videos where images are in motion and are accompanied by sounds. Therefore, the term ‘reading’ includes decoding prints and alphabetical knowledge as well as being fluent in digital literacy, so a rather complex skill. The storyteller in the recording chose a digital book in the form of a video where they need to stop the video for questions or other remarks. Hereby, students learn and expand their digital literacy knowledge about different varieties of digital books and how to use them.

What conclusion can be drawn from this? Language and literacy in the digital age is an essential and broad skill to develop in the early years of children. Shared storytelling supports and scaffolds the development of oracy, reading and writing skills while ensuring that students feel safe and accepted in their group. Moreover, having social interactions with adults and children challenges students to work in their ZPD and become critical thinkers as well as problem- solvers. One can argue that social interactions do not support the development of language but in this case the storyteller chooses to incorporate social interactions, predictions and reasonings into the storytelling to facilitate student's oracy, reading and writing skills. The reading style itself is a crucial element to engage students to actively participate and get to know the characters. In other words, language play is valuable and beneficial for students' social and emotional development and language development. Even though both books had quite different stories, the reading style the storyteller chose was efficient for both books.

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