

Language and Literacy in Early Childhood Care and Education

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Introduction

Being a confident and literate communicator supports participation in community life and civic society. Language and literacy are necessary skills, which support children to move effectively between worlds, interacting in a range of communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In modern day Irish society, while primary school children living in areas of disadvantage are struggling with literacy (Eivers, Shiel and Shortt, 2005), the role of home and early childhood education within the learning process is well recognised by practitioners, researchers and policy makers (Eivers *et al.*, 2005).

Building on thirty-seven years of experience in working with childcare practitioners, IPPA, the Early Childhood Organisation, has linked with the Penn Graduate School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, in the development of specific training to enhance language and literacy across and through the early childhood curriculum. This paper considers the implementation of the programme and the experiences of the practitioners as they reflect on the process and on language and literacy within their services.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to maximise children's language and literacy opportunities while in pre-school, through the implementation of specific strategies within a reflective practice approach by early childhood practitioners.

Through work with its members, IPPA was aware of the variance in confidence and capability of staff within childcare services to maximise literacy opportunities. The research question therefore emerged 'how can practitioners with differing levels of qualifications and experience support the acquisition of language and literacy for young children in pre-school?'

Stonehouse (2000) argues that the skills, knowledge and attitudes of staff in early childhood settings are the most important influence on the quality of the programme and on the implementation of early literacy learning. This piece of action research therefore aimed to support a group of practitioners implement and evaluate a range of strategies across the early childhood curriculum to enhance language and literacy opportunities for young children.

Many young children are failing to thrive in our educational system, with between 27% and 30% of pupils in first, third and sixth class in designated disadvantaged schools having "*serious reading difficulties*" (Eivers, *et al.*, 2005: 7). This inhibits children's learning across the curriculum (McGough, 2002) and places them at risk of failure or drop out at second level. The disparity of achievement among children from different socio-economic groups is widely recognised by early childhood practitioners. All children should have equal access to literacy, which enables them to contribute to and participate in their communities and the wider society. In seeking to explore means of equalising outcomes for young children, this small-scale study sought to focus on the pre-school setting, as a key early learning institution outside of the home environment.

Context

IPPA has a long history of supporting pre-school practitioners through the provision of services, training and quality improvement programmes. Work in the sector with both private and community pre-school services suggested to the organisation that literacy opportunities were often limited to the book corner and that the challenge for practitioners was to broaden their understanding of what counted as literacy.

The project partner, Penn Literacy Network (PLN), has been working with elementary and high school teachers in Philadelphia, since 1981, engaging the interest and improving the academic standards of students in areas of disadvantage (Botel, 2003). Drawing on the experience and expertise of both organisations, a short training programme has been developed, which is practical in nature and has its theoretical roots in social constructivism (Vygotsky, 2003).

An initial group of twelve pre-school practitioners working in West Dublin was recruited for the pilot phase of the programme (three practitioners from the baby room, four from the toddler room and five from the pre-school rooms). The childcare service is located in an area where over one third of all households are headed up by a lone parent and where unemployment is running at double the national average (Childhood Development Initiative and Dartington Social Research Unit, 2004). The group of practitioners work in a single integrated service, which caters for sessional, full day care and after school care. Participants self-selected onto the language and literacy training programme which was delivered on-site over a series of four sessions. Times and dates were agreed in advance with the group which resulted in a mix of evening and daytime sessions, delivered over a two month time frame. An IPPA staff member liaised with the childcare co-ordinator in the centre, gathering a profile of the practitioners and tailoring the session or teaching plans and resources to best meet the needs of the group.

Language and Literacy

The IPPA/PLN programme is underpinned by understandings of language and literacy as socio-cultural processes. IPPA's work is theoretically underpinned by the belief that children become literate through participation in family and community life and that literacy practices are valued differently in different contexts.

Language and communication does not emerge on a child's first birthday and literacy does not commence upon entry into primary school. In fact, Fox (2000) suggests that the first day of school is almost too late to begin the process of learning to read, as the foundations of language and literacy are laid and developed from birth. Literacy is understood as reading, writing, non-verbal communication, listening and talking. It also includes areas such as visual literacy and techno-literacy (Makin and Whitehead, 2004). In its broadest sense being literate enables the individual to function independently and flexibly in a society (Whitehead, 1999) and is required for economic, social and political participation. Bordieu also argues that literacy is a form of cultural capital, which is defined as *"knowledge and competence that can be converted into status, wealth, and mobility"* (Luke, 2000: 7). Thus the capacity to communicate and be literate provides life chances and empowers young children to move comfortably between family and the wider community.

Methodology

This small scale study adopted an action research approach, which is normally associated with *"hands-on projects"* (Denscombe, 2004: 73), is practical in nature and is a cyclical process. Action research is about *"researching with people to create and study change in and through the research process"* (Mac Naughton, 2001: 208). This method facilitated inquiry with the participants, promoted reflection on practice and supported alternative perspectives on working with young children.

The action research cycle comprised of a self-reflective spiral, the implementation of language and literacy strategies within the childcare setting and then *"re-planning, further implementation, observing and reflecting"* (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2002: 22). To maintain the integrity of the research, data was collected (audio taped) through focus groups and an individual interview. The use of focus groups allowed the views of the participants *"rather than the researcher's agenda"* (Cohen, *et al.*, 2002: 288) to emerge. An individual interview was undertaken with the centre supervisor as it permitted the exploration of more complex issues and allowed the researcher follow up on unanticipated issues. The study is limited by both the sample size and the duration of the research.

Programme Design

The programme was underpinned by a socio-cultural view and understanding of literacy which influenced its design. The ten-hour practitioner programme was developed with a commitment to:

- Using adult education methodologies with an emphasis on experiential learning to accommodate a range of learning styles
- Incorporating time for questions, group discussion and processing of learning to allow a range of voices to be heard
- Ensuring the programme content is accessible, that the depth and breadth has a starting point with which the practitioners can identify
- Adapting and contextualising the PLN strategies and associated language for a cultural goodness-of-fit
- Building the habit of personal and group reflection, so that practice becomes praxis, thereby using theory to guide action and using action to build theory (Freire, 2003).

The format of the programme sought to provoke questioning and urged the interrogation of practitioners' own values and practices throughout the sessions. The aim was to prompt practitioners *"to go beyond their first thoughts and taken for granted ideas"* (Haigh, 2002: 95). Strategies explored during the training focused on props and storytelling techniques, book reading and extending thinking, narrative and identity, documenting children's stories, mark- and book-making. Approaches within the programme sought to make literacy visible and possible across the curriculum for infants, toddlers and pre-school children.

Research Outcomes/Findings

This small-scale research considers the implementation of theory to practice from the perspective of the practitioners. Focusing directly on improved outcomes for children is beyond the scope of this study. If, as Stonehouse (2000) and others suggest, the trained adult is central to learning and development, then practitioner's attitudes, confidence and skills in promoting literacy practices within the pre-school have implications for the children in their care.

The focus group interview with staff yielded insights into perceptions on literacy and reflections on strategies implemented. At the commencement of the training, staff in the pre-school room indicated that they had an environment and a curriculum conducive to language and literacy acquisition e.g. *"we do all of that already"* (Pre-School [PS]-Staff 3.a). Staff in the baby and toddler rooms respectively felt more distanced from the issue of literacy e.g. *"there's only so much you can do with the toddlers"* (Toddler Room [TR]-Staff 2.a). During each training session a new strategy to support the acquisition of language and literacy was explored, which was subsequently implemented by staff and reflected upon in the large participant group.

Prior to this programme, practitioners had a particular range of literacy practices and incorporated story telling and book reading as circle time activities. Initially there was a sense in the pre-school room that *"reading is for when they are in school"* (PS-2.a) and those working with the youngest of children believed that *"well, we're with the babies so, you can't really do anything"* (Baby Room [BR]-Staff 1.a). Staff working with the toddlers explained that *"we try and read them stories but they don't really listen"* (TR-Staff 4.a). Story time in the pre-school room was something that the children had to engage with at set times and they were sent to *"read books for time out when they get too rowdy"* (PS-Staff 1.a).

Children and staff together identified and made changes over the course of the programme. In some cases, staff became more confident in reading or telling stories from a book (*"I know what I'm doing now"* [PS-Staff 1.b]). This confidence resulted in a more purposeful approach in one instance (*"our circle time for stories wasn't working out, so we got cushions and animal props in bags and it kept the children interested"* [PS-4.a]). Staff members also started to allow time for books and reading which previously they had not seen as an activity to be pencilled in to a particular time slot in the day. After the training however, they sat and engaged with the children before, during and after the story. One staff member shared that *"I let them tell the story back to me, sometimes it does sound like the story and sometimes it's their own little story. But it's really good to hear them saying it"* (TR-Staff 1.a). Mark- and book-making became a feature and extension of reading and stories, although staff acknowledged that it *"takes a lot of time to get them started and interested"* (PS-Staff 5.a).

Overall, the findings suggest that at the end of the training and reflection, the pre-school practitioners/team understood literacy in a broader context and began to re-configure both the environment (greater selection of books and mark-making materials) and their own practice. The training and reflection offered the staff an opportunity to *"stand back and look at what we do"* (PS-Staff 3.b).

An in-depth interview with the centre supervisor offered yet another perspective on changes in staff practices. Overall the centre supervisor saw a greater enthusiasm and team working among staff as they implemented the various strategies. She believed that the staff had *"definitely started talking about ideas"* (Centre Supervisor [CS]-1.a), which indicated a greater team awareness of literacy in the setting. The strength of modelling was evident to her in the toddler room where now, instead of the adult, *"the child stands up with the book and starts the story"* (CS-1.b). This, the children's enthusiasm, has had a reciprocal effect on the staff members who are *"delighted"* and *"are seeing the benefits of doing it"* (implementing the strategies) (CS-1.c). The staff group appeared to engage with the training, increasing the use of books and storytelling as part of the daily routine.

As a centre they have become more aware of the type of books they buy and are looking out for accompanying props.

Thinking ahead, and arising out of the group discussion, one practitioner wondered how children would feel and manage if, in spite of the efforts of all in the service, the benefits of and emphasis on language and literacy was lost once they leave the creche (PS-Staff 4.b).

In reflecting on the brief language and literacy journey, the supervisor was concerned about the high number of children with challenging behaviour and how this might impact on staff efforts to focus on their new learning. She is actively considering smaller group size, which she feels might be more beneficial for all children. The greatest challenge ahead will be "*keeping it all alive*" (CS-2.a).

There was ninety per cent attendance of staff at each training session and feedback both by session and within the focus group indicated an increased awareness of language and literacy opportunities within the setting. Practitioners working with both babies and toddlers placed higher levels of emphasis on talking with and listening to the children. While less energies were afforded to mark-making by these staff, there was a greater willingness to engage in story reading and story telling with the toddlers. Feedback from the group participants on the training experience and strategies implemented within the respective rooms in the childcare centre was positive. Whether this experience was due to the nature and delivery methodology of the programme and/or the opportunity to reflect on practice within a non-accredited training context is unclear.

There are limitations to this study. Time and resources mitigated against on-site visits to provide ongoing support in the implementation of and reflection on strategies. To what extent changes in practice will be integrated into the culture of the service remains unknown. Will practitioners retain their newfound confidence and will they continue to take and make opportunities to thread language and literacy through the curriculum?

Conclusions

It is evident that from birth, caring individuals play a central role in supporting the development of language and literacy in young children, but caring alone is insufficient. To support learning, practitioners must have a repertoire of strategies, which stretch across the curriculum to promote authentic literacy experiences for children. This study demonstrated that experiential training in one curricular aspect impacted on professional practice in one suburban integrated service.

If, as research suggests, children from disadvantaged situations have literacy problems and are failing within the educational system, attention should be focused on family

support and the first tier of education, the pre-school environment, to give our youngest citizens the cultural tools to participate in society. Equally, those working directly with young children require ongoing pedagogical support to ensure a language and literacy rich environment and curriculum. Reflection in and on practice becomes the means and tool for staff to develop professionally. Only when staff members are confident in their own literacy can children benefit and thrive as readers and writers.

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