

The Effect of Storytelling at School on Children's Oral and Written Language Abilities, and School Connectedness

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Introduction

- Storytelling involves telling a story from memory or imagination, without a book or props. It's an alternative to storybook reading, occurs in almost every culture in the world, and requires no resources or literacy abilities from adults.
- Previous research has found that storytelling can lead to improvements to children's: vocabulary (Trostle & Hicks, 1998), story comprehension (Palmer, Harshbarger, & Koch, 2001), and story retelling, sometimes more so than story-book reading (Isbell, Sobol, Lindauer & Lowrance, 2004).
- This study aimed to find out whether receiving a storytelling intervention at school led to improvements in the oral language, written language, and the feelings of school connectedness of 6 and 7 year old children, compared to children receiving a storybook reading intervention, or continuing with usual classroom literacy practices.

Method

- A quasi-experimental between-participants design was used with 194 children aged 6-7, in Year 2 at school. Eight classes of children in six schools were randomly assigned to either the storytelling group, story-reading group, or comparison group.
- The storytelling intervention group were told stories by their teacher four times a week for ten weeks, with a new story being told each week. The story-reading intervention group were read the same stories from story-books by their teacher over the same period. The comparison group continued with their usual classroom literacy practices.



Measures

Pre-test: at the start of the 10 weeks, after being told/read a story, participants:

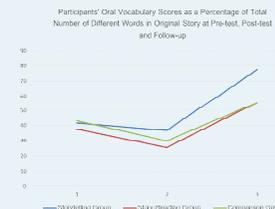
- orally retold the story individually, recorded using a voice-recorder,
- wrote a re-telling of the story for 15 minutes,
- completed the vocabulary subtest of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children – Fourth Edition (WISC-IV)
- completed the Early Attitudes Test – Revised (EAT-R)

Post-test: at the end of the 10 weeks, after being told/read a story, the same pre-test measures were taken again, except for the WISC-IV.

Three-month follow-up: Three months after the post-test, after being told/read a story, the same pre-test measures were taken again, including the WISC-IV.

Results

- There were no differences between the scores of the three groups at pre-test: they were comparable on the measures taken before the intervention.
- Mixed Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) showed that the storytelling group told significantly longer oral retellings of stories than: the story-reading group at post-test ($p < 0.001$), the comparison group at post-test ($p < 0.001$), the story-reading group at follow-up ($p < 0.001$), and the comparison group at follow-up ($p = 0.001$).
- Mixed ANOVAs showed that the storytelling group used a significantly larger vocabulary in their story retellings than: the story-reading group at post-test ($p < 0.001$), the comparison group at post-test ($p = 0.002$), the story-reading group at follow-up ($p < 0.001$) and the comparison group at follow-up ($p < 0.001$).
- The story-reading group scored significantly higher on the vocabulary subtest of the WISC-IV than the comparison group at follow-up.
- There were no significant differences between intervention groups found for key points of stories included in oral retellings, written retellings of stories scored by teachers using the Writing Assessment Measure (WAM), or on measures within the EAT-R.
- After the intervention teachers were given a short survey about how they had found implementing the intervention. Teachers in the storytelling condition noticed more changes to children's oral and written language skills and feelings of school connectedness than teachers in the story-reading condition, who did not notice any changes other than expected progress over time.
- Teachers in the storytelling and story-reading conditions noted similar difficulties in running the intervention, but teachers in the storytelling condition reported being likely to continue using more elements of the intervention in the future than those in the story-reading condition.



Discussion

- The findings of this study support findings of other research showing that storytelling interventions can improve aspects of children's oral language (Isbell et al., 2004).
- Based on this study's findings it is most likely that storytelling does not lead to improvements to children's written language or feelings of school connectedness. However, improvements may have been found if the intervention had been run for longer, for example children's oral vocabulary has been shown to predict and contribute to their writing ability over time (Dunsmuir & Blatchford, 2004), or if different measures had been used.
- Due to time constraints, written retellings were not scored in the same way as oral retellings (e.g. by calculating fluency, vocabulary and key points of original story included in retellings). If written retellings had been scored in this way then similar results to those seen in the children's oral retellings might have been found.

Further Research Ideas

It would be interesting to explore:

- The effect of this storytelling intervention on the written story retellings of older children who are more proficient at writing, allowing them to write more in 15 minutes.
- In more depth the experiences of the children and teachers during the storytelling and story-reading interventions, to extend this study which briefly explored teachers' views through the implementer feedback survey.

Implications for Practice

- These findings suggest that storytelling would be beneficial for primary school teachers to use regularly with their classes to develop children's oral language, which is likely to lead to improvements in children's literacy skills over time as language underpins literacy.
- Also, if storytelling improves children's cohesion as a class, as suggested by teacher reports from the survey, this could lead to improvements in children's learning across the curriculum, as they may feel a greater sense of belonging in the classroom environment and therefore learn better.

References

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