

Storytelling and Listening to Stories

A Critical Skill for Early Reading

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Abstract

National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 has put an unprecedented emphasis on developing critical foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) skills across the foundational stage. In order to improve the foundational literacy competencies and skills of all children at the foundational stage of learning, i.e., from preschool to Class II, various pedagogical practices need to be designed and used in the classrooms and at home. Storytelling is considered as one of the best methods to develop basic literacy skills in young children. Through storytelling, one (teacher or parent) can establish connections easily with other domains or subjects as it motivates children and arouse their interest towards learning. This also enhances children's competencies in other developmental areas. Use of appropriate pedagogy to promote foundational literacy is an important issue because the success in later years of school education depends on the FLN skills developed during foundational or early years of learning. This article discusses various dimensions of storytelling as a pedagogy and how it develops and boosts the foundational literacy skills in young children.

INTRODUCTION

A 4 year old, Ria carefully leaf through the pages of *मेरा एक दिन* (My day's routine), a wordless picture book; she tells the following story:

I wake up in the morning; my Mumma wakes me up every day. I looked in the mirror and saw my teeth so dirty. I said, "Ria let's brush your teeth – make them shine." Ria has to take

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bath also but here in this book – there is no picture of a toilet! Oh! This is wrong. Ria will go to the toilet first and then take her bath. Ria will also shampoo her hair. She has to look pretty. Let me close the door to take the bath. Then after bath, Ria wore a smart frock with lots of flowers on it. My Mumma bought this for me. Then my Mumma helped me in combing my hair. I have got long hair. Then I said my prayer. I ate my breakfast and drank milk. I took my school bag and said bye to my doll and pet. I said bye to my Mumma, papa and dadi. Why doesn't this book have any pet and any doll? Even my dadi is not here.' The story ends.

What does Ria know about stories and their construction? She is a competent storyteller and very creative at this age who can relate her experiences and language to the pictures in a simple, wordless storybook. But she also knows something about the form and language of stories. For example, she includes characters, obstacles or conflict in the story sequence. Story awareness is one of the important aspects of early literacy development that includes young children's growing knowledge about print, sound, and writing (Jensen and Hanson, 1982). As the practitioners of young children, we all need to understand how to assess young children's story awareness. We as practitioners need to incorporate storytelling experiences into a

balanced quality early years' education curriculum that encourages literacy development in early years.

Research has shown that once the children show poor outcomes in foundational literacy in their first eight years, they are unable to catch up later in the primary grades and the result is inevitable, i.e., drop out. This happens because children do not get the appropriate stimulating and enabling environment where the focus is on the literacy skills and thus, they do not enjoy reading. They keep passing the classes without actually learning to read. National Policy of Education (NEP 2020) emphasises on foundational literacy and numeracy so that the basic necessary learning gets accomplished in all the schools by all the children. In order to make early reading joyful and meaningful, at the same time attract reluctant readers and inculcate in them the desire to learn to read, storytelling is one of the best approaches and activity through which many of the skills can be targeted. The observation and assessment of children's foundational literacy become easier for the teacher as 'read aloud' and other storytelling techniques offer amazing strategies which motivate the young learner towards early reading. Let's see how story awareness can play an important role in improving the foundational literacy skills.

WHY READ STORIES TO YOUNG CHILDREN?

Young children become familiar with story language (age and developmentally appropriate) and increase their ability to talk about stories when parents and teachers read and re-read children's favourite picture storybooks to them. Whole group story reading has been an integral part of quality Early Childhood Education (ECE) programme in many preschools and early primary classes. Reading aloud is recognised as a valuable and appropriate action in the development of language and emergent literacy in young children. The above practices certainly build the foundation for children's literacy development and are highly recommended to be followed by the parents of young children.

Young children's story and print awareness seems to be enhanced at home when—

- Several people (caregivers, parents and teachers) read to the child.
- The child requests or demands for numerous books for re-reading.
- The child discusses storybooks read by others.
- The child pretends to read.
- The child shares a variety of books with their younger sibling.

Practitioners in high-quality ECE programmes are encouraged to read appropriate stories to children during the primary years as an appropriate

way to encourage emergent and early literacy development. Recent research indicates that reading simple stories that are age and developmentally appropriate to young children is important for the initial acquisition of early knowledge about reading.

There are several other activities that include labeling pictures, naming and spelling words or printing letters and words which are enhanced through story awareness.

Researchers also indicate that children who were read to in their early years scored higher on early reading skills than those who participated in other types of early literacy activities.

HOW DOES STORY AWARENESS DEVELOP?

Young children's schemas for stories might include broad concepts such as:

- Types of events and elements found in a story.
- Patterns for sequencing story events.
- Language patterns in a story.
- Patterns in a dialogue or role-taking.

Some of the story elements that might be included in young children's story construction are: setting, initiating an event, planning the characters, attempts to reach a goal, hurdles to the goal and consequences of the character's actions.

According to Piaget, during the pre-operational period, young children's thinking expands beyond sensory-motor and perceptual impressions. During this period, i.e., between 2–6 years of age, children are able to use symbolic mental imagery and recall. For example, children move from simply labeling pictures to role-taking through dialogues as they retell the story. Young children's stories are filled with action as they focus on what is being portrayed in illustrations. As children's symbolic imagery develops, their story content also gets widened. At pre-operational stage, children just develop skills to reason out logically and thus they create highly imaginative stories. This broadens their concept of what constitutes a story compared to the children in older age.

WAYS TO ASSESS STORY AWARENESS THROUGH STORYTELLING

It is difficult to assess children's abilities to tell or retell stories from picture books. Young children's language tends to be especially sensitive to situations. For example, children who are usually relaxed and talkative may sit stiffly and give perfunctory responses when they are in an uncomfortable situation. An emotionally supportive, familiar setting is essential when teachers try to assess children's language. Teachers need to use informal encounters where familiar interactions are possible and in order to increase the potential for active

participation. But many teachers often worry that even if the setting is comfortable and people are familiar, young children do not respond in a way that indicates their true ability when they are asked to tell or create a story by themselves. In such case, a teacher can try using additional cues such as an appealing theme-based story with familiar pictures. She can then encourage young children to retell a story using the same book or sequential story cards. While assessing young children's abilities to tell stories, preschool teachers should use several concentrated encounters, where each encounter will rely on different cues. Children's responses to these different cues could provide thorough insights into their story awareness than just a single encounter. Before teachers try to assess children's story awareness, they need to decide which story processing abilities they wish to elicit. Teachers need to select the story materials very carefully. If the teachers want to determine whether children can sequence the story cards in chronological order, they should use the materials in which the story topic, the character traits, and depicted behaviors are familiar to the children. These structural cues can enhance children's abilities to understand the stories and recall them. The connections in the story should be clearly presented to the children. During the storytelling, questions should be focused on the relationship between story events,

else children can get distracted. Story picture cards should be focused only on the event or the story content, otherwise it can distract children from telling stories. For instance, one child sequenced a set of story cards based on the shade of the pictures rather than on the story content. Therefore, teachers need to conduct an assessment of story awareness in an informal setting with age appropriate story materials conducive to eliciting appropriate responses. In such a setting, children will be much more motivated to respond in a way that indicates their storytelling abilities.

Let's see a few examples of what we mean by informal encounters during storytelling. There are generally five types of story activities that represent the range of encounters that can provide insights into young children's story awareness. These informal encounters should take place in an area that is familiar to the children, and at the same time, the area should have privacy with no distractions. A good storytelling session is where there is a freedom for children to make remarks. This is a good indicator where the children feel a sense of purpose and motivated towards listening to a story.

1. Retell a favourite picture book story— Young children often enjoy selecting and sharing the same story which they have already read. These retellings indicate that children retain lots of information and details from a familiar story.

2. Wordless picture book— Preschool teachers can create a simple picture book to assess children's abilities to talk about a story. This wordless picture book contains familiar content, a strong storyline, appropriate details, and a limited number of pictures in order to elicit children's story language. The purpose of creating a wordless picture book is to determine whether children can identify the main idea, elaborate it, predict what comes next and associate events in the story with their own experiences. It has been seen in early classrooms that children show greater interest when stories and characters are associated with their own experiences. This will help them to anticipate what will happen next.

3. Create a story for a wordless picture book or story cards— Preschool teachers can gain insights of children's story knowledge by analysing how they construct a story by looking at or reading a wordless picture book. Teachers need to encourage children to look through the book especially when it is an unfamiliar book so that they have some sense of direction that the story will take. The pace of this activity should be adjusted according to the needs and interest of an individual child.

4. Retell and recall a short oral story— This story activity does

Signs for Development of Sense of Story

- Recall specific information while discussing a story that has been read
- Role-taking when retelling stories
- Arrange and tell sequence story cards logically
- Use simple and common language when retelling stories

not have any pictures of cues to reconstruct the story, therefore the story needs to be simple, short and focus on specific information. When children are asked to repeat after hearing the story, they recall the specific information in a better way.

5. Story sequencing cards—Preschool teachers can easily prepare a set of four or five story picture cards that form a sequence. After demonstrating, teachers can ask children to arrange the story cards in sequence and tell a story. Initially, the teachers should use familiar pictures and then she can use new pictures to see how well the child can sequence those. Teachers can also add or eliminate some of the pictures to provide variation. This variation will help to see whether children can use the meaning of the story as a guide to picture selection and sequence. Young children's abilities to sequence the story picture cards and to recognise the direction of print both emerge during the early years.

The given examples of informal encounters for assessing children's story awareness are not intended to

be used to compare children with one another. Neither is it an objective form of diagnosis. However, this will help the preschool teachers to identify how the young children are developing a sense of story.

How to Select Storybooks and Materials Related to Stories?

- Consider the following when reading stories to a group of children:
 - Child development and appropriate practices
 - Children's background knowledge
 - Language ability of children
 - Children's interest in the subject
 - Accept the books that children bring from home
 - Use props while reading stories to children
 - Extend the story and provide related experience such as a visit to zoo, field trip, play with a doll, etc.
 - Invite visitors to bring something (such as a pet) or do something relevant such as cook porridge.

Always remember that young children love the repetition of their favourite stories. They love to listen to stories over and over again. It enhances comprehension and helps children to explore print.

What Adults Need to do to Enrich Story Awareness?

First of all, parents must tell stories to their little ones at home; a teacher must make it a part of their quality developmentally appropriate programme in preschools.

Both parents and preschool teachers need to work together and share their observations to develop children's story awareness. This will help the preschool teachers to plan age and developmentally appropriate learning experiences and pedagogies to lead towards story awareness for young children. Story awareness is a very important component in early childhood education that contributes to children's literacy development.

For emergent and early literacy development, children need to be given one-to-one reading experiences at home, opportunities for looking at picture storybooks (both individual and group), and meaningful and relevant print rich display be planned. An interesting area for such story reading activities needs to be formed which is easily visible to children.

To conclude, reading age appropriate and interesting stories to young children can substantially contribute to their story knowledge and their awareness of reading. The 'Story-based Lesson Plans' can be designed to suit different age groups of children across the foundational stage, and pre-storytelling and post-storytelling activities can be planned to connect with the different domains of child development as such pedagogical strategies will help in boosting the literacy skills among young children.

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