

Story Sack Theoretical Rationale

Storysacks are the licensed name of a business founded by ex school headmaster Neil Griffiths. They are valuable resources that are used throughout schools, nurseries and other educational settings to reinforce reading and develop language skills. Each sack contains one fictional story book, a factual book which is based on the theme from the story, a language game, scenery, props and characters from the story. Some story sacks also include an audio tape and a parental guide. The reasoning for the inclusion of all these items is to engage both the children and adults, aiding both to enjoy reading the story together. This rationale outlines the contents of the chosen storysack and suggests how these may benefit children's language development in relation to relevant theories.

The principle idea of a storysack is to encourage children to read, therefore when selecting materials for the storysack it is essential to use excellent literature accompanied by the same standard of resources. With this in mind the book 'The Three Little Pigs' retold by Nicola Baxter (2005) seemed an excellent choice as it is a classic story that has been enjoyed by children all over the world for many years. The story has been specially retold in order to appeal to beginner readers. It features short sentences, high frequency words, rhyme and repetition, all of which are invaluable to young children's language development. According to Bruner (1983) predictable routine language repetitions which are used by parents or practitioners at certain times of the day, such as bed time or tidy up time, help children to understand how to use language, therefore teaching the child that language has order and involves interactions. This 'social-interactionist' theory is also shared by Vygotsky and Piaget who also believed that "biological factors, cognitive factors and the linguistic environment interact to affect the development of children's language" (Curtis & O'Hagan, 2003: 60) Conversely Skinner and Bandura would argue

that imitation and reinforcement are the key factors to children's language development, "...children learn by imitating adults, who shape the child's language by selectively reinforcing the sounds that sound most like speech." (pg 58)

Despite the contrasting views theorists have on the way in which children learn storybooks cannot be questioned for their role in promoting language development, beginning with the conventions of reading. These are the rules that apply when reading, which include, understanding that writing starts at the top left of the page and is read left to right. The return sweep; when writing returns back to the left under the previous line that has been read, the correct use of punctuation and grammar and the link between written word and pictures.

In addition to the story book, a non-fiction book is also provided focusing on animals. Whilst sharing this book with the children, the practitioner should point out the words and pictures thus, supporting the children's awareness of words being used as labels. The book should be discussed and questions asked around the topic, this may be a new genre to the children which would contain new vocabulary and would therefore aid the children's language development. Bruner considered this method as children establishing early references. (Whitehead 1997)

Children and indeed adults all learn in different ways and this should be considered when selecting materials for the storybook. Not all children are audio learners, some are visual or kinaesthetic learners, meaning that reading a story is not always the best way to develop young children's language. In a Nursery World article in 2003, Penny Tasonni stated that in the early year's children's information processing skills are still developing, and details given in the form of spoken words are hard for them to process and thus retain. She goes on to say that by presenting children with activities that have a visual or sensory component, that this will have

a greater impact on their memories. This was a view shared by Jean Piaget who also believed that children do benefit from using a variety of senses. Marian Whitehead (1997: 61) reinforces this in her book *Language and Literacy in the Early Years*, "Language, as a system, mediates between the individual and the continual impact of sensory stimuli"

With this in mind it is vital that a storysack contains a good variety of props and tactile resources. The storysack in question provides the reader/listener with the tactile elements of wood, straw and plastic bricks to encompass the children's sensory motor skills. Children may begin to question why the straw may not be a good building material. This in turn is scaffolding their scientific enquiry thus aiding them through, in Vygotsky's terms, 'the zone of proximal development.' (Curtis & O'Hagan 2003) Children should also play freely with the resources enabling them to experiment, be imaginative and creative not only with the materials but also with their language. It is during this type of play that children can be observed talking to themselves whilst engaged in a task, this may involve children providing a running commentary of what they are doing, therefore developing the everyday language and thought used when planning and organising. This is what Piaget and Vygotsky referred to as 'egocentric speech' (Ibid)

Character props such as the cuddly pig and big bad wolf are also included with the aim of drawing the children into the world of the book. Children may be able to engage with the story at a higher level by simply holding or looking at the props. Once the story has been told the children can be given the opportunity to play with the props, giving them a chance to re-tell the story in their own style and using their own language, in turn, giving them the chance to reinforce any new vocabulary they may have learned.

Nonetheless it should be remembered that some children are audio learners who will prefer and benefit from the story being retold by a variety of readers, each of whom will have a different style which may or may not engage the children. Some children who have special needs or those who may not be able to read adequately may benefit from hearing the story, Tina Bruce (1997), author of *Early Childhood Education* believes that putting stories onto cassettes provides further variety and helps the auditory aspect of learning. "Listening to stories with a rich variety of texts helps children to learn about words and sentence structures in book language." (pg 134)

To provide opportunities for those children who are audible learners an audio book is normally included within the storysack. However if this is not available a recording of the parent or practitioner reading the story would be sufficient, although licensing laws should be referred to and complied to. The rationale for the audio recording is to aid the children's listening skills, prompts and questions may also be recorded enabling children to interact with the story on their own in their own time. Making this an excellent supplementary activity when in a setting, indeed this type of individual work may develop some children's language more than in a whole class scenario.

There are many contradictions when it comes to learning theories; however one generally agreed notion is that children's learning becomes more effective when having fun, "...psychologists have realised that 'play' has an important role in the lives of adults and children, and young children in particular." (Curtis & O'Hagan, 2003:110) This is why the foundation stage curriculum is based around play activities. With this in mind a game is also placed in a storysack, the game in question would be based around the characters and themes of the story and would

aim to develop the children's awareness and understanding of rhyme, phonics, spelling, grammar and punctuation. Depending on the game selected it may develop the children's mathematical language or another area of the curriculum. As the game will require more than one player it will further develop the language associated with turn taking, negotiating and instruction, thus enhancing the crucial social skills which are paramount to Vygotsky and Bruner's theories. These social skills also link to personal, social and emotional development together with citizenship which, are fundamental factors in both the Foundation document and Every Child Matters document.

In conclusion this rationale has looked into the underlying principles of storybags. Whether this is a storybag manufactured by Neil Griffiths or a home made bag the benefits for children's language development are evident. Children engage in the story through the use of props, and it is during this time that learning and language development take place. However storybags not only allow children to enter the world of a story but they also encourage children to extend their learning through use of non fictional texts, audio recordings and games. Storybags can be made for very little yet can provide such a lot for early language development, which in turn helps the children to develop all other areas of development in the Foundation stage. Early year's practitioners on occasion have been referred to as 'plate jugglers' with reference to the need to find, understand and promote the links between all areas of the foundation stage curriculum, in storybags they have a resource which can assist them in doing this.

Bibliography

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