

How do story bags support children in using new vocabulary when creating stories?

Hoxton Garden School, EYFS Phase

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of story bags in the Early Years and to find out if, and how, implementation supported children's communication and language development. Using a whole class approach, the study followed the impact of using regular 'story bag' sessions on child development. For eight weeks children received 'story bag' sessions three times a week delivered by the class teacher. Support staff revisited these sessions throughout the weekly timetable to revisit and recap the key vocabulary that was previously taught and to embed this in different contexts. Throughout these sessions, children were taught how to explore scenes, characters and plot development in a story book through the use of visuals and props. Children used language and speaking skills to recreate and re-tell their own version of the story whilst adults facilitated topics for discussion. Overall, teacher response indicated that the use of story bags was an excellent facilitator to create and sustain children's interest in books. Children enjoyed the interactive activities allowing more exploratory opportunity during story time, stimulating their minds and imagination by bringing stories to life. It created another dimension to the book and sense of what was going on in the story. It enabled them to apply this creatively and provided them with opportunities to think critically.

Introduction

Hoxton Garden Primary School is a multi cultural primary school situated in Hackney, London. The proportion of pupils who are eligible for the pupil premium is higher than average and a significant number of pupils enter Nursery and Reception below the expected level for their age across a number of areas of learning. The proportion of pupils from a minority ethnic group and those who speak English as an additional language are much higher than average. Saracho (2017) states that: "*young children whose culture and language differ from the ones in the school encounter functional language difficulties, such as differences in using language to communicate for various purposes*", therefore, ensuring that children are provided with language rich opportunities in the Early Years is vital for their early development.

Story sacks were developed in the United Kingdom by Neil Griffiths in the 1990's and comprise of a large cloth bag containing a good quality picture book with supporting props and visuals to stimulate reading. Books are brought to life through the use of props that relate to the story. Story sacks can help reading become meaningful and engaging and supports stimulate language development, in turn making reading more memorable and allows children to create their own stories.

Linguists such as Chomsky (1957) have claimed that learning to talk calls on innate predispositions and does not require direct teaching. Chomsky made the case for a 'language acquisition device' that, by experience of language in the environment, allows the child to make sense of what they hear through the use of a 'transformational grammar'. It is argued that this translates 'surface structure' into 'deep structure' and allows the child to generate their own conversation.

During story bag sessions, children participate in a dialogue that is strongly connected to official views of literacy and yet they are often able, through the activities offered such as role-playing and recreating storyline, to incorporate aspects of their identity into the process.

The elaboration of personal voice is an important part of the growth and development of personal identity as children rehearse their perception of 'self' and 'others'. Further engagement in the story sack activity helps children's self-articulation and active engagement in the world rather than being impacted on by other powerful discourses where they have less opportunity to participate, such as television. Story bags give children the opportunity to express themselves through practical application.

The changes to the EYFS Statutory Framework (2021) presents many opportunities for practitioners to develop the way they support progress in communication and language. For example, the high status of spoken language in the framework sees talking underpinning all seven areas of learning and development thus indicating how big a priority spoken language is.

The importance of modelled language is highlighted in the new framework, along with an emphasis on introducing new vocabulary, the interaction between children and adults and children and their peers and speaking in sequenced sentences when telling stories. Along with several methods that support interaction and conversation, the skill of linking modelled language and oral rehearsal to introduce new vocabulary in a simple, effective way is demonstrated within story bag sessions.

The new framework only has two goals instead of three (Listening, Attention, and Understanding is one; Speaking is the other). It also includes greater focus on adult-child interactions. In order for a child to meet their early learning goal by the end of Reception, children need to hold conversation when engaged in back-and-forth exchanges with their teacher and peers and participate in small group, class and one-to-one discussions, offering their own ideas, using recently introduced vocabulary.

After analysing the baseline data for Communication and Language, it was clear a significant number of children had to make measurable progress to close the attainment gap. We focused on a whole class approach to ensure the children that were below the expected standard at baseline has opportunity to make rapid progress through change in approach that enabled wider and targeted support.

While children make good progress from their starting points in their communication and language development by the end of EYFS, this needs reflective analysis and precision approach. A group of children were identified as 'at risk' of not making as much progress as their peers. These children were often distracted during story time, disengaged in role play activities. A number of research studies shows that effective 'story bag' session's supports language development and provides children with the opportunity to learn new words in a safe environment of facilitated opportunity.

In order to successfully evaluate the impact, whole classes participated in weekly sessions. The group of focus children were tracked across eight weeks participating in additional story sessions and data analysis reviewed the effectiveness of the sessions. It was expected that regular sessions would support rapid communication and language development.

Research Process

The process was coordinated by the two classroom teachers and two Nursery Education Officers. The focus children were measured through baseline, interim data and end of term data and these were used to identify the progress made throughout the research process as well as qualitative data in the form of teacher and pupil interviews. The phase leader led training to support class teachers and nursery education officers in leading these sessions throughout the school day as well as supporting them in observing developmental achievement in communication and language development.

The implementation of these sessions happened over a series of weeks. The sessions were slowly introduced by introducing one story at a time over the first two weeks. As the children became more competent, the

length of the sessions increased and the story bags were available for children to engage with independently throughout the continuous provision. It was important to ensure that children understood the purposes of these sessions and gained an insight as to what these sessions entailed before beginning a full session. During Week 3 to 8, teachers delivered sessions 3 times a week for 15-20 minutes, recapping on the key vocabulary that had previously been taught. These sessions would include characters and setting descriptions, dialogue and sequencing stories using story language. Children were encouraged to engage in the use of story bags during the continuous provision, developing their own stories with their peers. The phase leader led a parent workshop, which provided parents with the opportunity to make props that could be used at home. Teachers also sent home story bags with key children to ensure key skills were being embedded at home as well as school.

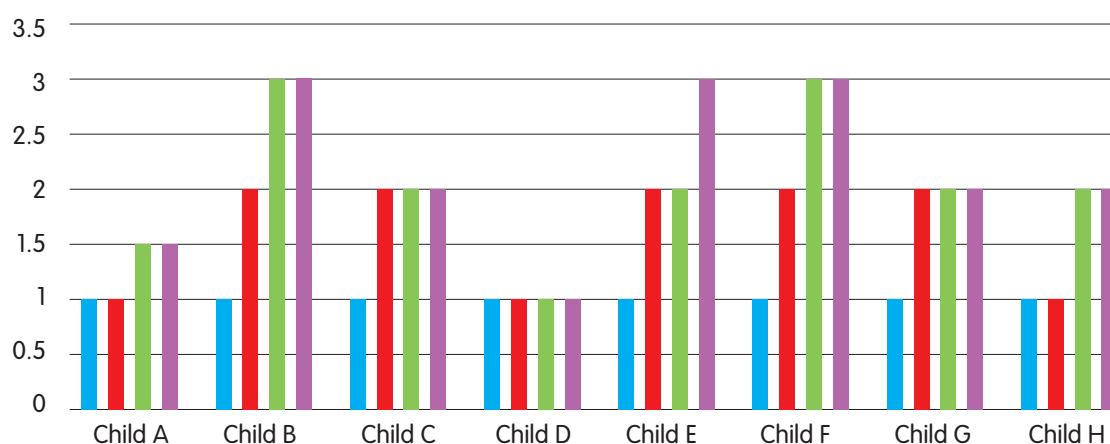
Weekly phase meetings provided an opportunity for dialogue between the professionals who were undertaking the research project. This allowed essential time to share and discuss methods that were successful and those that were not as successful. The dialogues gave the professionals further support in developing ways to ensure children were beginning to use the strategies taught independently and how to implement this successfully and move forward effectively.

Findings

The children responded very well to the story bag sessions. The results from the children's questionnaires and discussions with class teachers show that the implementation of these sessions were successful and enjoyed by the children. There were a number of very quick noticeable differences in ways that children were learning new vocabulary and the ability to retell and develop their own stories. Class teachers fed back that the additional sessions throughout the week provided an opportunity for children to develop understanding of story structure; children were able to articulate their ideas in well-formed sentences and describe key events in detail. The children became less reliant on adults to help structure stories and were able to use the bags as a strategy to use new vocabulary in different contexts.

The progression of statements, which include listening, attention, understanding and speaking were discussed throughout each meeting ensuring consistency in judgements. Children's ability to develop a deep familiarity with new knowledge and vocabulary was noted as the most reliable change throughout the duration of the project. It became more evident that children gained confidence in using vocabulary in a wider context within the environment.

Children were able to enter into the story through the accompanying activities. This helped to promote skills in emotional literacy, encouraging children to explore their own thoughts, feelings and responses.



Key:

0-1 = **Below expected** 1-2 = **Expected** 2 and above = **Above expected**

The data that was collected throughout three collection points during the academic year showed good progress for all 8 children as a result of the sessions and strategies taught. There is a typicality within the data of plateau between Spring and Final data assessment. This suggests that children who were accessing the 'story bags' had reached a threshold of new language acquisition and application and a second stage of implementation needed to be implemented, either through the wider provision link or additional self-selection 'story bag' elements to enable rapid impact the impact term on term.

Impact and conclusion

Evidence concludes that the impact of implementing regular story bag sessions were positive. Only one child out of the focus group did not meet their ELG and 3 children out of the 8 children were working above expected by the end of the academic year. The evidence gathered from the pupil questionnaires identifies the positive impact the sessions had on pupils and this was evident in the way they were able to articulate their knowledge of stories and the ability to talk about stories with familiarity and understanding against common assessment criteria. All teachers involved in the study agreed that children were able to talk more confidently about stories and their ability to articulate their ideas advanced throughout the research process. Providing children with the opportunity to explore key vocabulary throughout the week in various contexts developed a rich learning environment where children felt confident to explore words further. By being exposed to more story language and having secure understanding of the definitions of words children became more confident speakers and writers.

It was evident that the children often made connections between the world of the official story and its resonance with the discourses of literacy and experiences that are taking place in their own lives. Story bags as a creative activity provided a method to communicate and develop meanings that rose from children's constructions of their own experiences and the ways in which they account for them.

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To conclude, the study had a positive impact on the development of communication and language in early years. With consideration, regular sessions would be beneficial for early years to keep in place as a standard practice.

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Appendix

Appendix 1 (Story bag session)



Appendix 2 (Parent workshop)

