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RELEVANCE OF STORYTELLING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Storytelling describes the social and cultural activities of sharing stones, sometimes with improvisation and embellishment. Every culture has its own stories or narratives which are shared as means of entertainment, education, cultural presentation or instilling of moral values. It helps us to understand our environment and personal experiences. Many older stories are originally traditional folktales which were used as means of preservation of the societal norms for the future of those societal norms to be past across to future generations. The norms and values represent the rules of oral pattern of storytelling and are the product of a community experience, as well as the individual storytelling. Therefore, it has become a great concern on how storytelling can be integrated into early childhood curriculum. It becomes necessary to also think of how early childhood teachers should develop the habit of using storytelling in the classroom situation to effectively increase role in early childhood learning.

Keywords: Relevance, storytelling, early years,

Introduction

Storytelling is one of the greatest technologies that humans have ever created. It is the basis for almost everything in our society which directs younger ones on the way we react, build, communicate, live and dream. Spending more time, resources, learning and telling better stories was something that people did as a major communal activity, where young ones learnt such skills formally or informally from the people in their circle who were particularly gifted.

Child development implies many aspects, but what lately has become the focus of attention is literacy development and readiness for school on one side, and art and creativity development on the other. Preschool activities are expected to be governed by children's needs and interests and the time children spend in free play becomes very important. All of this is followed by new age technologies that bring new approaches to teaching and learning processes. The stories preschool children tell can provide important insights into the way they see and think about the world. For example, Paley (2004) analyze of the stories told and performed by children in her classrooms. She demonstrates how stories can help teachers to better understand the children they teach, more effectively meet children's social and emotional needs, and create curriculum that is responsive to children's interests and needs. Storytelling is a powerful process in early Childhood education as a useful instructional approach in facilitating Childhood instruction and learning especially during preliterate eras. What began as oral tradition has evolved to include written literature. A popular Eurocentric perspective in the early 19th century was that before the arrival of Europeans Africa was a savage continent devoid of culture. Once Nigerian authors began to produce novels and other written works, authors such as Chinua Achebe continued using storytelling and proverbs to establish that the continent wasn't devoid of culture. This approach resonated with readers and reignited interest in the storytelling tradition. Storytelling in both the

oral and written tradition can help early childhood learners understand the impact of colonialism in Nigeria.

Today teachings and storytelling focus on speeches made by teachers in classroom settings. To use narration as a tool to educate others is nothing new. In a traditional village setting in Nigeria where small villages competed severely with each other, warriors of those villages were searching for ways to gain power and strength. Wise men and canvassers recorded what happened in the past that brought about the ruin or prosperity of a village. Sometimes they would use allegories to persuade their warriors to be careful about their conducts. In Western countries, stories in the Bible are used to influence people's though^ and educate Christians. Stories in Aesop's Fables teach children and adults alike about life. Narration has shed light on education of many fields. For example, researchers from universities, government, and corporate research organizations, with backgrounds in military training, education, law, aviation, and business have figured out four main types of storytelling techniques used for teaching (Andrews et al. 2009). Different types of stories are used to persuade the audience (in this case, pupils) and educate them. On the other hand, through narrating stories pupils can express their thoughts; sort out what they have already obtained.

Facts about Storytelling

Stories affirm who we are and allow us to experience the similarities between we and other persons, real or imaginative. Stories help us to make meaning of our lives. It has power to transform our perception of the world. The use of storytelling in teaching is one the best methods a teacher can employ in any lesson presentation.

Children need stories because they are recognizable patterns through which they can find meaning. Oral storytelling is one of the ancient art forms and continues to this day as a vibrant part of culture throughout the world Nigeria inclusive. It provides a central place to find out about events to ask for advice. Any organization that has continued to teach, celebrate and explore the art of oral storytelling that organization or society will not lose its value, moral and commitment to the future generation.

Encouraging Children to tell Stories

Initiating a storytelling project in an early childhood classroom requires few materials. The only basic supplies not typically found in the early childhood classroom are carbon paper and if needed, a tape recorder (Paley et al.2003). To begin the project, the teacher can create a storytelling table as a center in the classroom. During free choice, children have the option to tell stories, which the class will later dramatize. When no child is present at the storytelling table, the transcriber (usually a parent or a teacher) seeks out children who are not engaged in other activities. These children are encouraged to dictate a story for the class to act out. Transcribers try to encourage children who have told few or no stories all year to participate. In order to support creativity and originality, it is important to encourage children to tell stories without influencing or censoring the content. The role of the transcriber is to offer little feedback, commentary, or direct input that would influence story content (Richner and Nicolopoulou 2001). For this reason, transcribers use only general prompts when children seem "stuck." These prompts include opening prompts, prompts for children who do not know how to start a story, continuation prompts, and closing prompts.

Young Children and Storytelling

Long time ago, there was no technology, no computers, and no cameras, but there were children and stories. Everybody tells stories in order to communicate with one another. To be able to express themselves, children connect their first words to transform a story. In the 21st century, the science and technology age. stones can be created by using technological devices such as computers, cameras, etc.

Today, young children tell their stories with their teachers using technological devices: Storytelling reflects the constructivist philosophy by emphasizing the importance of learners' experience. Constructivism rests on assumptions that knowledge is constructed by learners through their experiences and learners participate actively in the learning process (Driscoll, 2000). Parallel to this, in the performance of the story, there is always a raconteur (who may be a man or a woman) who sits with a child, with an audience (made up of children) sitting in front of them. Sometimes the children sit around the raconteur, at his/her feet, and at other times the raconteur sits on a traditional stool or chair, with the children on the floor in front of him or her. Every effort is made, in the arrangement/composition of the participants on television, to foreground the presence of the children as the focus and center of the performance, i.e. to show that the programme is meant for children.

Also, in the performance, children's roles are made significant. Indeed, the raconteur merely provides the lead; the children double as both the immediate audience and the co-performers, joining the raconteur with singing of choruses to move dramatic action. Indeed, as many authorities on African oral literatures like Isidore Okpewho and Ruth Finnegan have pointed out in their several studies (Oha and Andah, 2002), African oral performances are made more dynamic and creative through audience participation, and are not formulaic and uncreative as the early Western anthropologists thought. This is what we find in the participation of children in the presentation of "Tales by Moonlight". Children's skills and abilities are developed immensely as they participate actively in the performance. Children also learn more when they are made active participants in the process of their education.

Bell (2002) opined that learners explain their experiences and support their interpretation through the stories. Perhaps for that reason, Koenig and Zorn (2002) described storytelling as an approach to teaching and learning that develops from real life experiences of teachers, clinicians, and pupils.

Although, storytelling . has been very popular in early childhood education (Brostrom,2002), yet the strategies used to engage kindergarten children in storytelling activities should be different from strategies used for primary and elementary school children. Mages (2006) emphasizes that the focus should be on oral and aural comprehension, not on reading and writing because the reading and writing skills of children between ages 2 -7 are not sufficient to create their .own stories. Moreover, Brostrom (2002) states that adults should help small children with storytelling and verbal expressions.

According to Mages (2006) to support the academic achievement of all children, it is critical to find ways to foster children's acquisition of the narrative skills necessary for academic success. Mages (2008) further claims that children's ability to tell a story is related to their academic literacy. She cites storytelling and story comprehension as examples of narrative comprehension. Davies (2007) opined that storytelling can improve children's listening and speaking skills and strengthen their language and imagination development. The morals often include: children should obey their parents; children should not tell lies; children should learn to live in community and help other human beings; children should not steal; children should not cheat others (as the tortoise or the monkey does), etc. Indeed, these moral lessons agree with the goals of peace education which aims at addressing "the prevention and resolution of all forms of conflict and violence, whether overt or structural, from the interpersonal level to the societal and global level" (Oha and Andah, 2002). The purpose of the performance of "Tales by Moonlight" is therefore not merely the entertainment of children. It is rather that of teaching through entertainment, and teaching in lines with the pursuits of Global Education in all its dimensions. The songs and proverbs that occur in the performance are among the devices through which knowledge is constructed and transmitted in a culturally relevant way. Stories take place in the everyday existence of children and are created from making sense of children worlds (Hall, 2001). Many projects that focus on storytelling as a teaching method emphasize

the importance of the teacher's responsibility to engage children in the activity. However, although the teachers role is mentioned in the research, there was no prescription presented to the teachers about how they can use storytelling effectively.. The quest for more result-oriented and contextually-relevant education in Nigeria and in other African countries needs to be consolidated with the rediscovery of indigenous media of education. Locating such media within the modern media is necessary for more realistic and effective encounter with contemporary conditions in the postcolonial milieu where education has to be geared towards not only learning to know, but also learning to do, and learning to build (peace in) community. The real story of "Tales by Moonlight", for us, is that Nigerian education should recognize its context, as well as the future of such a context, namely: children as opined by Oha and Andah, (2002).

Storytelling helps with young children ability to think symbolically and metaphorically in addition to supporting their vocabulary acquisition and concentration. Hall (2001) considered three ways young children experience telling their own stories in preschool settings. The first way is sell-recorded stories. In this type, children have self-recorded what they want to say in a story. The teacher can tape record the children telling their stories. Although young children have difficulties creating precise tales, they have the advantage of hearing their own voices when creating stories. In this technique, Hall (2001) suggested some rules for teachers. "As he puts it the major rule is that children must not listen to their story immediately, after they have recorded it". The violation of this rule may cause some aggressive effects or undesired results on children behavior, because the children may perceive their own voice differently when it comes from the digital devices. The second way to tell the story is through adult recorded stories. In this type of storytelling, the adults type young children's words and frequently repeat the words to them. Hall (2001) stated "The process of typing the stories was itself revealing about children's ability to control their language". Thus, the adult recorded story is a procedure a teacher may follow for creating their digital stories. The third way is symbolic play as storytelling. In this type, children create their stories during their socio-dramatic play. This is a collaborative storytelling experience. Hall (2001) described this way of telling story as a complex phenomenon, and the fact that it often happens relatively spontaneously and seamlessly is a compliment to children's intellectual and narrative abilities. In the current study, the collaborative storytelling is one way teachers should follow for using digital storytelling with young children.

Dimensions of a story

According to Foss (2009), there are eight elements constituting a story: setting, characters, narrator, events, temporal relations, causal relations, audience and theme. It should be noted that in Foss's discussion about narrative criticism, the artifact being analyzed should contain at least two events which are in sequence of time or cause, but a story used in class may be much shorter in length and less complex. However, it must contain some major elements.

The setting or scene is the details external to characters in the narrative. It may relate to the plot and characters and have prominence or it may be negligible. Sometimes there is change of setting. Characters are important elements in a story. It is often the main characters who make the process of events. Characters can be non-human or inanimate.

Whether a story is heard by the audience in a speech or read by readers from a literary work, there is usually a narrator who is telling the story. However, the narrative can also be presented directly to the audience, when it is in the form of action. In a classroom setting, a narration is usually presented by the teacher or students. Thus teachers and students are the narrators.

Narrators' preference for certain vocabulary, sentence structure or length of speech will affect the narration. When a story is told orally, the narrator's pitch, tone of voice, gesture, pronunciation, emphasis and some other speech features will help in influencing the audience. There is often a

direct interaction between the speaker and the audience in the process of narrating. The narrator may choose to tell a story in a certain manner according to the response from the audience. Sometimes narrators and audience can be characters of stories. It is often the case when the narrator is telling his/her own experience or everyday life experience.

Foss (2009) explained that a narrative should contain at least two events: major events or kernels and minor events or satellites. The satellites do not affect the basic storyline; they only have rhetoric effect. Temporal and causal relations are about the relation between these events. Which events happen first and which follow them? Which event is the cause and which one is the effect or result? The theme is the last but not the least element of a story, which direct the general idea. The narrator should keep the major theme throughout the narration.

Conversational strategies that encourage storytelling

Early childhood teachers often initiated a story-telling activity by talking about possible ways to start a story, asking who could start a story, and giving story-telling start strategies such as "Once upon a time". The use of gestures such as getting down to the child's level and holding children's gaze worked to keep the children interested in the story activity. Pauses were also used by the teacher to allow a 'turn allocation space' for the children to advance a story'they were telling where teachers avoided leaping in too soon to prompt talk and hijack the thinking time. The teachers were observed pursuing a story-telling by making explicit reference to the story features that the child has already told by attending to characters or the actions they were doing. The

Question "What happened?" was also often used by teachers to incite discussion around a topic. These types of prompts helped children to elaborate on a specific feature of a story, scaffolding the telling by prompting a narrow focus for the story. The prompts around specific characters and their actions afford opportunities for children to embellish story ideas, often tying characters and objects together to make an interesting story.

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Digital Storytelling in Preschool Education:

Digital storytelling (DST) commonly refers to the process of developing a multimodal narrative (that includes pictures, video, sound effects, music or text), using digital tools. Although digital stories were primarily intended for self -expression (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009), documented their role in teaching and learning is becoming inevitable. The goal of preschool education is to support the child's development at all levels. During their early childhood, children explore their ability to create using different media and through creative movement. ICT supported language learning programs (both first and second language programs), ICT supported mathematics and the computer literacy learning program all represents the important aspects of education in a growing computerized world. On the other hand, knowledge gained in

the kindergarten enables the child's further education and understanding of the school material.

It is important to enable them to acquire basic skills through preschool programs that foster easier and better application of acquired skills in their everyday life. Digital technologies provide one more channel for them to demonstrate their creativity and learning (Mikeli c Preradovic, Unic, & Boras, 2014).

Conclusion

Storytelling and dramatization can enhance early childhood programs in many ways. Children develop literacy skills, social skills, and creativity. Home-school connections are strengthened, and teachers gain insights into the thinking of their children. These benefits result from a process that is mostly child-centered, where children engage freely in the activity and are able to direct most of the processes. Storytelling carried out in this way provides a good example of curriculum that is play-based, child-centered, and highly beneficial.

This reveals that the process of using storytelling in early childhood education provides a guide for a new learning material for teachers and pupils in kindergarten classroom. Teachers can use storytelling in their classroom as a classroom activity and a learning tool. Using storytelling in early childhood education allows pupils to promote their motivation, to modify their behavior, to document their developmental process, to be able to reflect themselves, and to promote their self-confidence.

Recommendations

Having seen the usefulness of storytelling, the following recommendations are preferred below.

1. The curriculum planners should integrate the use of storytelling in early childhood learning.
2. Teachers should be trained on how to effectively employ story telling in other to instill the needed NORMS and values into children to prepare them for future leadership.
3. That the use of storytelling should be seen as a vehicle to broaden children understanding about their environment and the world.
4.

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