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Utilizing Classical Literature in Kindergarten Classrooms: A Tool for Developing Social Emotional Skills and Reading Comprehension

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Utilizing Classical Literature in Kindergarten Classrooms: a Tool for Developing Social

Emotional Skills and Reading Comprehension

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A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in Teaching.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Esteemed fantasy writer and editor Terri Windling once said “Fairy tales were not my escape from reality as a child; rather, they were my reality—for mine was a world in which good and evil were not abstract concepts, and like fairy-tale heroines, no magic would save me unless I had the wit and heart and courage to use it widely.” While the quote itself describes Windling's own experiences, this sentiment can be broadly applied to childhood. Stories give children the context to process their own experiences and impose order on the world around them. In fact, pedagogical storytelling remains a key instructional strategy, particularly when we consider that we are 22 times more likely to remember information when presented with it in the context of a story (First Media Group, 2019).

As I began to study this topic, I became particularly interested in the role of classical literature as a tool for pedagogical storytelling in kindergarten. Classical literature in this context refers to time-tested fables and fairy tales stemming from various cultural traditions. As such, this capstone seeks to answer the question: *How can educators use pedagogical storytelling with classical literature to address the social-emotional needs of their students while also increasing reading comprehension in early years?* This chapter will provide an overview of the personal and professional background to my research endeavors, a rationale for my research question, the context of my work, and finally the proposed structure to my culminating project.

Background

Personal Experience

As one might expect based upon my choice of research topic, there are many reasons why I believe that fables and fairy tales are crucial literary works for children. The most

impactful factor was my early exposure to the writing of Hans Christian Anderson, the Brothers Grimm, Charles Perrault, and Joseph Jacobs—think stories such as *The Little Mermaid*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, *Jack and the Beanstalk*. These writers formed the foundation of the stories I was told and my imaginative world.

I grew up in Duluth, Minnesota, as the daughter of a pastor who believed in the power of storytelling for learning. With much of my time spent in the church, my mother believed and taught that there were important connections to be drawn between the way that Jesus taught via parables and the learning that children can and should do via fairy tales and fables. We spent countless hours reading books that had been passed down from generation to generation and listening to oral retellings of classical stories. In my family, use of the television was infrequent and often a joyful family bonding night. Thus, as a child, the stories I heard formed the foundation for how I played, problem-solved and organized my small world.

As an adult, I've found great comfort in reading during stressful times and often find myself reaching for classics or fantasy fiction. I've noticed that the comprehension skills I developed as a younger child have influenced my love of reading in adulthood, and also reinforced the value I place on literature as a tool for self-improvement, understanding the world around me, and educating myself. These benefits have been invaluable skills that have not only improved my personal life, but also my ability to show up as a calm and loving teacher.

Professional Experience

As previously noted, my love of classical literature, fables and folktales have, in my opinion, improved my teaching practice. This is largely due to my professional teaching experience within the Waldorf and Classical Education realms. The Waldorf philosophy of education is rooted in the work of Rudolph Steiner, who believed that education should be

holistic and centered on the whole child. Waldorf schools often favor nature over technology, incorporate hand work such as sewing and knitting, and have a unique spiritual tilt. Classical education, however, represents a return to direct instruction that is rooted in the trivium (which includes the grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages as well as the liberal arts). Despite the semantic differences between the two pedagogical approaches, at the core these two teaching philosophies prioritize the use of folk and fairy tales in kindergarten. In the Waldorf philosophy these stories are read to reinforce imaginative play and wonder, whereas in classical education these stories are retold because they are considered to be time-tested and centered upon virtues. In my professional experiences, I now view these stories as an amalgamation of these ideas and much more.

While my curiosity around the use of fairy tales and fables is broadly applicable to elementary years, I am particularly interested in the use of fairy tales in kindergarten. I have taught kindergarten and preschool for the past three years and experienced firsthand the power that stories have in these classrooms. I've used social stories to help students adjust to school expectations, social emotional stories to begin to name big feelings, and fairy tales to engage their sense of play and wonder. I'm now looking to see how I can bring these all together into a cohesive curriculum that addresses both the social-emotional and literacy needs of children. Reading comprehension becomes an important social-emotional skill as well in these instances so students are able to access the intended information.

Rationale

This project seeks to explore the connection between classical literature such as fairy tales and fables, social-emotional learning and reading comprehension to address the needs of kindergarten students. This project stems from the disjointed efforts to meet students' social-emotional needs and provide them with excellent literacy education, and is intended to

create a holistic approach to both. This approach aims to incorporate the following:

- The history of using pedagogical storytelling in teaching across cultures
- The importance of social stories for social-emotional learning
- Retelling as a tool for reading comprehension
- The use of stories to inform discussions on difficult emotions and feelings

The cross-cultural comparison of pedagogical storytelling practices is an important consideration within this project, as much of the emphasis on fairy tales that I've experienced stems from white euro-centric pedagogical approaches. The study of the story telling across cultures and also accumulation of resources to tell these stories is something that is imperative to ensure we are meeting all children where they are. My goal is to create a curriculum which includes literature that adequately reflects a diverse population of learners in order that all of my students can see themselves in a story.

Children relating to the stories they hear is crucial and also captures another area of interest, which is the use of social stories for social-emotional learning. This project will explore the research that supports the use of social stories to improve student outcomes while also re-imagining what a social story might look like. For example, when considering fables such as *The Tortoise and the Hare*, how can we retell those stories and apply them to the contexts of children's everyday lives? The learning then shifts from not only being able to identify the setting, characters and sequence to seeing the story come to life when they wish to be first in line or are bragging to a friend. This type of learning is powerful elaboration that not only improves their social skills now, but also makes it stick in the years to come.

In conjunction with making learning last, retrieval practices such as story retelling are crucial instructional strategies that provide opportunities for students to retrieve information and reinforce what they've learned (Brown et al., 2014). This project explores how retelling

can reinforce the previously mentioned social-emotional and literacy skills that fables and fairy tales offer students. Similarly, retelling exercises aim to provide students with practice at utilizing the language they need to discuss emotions with peers and adults. The project explores how explicitly teaching these skills in a manner akin to academic language during the retelling process provides students with tangible and lower stakes opportunities to put these words into use.

My exploration of each of these subtopics will illuminate the ways in which we can engage students in a variety of facets by using fairy tales and fables. The focus of these skills will be specific to early childhood and kindergarten education, as that sets the foundation for how students approach school and presents a unique set of problems that students encounter. In addition, this tends to be when students' social-emotional learning occurs at the highest rates as they begin developing a sense of empathy and self that considers other points of view and experiences.

Context

While this project is intended to be applied to a wide variety of educational contexts, it is my view that the most important context to consider is that of an increasingly technologically-driven and high interest book world. Specifically, there has been a shift away from time-tested literature to high interest books within many classrooms. This is extremely important from the standpoint of ensuring that students have access to books they are excited about and invoke a joy of reading as well as ensuring that they have access to books to offer diverse experiences. That said, it also means that students have access to stories that aren't necessarily trying to teach a specific lesson or value but are rather meant to be read for the sake of pleasure. Further, we exist in a period of time where screentime via youtube, social media and more tends to be the highest value source of entertainment for kids. This presents a

significant challenge as we seek to engage students in a sense of learning and wonder that returns to the basics of what classical fairy tales and fables offer.

Summary of Chapter

This paper seeks to explore how classical literature such as fairy tales and fables can be used in kindergarten classrooms to meet the social-emotional needs of students while also increasing their reading comprehension. This research was precipitated by my experiences as an educator working in both Waldorf and Classical kindergarten classrooms and seeing firsthand the impact of storytelling on children's understanding of the world around them. In addition, this project reflects my own personal journey as a child who was exposed to parables as a tool for learning and now sees the benefits of literature in her everyday life.

The following chapters will detail the history of pedagogical storytelling, importance of stories for social-emotional learning, and provide key insights on strategies for reading comprehension; ultimately, combining these topics to create a literature curriculum for kindergarteners that utilizes these ideas within the context of classical literature. Chapter Two will provide an in-depth review of the research supporting the various subtopics of this project, as well as defining the types of fairy tales and fables this paper refers to. Chapter Three describes the project itself, including the standards addressed, lesson objectives and emphasis on diverse cultural representations. Finally, Chapter Four will be a reflection on the intended use of the project and the lessons learned from the months of research and work.

CHAPTER TWO

Introduction

In this section of my capstone, I explore the literature that underpins the question: *How can educators use pedagogical storytelling with classical literature to address the social-emotional needs of their students while also increasing reading comprehension in early years?* I look at and define both classical education and classical literature, in particular as it relates to a kindergarten literature curriculum. I also examine the ways in which pedagogical storytelling has been used across cultures, including within the United States. I then detail key research findings on reading comprehension strategies. Lastly, I explore the key elements of social emotional learning, in particular those that relate to the crucial skills teachers are reinforcing in kindergarten classrooms.

Classical Education

While this capstone project is not intended solely for the purpose of being implemented within a classical school, the context for my research takes place within a classical classroom setting. As such, what is classical education and what does classical kindergarten look like become poignant questions. In the elementary years, classical education prioritizes facts, grammar, vocabulary and syntax (Perrin, 2004). There are two primary pedagogical approaches. The first is direct instruction, with an emphasis on reading and socratic seminar style discussion, and the second is classical education, while inclusive of a wide variety of subjects, mainly emphasizes the trivium, which consists of the grammar, rhetoric, and logic stages.

Each of these stages has a wide array of associated skills and principles as shown by Perrin (2004) in the following chart.

The Trivium Arts as Stages in a Child's Development

GRAMMAR	LOGIC	RHETORIC
Age: 5-11	Age: 11-14	Age: 14-18
Poll-parrot Stage	Pert Stage	Poetic Stage
Language: Grammar, syntax,structure, vocabulary	Language: reasoning, debate, clarity	Language: Eloquence, beauty, persuasion
Philologists	Philosophers	Poets
Basic Facts, Fundamentals	Principles, relations	Expressive communication, application; synthesis
Method: Singing, Chanting, Repetition	Method: Argument, discussion, debate	Method: Discussion, speeches, imitation, practice
Writing: clarity, narrative, description	Writing: compare/contrast; praise/blame, argumentative	Writing: persuasive, legal, polemic, poetic, creative

Figure 1. The Trivium Arts as Stages in a Child's Development (Perrin, 2004, p. 23)

Perrin (2004) expands this illustration by noting that within the elementary stages students learn about math, science, history, literature, fine arts and, in some Christian classical schools, religion. He notes that these subjects have a different look and feel in classical schools with educators taking the following approach:

I have mentioned that classical educators do not see subjects as self-contained and isolated. Knowledge is more like a web than a chest of drawers; there are no subjects that are unrelated to others. Literature, history, and religious studies for example are quite intertwined. Anything from the past (in any subject) can be history; anything committed

to creative or excellent writing can be literature; and any subject considered in relation to God or religious teaching can be theology or religion. Until the 19th century, educators understood and taught knowledge as a web, rather than as separate departments.

Classical educators, therefore, while teaching classes in “history” or “literature” keep the boundaries light and fluid and emphasize the inter-relationship of all knowledge. (p. 26)

Classical education consists of a return to ancient ways of teaching that emphasize the trivium and liberal arts. This project looks at the way that literature is approached in the classical kindergarten, both within the context of curriculum content as well as the approach of direct instruction and narration.

Defining Classical Literature

As noted, this project examines classical literature within the kindergarten classroom. For the purpose of this capstone project classical literature is referring to fables and fairy tales. This selection is specific to the capstone project due to the emphasis on learning in a kindergarten classroom in a classical education model. Within the realm of classical education, classical literature is often more broadly viewed as time-tested literary works. Perrin (2004) discusses classical literature as follows:

What makes a classic? [...] Books that are called “great books” are usually synonymous with “classics.” However books that are classics are enduring works, meaning they are older works, proven by positive assessment over time. It is possible for a new book to be a great book, but only after wide, critical acclaim and influence. It will take time, however, for new great books to become classics, if indeed they pass the test. Charles Van Doren referred to great books as “the books that never have to be written again.” (p. 28)

In the kindergarten classroom this often looks quite different from older grades, and thus the focus of this capstone project will be on fables, legends and fairy tales, each of which are detailed further below.

Fables

In the classical tradition, fables (particularly Aesop's fables) were used in the grammar stages to teach the skills of paraphrasing while also conveying a message (Laes, 2017). As Goldsmith (1939) points out, the history of fables can be traced back several thousand years to Eastern cultures, ancient Greece, and Persia. Fables from this lineage are composed of two essential elements—the story, often following an animal, and the moral. Goldsmith goes on to point out that the power of fables is their brevity and simplicity that is aligned with children's comprehension. Lev Settleman (1981) provides a similar definition in her work, outlining that a key element of fables is the way animals take on human characteristics to convey messages about a wide array of subjects from interpersonal relationships to broader societal values. She further details the traditional approach to learning fables, which consisted of students hearing oral and text readings and then narrating the story they had learned.

Fairy Tales

Where fables are known for their brevity and practicality, classical fairy tales provide a contrast in their length and mysticism. In Mylius' exploration of Hans Christian Anderson's work he examines the slight differences between stories and fairy tales, and states that fairy tales often deal around a protagonist's wish or dream, with the plot then following the journey to the character's eventual happily ever after (2006). MacClintock (1903), however, creates an even more detailed segmentation of what encompasses fairy tales honing in on the following three categories: (1) stories of heroes, supernatural beings or events that are realistic in nature, (2)

nursery rhymes and popular stories told purely for enjoyment, and, (3) comical tales that often are stories of misadventure of everyday or extraordinary nature. Similarly to fables, fairy tales have an agreed-upon place with children's learning, though the nature of how they are used is quite often debated. Walker and Lunz (1976) argue that fairy tales should be told to children, with their research supporting that by doing this, children are better able to absorb the symbolism and message of the story, experiencing the rich historical traditions these stories have offered society. They argue that these symbols help children to understand societal archetypes within the stories.

Pedagogical Storytelling Across Cultures

Having defined classical literature, one of the key elements within this capstone project, it is now important to consider the use of pedagogical storytelling across cultures. As previously explored, fables represent one tool by which storytellers can convey a message (Laes, 2017). Within the context of this project, pedagogical storytelling refers to the practice of storytelling for the purpose of teaching. Here, we explore the ways in which storytelling is used in a variety of cultural contexts, focusing specifically on Greek, Indigenous, African American, and contemporary storytelling (often told through a white eurocentric lens).

Greek Storytelling

As noted in the discussion surrounding classical education, classical literature often focuses on fables and traditional stories that aim to provide a moral. In ancient Greek culture, traditional stories such as myths, legends and folktales were often told orally and considered separate from written Greek literature (Hansen, 1983). One of the most prominent examples of ancient Greek storytelling are Aesop's fables, although fables themselves were a common component of Greek authors' work (Seittleman, 1981). Aesop was an enslaved man who lived in

Athens, credited with authoring a broad collection of allegorical fables, though many of the fables associated with Aesop actually stem from even earlier in places such as India (Cooper, 1955). As noted earlier in this review, Seittleman discusses how Aesop's fables served as core curriculum in Roman elementary schools with students making cross-curricular connections with history, literature, and grammar, while also conveying a moral message pertaining to cultural norms. While fables in Ancient Greek culture are seen clearly as an educational tool within their pedagogical approach, myths and legends within the Greek oral tradition are seen as a way of communicating Greek religion rather than as literature (Hansen, 1983). Hansen expands this idea that myths and legends were viewed separately from folktales because they were intended to be viewed as religious truths rather than only be used for enjoyment or education. This is demonstrated via traditional stories about the genesis of Greek gods and their interactions with one another, as well as stories of Greek protagonists such as Hercules. As such, we can see that storytelling in Ancient Greece held two main purposes: preserving religious and historical beliefs and serving as an educational tool.

Indigenous Storytelling

While Ancient Greece represents a view of classical storytelling, as we consider the role of pedagogical storytelling within the United States, a crucial lens for consideration is that of Indigenous storytelling. Archibald and Xiiem (2018) state that in Indigenous cultures, storytelling plays a powerful role in preserving oral histories via both lived and traditional stories. In this way, storytelling becomes a tool that facilitates knowledge transfer and is a central pedagogical strategy within Indigenous culture. Iseke's (2013) work dives into this further exploring the ways in which storytelling teaches lessons about life and spirituality and is the main pedagogical practice that holds space for both children and adults to gain knowledge and

important skills. Indigenous storytelling has been a crucial tool of cultural preservation in the face of colonization. Eder (2007) states that storytelling in Indigenous cultures also provides a different perspective on education in comparison to western approaches. In particular, Eder focuses on the practice of Navajo storytelling which is central to the messages children receive about the skills and values required of them. According to Eder (2007):

The telling of stories to children reflects the cyclic nature of Navajo thinking. Stories are told to teach children how to live well, which means understanding the Navajo worldview, which in turn means understanding one's purpose in life, which further leads to— as part of that purpose— continuing to tell stories to children. (p. 280)

In Ross' (2016) study of teaching practices at an Ojibwe summer camp, these principles were reflected in the teaching strategies used by elders to transfer knowledge of Ojibwe culture and traditional ways of life. They utilized oral storytelling and talking circles to cover a wide array of topics from joyful moments of how they received their spirit names to the immense suffering of their families when colonial forces tried to erase Native voices through boarding schools and erasure of Indigenous language.

In summary, storytelling is an inextricable part of Indigenous educational practices. The research summarized here informs that storytelling in Indigenous culture serves as a practice for intergenerational knowledge transfer about traditional values and ways of life, suffering of past generations, and guidance on spiritual practices and ways to live well.

African American Storytelling

In discussing the history of storytelling within the United States, it is also important to consider the importance of storytelling amongst African Americans. Hamlet (2011) describes its importance as follows:

The oral tradition refers to stories, old sayings, songs, proverbs, and other cultural products that have not been written down or recorded. The forms of oral tradition cultures are kept alive by being passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next.

These diverse forms reveal the values and beliefs of African Americans, the things they hold to be true, and lessons about life and how to live it. In African American culture, the oral tradition has served as a fundamental vehicle for cultural expression and survival.

This oral tradition also preserved the cultural heritage and reflected the collective spirit of the race. It has a powerful history, beginning with Africans' preslavery existence. (p. 27)

While storytelling provides an intergenerational connection in nearly all settings, as noted above, within the African American experience it creates a link between older and younger generations which enables teaching cultural values and strategies for resilience that are unique from other communities (Fabius, 2016). Ogunleye (1997) expands on this idea further by highlighting the power of African American folklore in communicating the agony of the experience of enslaved and free Africans, and the power it has to teach young African American children about their ancestors (p. 436). He goes on to discuss the ways in which all African and African American folktales are pedagogical, whether that be animal stories where heroes often are using trickery to fight for the oppressed or weak, or in the form of Stagolee who is a mythical representation of fighting against systemic oppression.

As a result of the above research, it is clear that African American storytelling not only conveys oral histories of a people, but also the identities, values and survival strategies of an entire racial and cultural group.

Contemporary Storytelling

While examining contemporary storytelling practices, it is important to address that many

of our contemporary fairy tales are those that came from western culture. As such, contemporary storytelling is the modern offshoot of the traditional European stories of authors like Hans Christian Anderson, the Brothers Grimm. As such when we explore contemporary storytelling it is important to first address the role that storytelling held in Euro-centric cultures. Specifically, many of the ways in which we now consume fairy tales are through the lens of movies and shows, which draw on traditional stories (often those from the Victorian era in Europe) with a modern interpretation (Wood, 2006). Some of the best examples of what Wood describes can be seen in the popularity of Disney films retelling classic fairy tales and the popularity of the fantasy genre for adults with films such as *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy*.

As noted, the stories have evolved, as have the methods by which they are told. Children are increasingly exposed to a wide variety of digital tools, with both teachers and students being considered digital natives. With this in mind, research suggests that relying on tools such as digital storytelling within the classroom is best practice to help students make connections with academics in the ways that they consume other content (Dreon et al., 2011). Hilary McLellan (2006) defines digital storytelling as:

Digital storytelling is the art and craft of exploring different media and software applications to communicate stories in new and powerful ways using digital media. Since the new digital tools are inexpensive and widely accessible, digital storytelling tends to be highly personal, and at the same time, universal. As a result, it is a very powerful form of communication. (p. 26)

As such, contemporary storytelling encompasses not only modern twists on longstanding narratives, but also encourages a new way to voice these stories through a multimedia lens.

Conclusions

In reviewing the research, the key themes of pedagogical storytelling are the communication of cultural values and life experiences across generations. Upon examining the roots of storytelling in Ancient Greece, we saw that pedagogical storytelling was used as a tool for preserving religious and historical beliefs, as well as educating children within the Roman school system. Similarly, within Indigenous cultures, Eden emphasizes the way that storytelling is viewed as a responsibility in educating children on traditional values and experiences. Ogunleye speaks to the way storytelling in African American communities serves as a tool to connect children with their ancestors. Contemporary storytelling offers a route of access to these stories with digital storytelling, expanding access through media sources like film, podcasts, and more. Pedagogical storytelling thus provides a way for children to learn and grow across cultures and traditions.

Reading Comprehension Strategies for Emergent and Early Readers

This project aims to explore the ways that classical literature can support students' reading comprehension and social emotional learning. In the classroom, reading comprehension refers to students' ability to comprehend text, as measured by students' ability to retell key themes from the text. Strategies for reading comprehension in this selection include those targeting emergent readers in both elementary and early childhood settings. For the purpose of this project, the definition of emergent readers includes children that are first developing print awareness to those with early reading skills. This is deemed appropriate due the curriculum's emphasis on kindergarten literature. This section outlines research-based reading comprehension strategies for implementation in the classroom.

Read Alouds

McCormick (1977) argues that reading aloud to children is an invaluable tool for growing

their vocabulary and understanding of language. Similarly, read alouds in the classroom are effective tools for promoting reading comprehension. Research based read aloud methods are important tools to maximize this learning, specifically, dialogic reading, text talk and print referencing (Lane & Write, 2007). Lane and Wright's dialogic reading in a read aloud setting is accomplished via selecting texts that contain language slightly above students' current comprehension level, and providing ample modeling for its use. Similarly, their conception of text talk facilitates vocabulary development by reading a story aloud and then engaging in a discussion about several keywords. Lastly, print referencing, the practice of pointing to text and images while reading, helps students to develop reading comprehension strategies by helping them to identify cues within reading interactions that grab their attention (Lane & Write, 2007). Each of the strategies outlined can be used by teachers to plan strategic read aloud lessons that build students' enjoyment of reading, while also promoting their comprehension.

Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect

The Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect (RSTAC) strategy for reading comprehension is a strategy that was developed to support elementary students in learning while learning to read (McKee & Car, 2016). The strategy is centered around the idea that students need to interact with a text in meaningful ways to facilitate the construction of knowledge. The strategy contains five key components:

- reading the text and viewing related images;
- stopping during reading to address unfamiliar words or contextual elements;
- thinking about the text to understand story structure (for example, looking for sentence starters that align with the story sequence);
- questioning elements of the text; and,

- making connections with the text from students' own lived experiences.

Text Talk

The practice of questioning in RSTAC is echoed in the previously mentioned read aloud practice of text talk. Within the subset of text talk itself, Beck and McKeown (2001) highlight the following methodology utilized by effective teachers to promote discussions about what was read:

From working with teachers as they implemented Text Talk, we can point to several concepts that can guide the development of more effective read-aloud experiences. They include the following:

- awareness of the distinction between constructing meaning of ideas in a text and simply retrieving information from the text;
- understanding the difficulty of the task young children face in gaining meaning from decontextualized language;
- designing questions that encourage children to talk about and connect ideas and developing follow-up questions that scaffold, building meaning from those ideas;
- helping students to meaningfully incorporate their background knowledge and reduce the kind of surface association of knowledge that brings forth a hodgepodge of personal anecdotes;
- awareness of how pictures can draw attention away from processing the linguistic content in a text, and thus attention to the timing of the use of pictures; and
- taking advantage of the sophisticated words found in trade books by using them as a source of explicit vocabulary activities. (p. 19)

They argue that these tools, while time consuming and intensive, are essential parts in helping

guide children to construct meaning from what they read.

Reading and Retelling

As was echoed in the previous reading comprehension strategy, research suggests that reading aloud to children is perhaps the most important way for them to begin to comprehend text and build their vocabularies (McCormick, 1977). A strategy utilized frequently in classical education to bolster reading comprehension is the practice of narration, or the retelling of stories in students' own words. This instructional strategy is aligned with Morrow's (1985) focus on retelling as a way for emergent readers to improve their reading comprehension. Specifically, when retelling a story, emergent readers should be given guidance in their retellings to promote their comprehension and build awareness of story structure and oral language. Morrow suggests that using general prompts and then providing assistance only when needed with retellings is best practice when conducting a directed reading, and then after the retellings posing questions to extend students' learning.

Conclusions

This section detailed key strategies to increase elementary students' reading comprehension. A key theme in this section is that reading aloud to students is often the best tool for promoting literacy (McCormick, 1977). While reading aloud, however, there are several instructional strategies that scaffold students' learning. These strategies include, RSTAC, text talk, and reading and retelling. When comparing these three methods, the practice of questioning children about what they've heard, drawing connections between the text and children's lived experiences, and retelling stories in their own words are key themes for building comprehension.

Social Emotional Learning

This capstone project aims to utilize classical literature and the morals found within those stories to improve students' social emotional learning. Social emotional learning (SEL) has risen to prominence in conversations around education recently. The practice refers to explicitly teaching students skills needed to be successful in the classroom. Typically, the focus is on self-control, self awareness, and interpersonal skills so that students can regulate their emotions and manage difficult situations or unfamiliar environments. This learning is particularly important for students with disabilities as well as early childhood and elementary school students. This section of the paper explores key instructional strategies for social emotional learning, in particular social stories. Social stories explain certain social norms, expectations, classroom routines, or upcoming events. These stories are extremely powerful tools in early childhood, during which information is more often retained when told in the format of a story.

Components of SEL Programming

Within the elementary classroom, SEL programming is an important factor in providing support for the growth of five key competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (Lawson et al., 2018). Following the research of fourteen SEL programs, Lawson et al. identified that the most common programming are social skills, identifying others' and one's own feelings, and behavioral coping skills. Each of these components are detailed further below.

Social Skills. In the context of SEL programs, social skills refers to a specific set of behaviors that promote school success. According to Campbell and Brigman (2003), these social skills are often focused on interpersonal relationships and team building skills rooted in conversation. Activities that support these behaviors are reciprocal questioning, working in small groups or pairs to practice cooperation, and working to identify the benefit to the student for

engaging in these behaviors. These social and interpersonal skills are what help children to understand the behavior of others and maintain positive social interactions. In fact, children who can do this are able to collaborate and coexist peacefully with others (Jones et al., 2017).

Emotional Processes. Identifying emotions is another crucial component of many SEL programs, aiming to help “recognize, express, and regulate their own emotions, as well as understand the emotional perspectives of others” (Jones et al., 2017, p.4). Whereas social skills allow students to establish positive relationships, often emotional processes are the building blocks to doing so by allowing students to understand their own and others’ emotional perspectives.

Behavioral Coping Skills. Lawson et al.’s behavioral coping skills refer to self regulation strategies that Jones et al. refer to as cognitive regulation. Their research points to cognitive regulation as underpinning children’s ability to see behavior as a tool for achieving a goal. Many of the functions of cognitive regulation are what classroom teachers would identify as self control within executive functioning. Successful behavioral coping skills look like students raising their hand instead of blurting, following directions, and staying on task. Jones et al. (2017) state “children use cognitive regulation skills whenever they face tasks that require concentration, planning, problem-solving, coordination, conscious choices among alternatives, or inhibiting impulses” (p. 4).

Social Stories

While all of the aforementioned skills relate directly to SEL programming, social stories refer to a specific tool that can often be found within the SEL context. Social stories are evidence-based tools that target students’ social needs by providing them with a written or illustrated story that builds their social awareness (Goodman-Scott et al., 2016). The goals of

social stories as outlined by Goodman-Scott et al. (2016) are to walk students through specific situations or behaviors in order to understand all of the relevant details so that they can be prepared for changes in routines, have clear understanding of behavioral expectations, and understand others' points of view. Currently, research has shown the benefits of social stories among students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). However, there is a movement to extend their use to a wider array of students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (Delano & Stone, 2008). As such, the use of social stories in a general education classroom might provide incidental benefits to general education students given the lack of research regarding the use of social stories in early childhood and elementary general education settings.

Conclusions

This subsection of the literature review detailed the definition of SEL and the components of SEL programming. Through the literature, we saw that many SEL programs target specific social skills, emotional processes and behavioral coping skills. We then discussed the use of social stories to explicitly teach students skills or prepare them for novel experiences or classroom routines. As such, we can then see the ways that stories can be a powerful tool for teaching the core elements of SEL programs.

Academic Language

For the purpose of this paper, we are focusing on academic language broadly with the understanding that academic language within the context of the project refers to that of retelling stories and social morals or lessons, as well as describing social and emotional terms. Academic language refers to the syntax and vocabulary needed to successfully achieve lesson objectives, as well as understand a content area. Nagy et al. (2012) provide the following definition of academic language for teachers:

Academic language is the specialized language, both oral and written, of academic settings that facilitates communication and thinking about disciplinary content. We think a concise definition such as this will be helpful for teachers, but we also acknowledge that it needs some unpacking. This definition can be elaborated on as follows. Academic language is specialized because it needs to be able to convey abstract, technical, and nuanced ideas and phenomena that are not typically examined in settings that are characterized by social and/ or casual conversation. (p. 3)

As discussed, the academic language for this capstone relates to reading comprehension skills, as well as social and emotional skills. This section details the definition of academic language, as well as explicit instructional strategies for academic language in elementary years.

Academic Vocabulary

Academic vocabulary is consistently associated with greater student achievement and consists of both general and content-specific words (Nagy et al., 2012). In their research, Nagy et al. elaborate on academic vocabulary to specify that general academic words are used both within academic contexts and in everyday conversations, whereas content-specific vocabulary are words that are typically only used in discipline-specific contexts. It follows that vocabulary instruction is thus a necessary component of scaffolding students' learning of academic language. Graves (1986) outlines several strategies to accomplish this: learning new labels, learning new concepts, and moving words from students' receptive vocabularies to their productive ones. Learning new labels in this research refers to learning new words that are then identified with a familiar concept. For example, a student might learn the word canine in relation to the known concept of a dog. Effective instructional methods for this type of learning include the dictionary strategy and the keyword method.

The dictionary method involves looking up and transcribing the definition of new words, whereas the keyword method has students identify a familiar keyword that relates to the new word they are learning and visualize a way that the keyword and new word might interact. Learning new concepts conversely refers to connecting new words to unfamiliar and, at times, challenging concepts. Graves (1986) suggests using concept teaching or semantic mapping for this domain. Concept teaching is where new concepts are defined, explored, students are provided with examples and non examples, and find cross-curricular connections. Semantic mapping tends to be the lower preparation method with a teacher writing a new concept on the board and students generating a concept map with related familiar words and concepts that are then transcribed by the teacher. Graves' (1986) final word learning task, moving words into students' productive vocabularies, involves motivating students to actively use new words through activities such as narration and providing students with rewards for using instructional words.

Academic Syntax

While much of the discussion around academic language focuses on vocabulary and developing students' awareness of unfamiliar words and concepts, syntax, which refers to how sentences are constructed, is an important component of academic language as well (Barnes et al., 2016). Academic language typically contains more complex syntax, which in turn results in more words per sentence and longer utterances. Barnes et al. (2016) identify features of complex syntax as follows: (1) noun phrase, (2) attributive clause – a clause that classifies objects and cannot be reversed, (3) identifying clause – a clause that defines a new word using a familiar one, and (4) verbs that are changed into nouns. Given the complexity of academic syntax, they suggest that the best methods for promoting this language in the classroom are during whole

group instruction via elevated read aloud texts that model the use of specific syntax, as well as targeted language lessons that provide students with the opportunity to both learn and practice complex syntax in speaking and writing.

Academic Discourse

Where academic language and syntax provide pieces of academic language, academic discourse synthesizes the two so that students are able to use them in a classroom setting. Academic discourse thus takes the shape of having the skills to compare and contrast concepts, write a descriptive sentence, or participate in a debate. Discourse is what students are able to do and say with academic vocabulary and syntax. Classroom discourse in this format plays an important role in student learning, with activities such as high dialogic quality discussions and instructional conversation within both large and small groups playing a more significant role in learning than rote memorization (Nystrand, 2006). To accomplish this discourse, Walshaw and Anthony (2008) suggest that “teachers who implement pedagogical reform, in relation to classroom discourse, must inevitably focus on developing community, ensuring that those within the community are given opportunities to talk about, support, and nurture each other’s learning” (p. 541). They argue that along with creating a culture of co-creating learning, several tangible instructional strategies also play an important role. Specifically, they argue that teachers must create opportunities for their students, typically through creative or problem-solving contexts. In addition, students must be familiar with the pattern and expectations of classroom discussions through repeated practice and social interactions that consist of a respectful exchange of ideas.

Conclusions

Academic language is an important skill for students to be able to both comprehend and communicate about their learning. The research in this section detailed best practices for

explicitly teaching academic vocabulary and syntax, as well as how to put into place routines that promote academic discourse. Key themes identified were the explicit teaching of new vocabulary words and concepts via detailed definitions and connecting to known concepts, providing structured practice for use of complex syntax in speaking and writing, as well as creating an ethos of respectful exchange of ideas in the classroom.

Summary of Chapter

Chapter Two has explored the key research related to the question: *How can educators use pedagogical storytelling with classical literature to address the social-emotional needs of their students while also increasing reading comprehension in early years?* The chapter explored the definition of classical literature as that which is time tested and of high quality, identifying fables and fairy tales as the two genres of focus. In addition, the chapter explored the ways in which storytelling is utilized in African American, Indigenous and Contemporary culture. This cultural comparison illustrated the importance of storytelling as a pedagogical tool for preserving cultural values and life experiences across generations. The chapter then reviewed current research pertaining to SEL, noting the importance of explicitly teaching social and emotional skills to students. As part of that discussion, social stories were highlighted as a tool for introducing children to routines, expected behaviors and novel events. Lastly, this literature review detailed the components of academic language and effective practices for teaching them within the classroom.

The next chapter provides a detailed description of the proposed project of this capstone in order to address the research question. I will outline my proposed methods and the research supporting the project, as well as the setting, target audience and intended assessment questions to evaluate the project's success.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

The previous chapter provided a broad overview of the themes of classical literature, the history of pedagogical storytelling across cultures, research based reading comprehension practices, social emotional learning (SEL) programming components, and academic language teaching strategies. Several key themes emerged, including that storytelling has been a relied-upon method for disseminating and teaching information across Indigenous, Greek, African American, and contemporary cultures. This project aims to utilize this precedent to answer the question: *How can educators use pedagogical storytelling with classical literature to address the social-emotional needs of their students while also increasing reading comprehension in early years?* As such, while we can see the history of pedagogical storytelling, the project also seeks to teach reading comprehension and social and emotional skills with classical literature as a conduit. This chapter will provide an overview of the proposed project including the project description, research basis, setting, target audience, timeline, and proposed assessments.

Project Description

This project is the creation of a kindergarten literacy curriculum that uses classical literature as read aloud stories to increase reading comprehension and also address the social and emotional needs of children. The social emotional aspect of the project is primarily reinforced through the morals found in classical pieces—specifically, fables and fairytales.

The curriculum design process will consist of the following key steps, and grounded in utilizing the principles of understanding by design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011):

- Needs assessment with regard to social-emotional skills that are necessary to succeed in kindergarten and be ready for first grade to create social skills objectives for the project
- Review of Minnesota reading and literacy state standards to determine literacy objectives
- Academic language review to determine the vocabulary and syntax needed to retell stories, identify key events and discuss the moral and social or emotional implications of stories
- Aggregation of literature materials and design of units and lessons based upon the predetermined academic and social objectives
- Design of pre-unit assessments to establish a baseline skill levels and post-unit assessments to assess effectiveness of learning

Following the completion of these steps, the curriculum will be ready for implementation within the kindergarten classroom during the 2023-2024 school year.

Research Basis

As noted, this project will consist of a curriculum that synthesizes classical literature, SEL, reading comprehension and academic language. The basis for how these elements will be woven together are grounded in research. The research that supports my project's approach falls into three categories: literacy strategies, academic language instruction, and social-emotional learning programming.

Reading Comprehension. A key theme of this project is building kindergarten students' reading comprehension by reading aloud classical literature. This project aims to utilize the Mckee & Car's (2016) read, stop, think, ask, connect strategy for students to engage with the

classical literature and identify the moral of the story and make a connection between that moral and their lives. The curriculum also intends to leverage Morrow's (1985) idea that reading and retelling is a key method to build emergent readers' comprehension. These practices will be woven into the curricular framework as the key reading comprehension instructional strategies utilized.

Academic Language. The academic language component of this curriculum specifically focuses on building students' vocabulary and syntax to successfully utilize academic discourse to participate in the discussions necessary for reading comprehension and about social skills and emotions. The lessons largely rely upon Graves' research (1986) outlining several strategies to accomplish this: learning new labels, learning new concepts, and moving words from students' receptive vocabularies to their productive ones via practice. As such, the curriculum will explicitly teach new vocabulary and provide ample opportunities for students to practice using the vocabulary and correct syntax prior to expecting them to have mastered the academic and SEL objectives.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL). The final key area of focus for curriculum design is SEL programs. This curriculum will identify areas of focus based upon the five key competencies targeted by SEL programs: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making (Lawson et al., 2018). The curriculum will also utilize a reimagined view of social stories, guided by the goals of social stories as outlined by Goodman-Scott et al. (2016). These goals are to walk students through specific situations or behaviors to understand all of the relevant details so that they can be prepared for changes in routines, have clear understanding of behavioral expectations, and understand others' points of view. While often social stories are written from the perspective of the student, this curriculum

will utilize classical literature that contains themes such as cooperation, compassion, greed, to use morals as a tool for rethinking social and emotional interactions within the classroom.

Setting

The proposed project will take place at a classical charter school that serves elementary and middle school students. The school is located in southern Minnesota in a town that currently has a population of just over 20,000 people. The school serves over 300 students from the town, as well as the surrounding suburban and rural communities. In terms of demographics, the school is primarily white and middle-class, with only a fraction of the students receiving free or reduced lunch.

The curriculum will be implemented in a kindergarten classroom consisting of 24 students, with approximately one third of those students receiving additional special education or speech services. The teacher is a second year teacher who previously taught preschool and kindergarten within a private Waldorf early childhood setting. The classroom focuses on education through the lens of virtue, focusing on the pillars of fortitude, wisdom, gratitude, compassion and temperance. The curriculum will reflect those school themes accordingly.

Target Audience

The intended audience for my project is kindergarten teachers that are looking to utilize classical literature for social emotional learning and improved reading comprehension. In particular, this curriculum would be useful in other classical schools where traditional social skills and high interest books are not aligned within the school's pedagogical values. As such, the project aims to provide teachers with a resource to improve social skills and reading comprehension in a manner that is aligned with the classical model.

Timeline

The proposed project stemmed from the experience of teaching kindergarten in both a Waldorf and a classical setting, which primarily utilizes fables and fairy tales for literature in early childhood. The researcher spent two years in these settings thinking about the ways that students might benefit from leveraging storytelling to meet their reading and social-emotional needs. The curriculum design will take place during the summer semester of 2023 for implementation during the 2024 school year. As previously noted, the project sequence is as follows:

- Determination of SEL, reading and literacy, and academic language objectives
- Aggregation of literature materials and design of units and lessons based upon the predetermined academic and social objectives
- Design of pre-unit and post-unit assessments to measure learning outcomes

Each of these elements will be completed during the summer semester, with the aggregation of materials and design of units necessitating the largest block of time. The project will be completed and ready for implementation within the 2023-2024 school year in the previously described setting.

Assessment Tools

Although the project will not contain any specific data from human subjects for research purposes, it will contain assessments to ensure that students are meeting the proposed learning outcomes. This will take the shape of retelling exercises that have students identify key themes from the stories studied such as characters, story sequence, problem and solution. The various data collection points will allow progress to be seen throughout the year on literacy based skills. The social skills elements will be assessed by students' ability to articulate the moral or lesson of

the stories they study. The assessment design is included explicitly in the project timeline to ensure that the teacher implementing the curriculum is formally assessing student learning regularly.

Summary of Chapter

To answer my research question: *How can educators use pedagogical storytelling with classical literature to address the social-emotional needs of their students while also increasing reading comprehension in early years?* I am designing a curriculum that leverages classical literature as a tool to improve students' reading comprehension and social skills through the use of read alouds that incorporate strategies such as narration, retelling, questioning and building connections to students' lives. The curriculum also aims to provide a tangential benefit for SEL via the study of the morals and lessons of stories and noticing the connections between these themes and the problems or experiences that arise in the classroom. The curriculum will explicitly teach students the academic language needed to successfully meet those objectives with the introduction and regular practice of new vocabulary and syntax. This curriculum aims to synthesize the research summarized in Chapter Two of this project proving the benefit of pedagogical storytelling for reading comprehension and SEL.

In the next chapter, I reflect upon my experiences designing my capstone project and my conclusions about the key themes I've explored. The next chapter also answers the question "where do I go from here?" and outlines my intended use of the curriculum within the classroom.

CHAPTER FOUR

Project Reflection

Introduction

My capstone project explored the question: *How can educators use pedagogical storytelling with classical literature to address the social-emotional needs of their students while also increasing reading comprehension in early years?* This resulted in the creation of a two week literature unit that synthesizes the concepts of reading comprehension and social-emotional learning by reading classical literature. Following the completion of this curriculum, I spent time reflecting on the impact this work has had on my personal and professional development. Specifically, this chapter details the following: personal growth, newfound perspective on the literature reviewed, project implications and limitations, and recommendations for the future stemming from my learning.

Reflection

The creation of my literature unit and the capstone process more generally was a significant driver of personal and professional growth. When I entered the Hamline MAT Program during the summer of 2020 and COVID-19 pandemic, I had no idea the way that my pedagogical philosophy and the world would change. This capstone has been a testament to the journey I've begun as an educator in the ways it challenged me, helped me to question my teaching practices, and make adjustments to my practices to continue to improve my teaching in the years to come.

Personal Growth

As noted above, this capstone has prompted significant personal growth. In particular, the capstone has prompted me to improve my organization and has bolstered my confidence in my

lesson design. The capstone process is incredibly detailed and requires numerous steps, timelines, specific formatting, research and much more. In the past, I've taken the approach of fitting graduate school work in around my teaching schedule in a bit of a chaotic fashion. As I began researching and drafting my capstone paper, I quickly realized this approach was not going to work long term. At that point, I had to be extremely clear on what I wanted to accomplish and when, as well as be honest with myself about the time I needed to do it. Setting aside time to work on my capstone became part of my routine and was a methodical and measured process. As I continued to make progress on my capstone and received feedback on the various aspects of my work, my confidence blossomed in the way that my work was reflected back to me. I had never had the opportunity to receive this much detailed feedback on my writing or thinking aside from the edTPA, and having it be something I'm so passionate about was an amazing experience. I find myself now approaching lesson planning and teaching with a renewed energy about my capacity to create change and meaningful learning in my classroom and school.

Revisiting the Literature Review

As my confidence and my organization grew, I also became introspective on work I've done to date on my capstone. With regard to the literature review, this has helped me to identify the key influences on my research, which can be outlined in the following categories:

background knowledge, reading comprehension strategies, and curricular design.

At the beginning of my literature review, I began studying the history of classical education and classical literature as well as pedagogical storytelling. This background information, while not explicitly reflected in my capstone project, was influential in terms of helping me to see storytelling outside of my own identity as white classical teacher. Specifically, Perrin (2004), emphasized that classical literature can be defined as time-tested and enduring

books. Within classical education, many of these stories tend to come from a white eurocentric worldview, so as I worked to create this curriculum I had to consider that many of the texts that would be considered ‘classical’ may not represent all of the students in my classroom. This is something that classical educators must wrestle with as we look for fables and folk tales from a variety of cultural backgrounds. In contrast, the history of pedagogical storytelling provided a window into the importance of stories for survival among disenfranchised groups of people. Specifically, Storytelling is a crucial part of cultural preservation in many communities as highlighted by Eder’s (2007) focus on Indigenous storytelling and Hamlet’s (2011) discussion of the African American oral tradition. This background knowledge was foundational as I looked to create a unit that focuses on stories as a tool for learning, while also thinking deeply about where pedagogical storytelling comes from,

While my research about best practices for reading comprehension included a wide range of ideas and sources, I focused on the idea that reading aloud to children is the most effective way to improve comprehension (McCormick, 1977). I then utilized McKee & Car’s Read, Stop, Think, Ask, Connect strategy to ensure that my curriculum used reading aloud to help explicitly teach students about the structure of stories, unfamiliar words, and make connections between the stories read and their own lives (2016). This research underpinned each of my lesson plans within the curriculum through turn and talks and ‘think aloud’ modeling.

While I used research-backed strategies in my learning activities, my overall curriculum design was based on the principles of understanding by design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2011). Using this model, I focused on the end learning outcomes I wanted students to achieve and then created assessment tools based upon those goals. My assessments served as a base for my learning plan, which was created last. This style of working backwards was incredibly helpful

and what I learned from this tool I plan to use going forward in my planning. In my literature review, I did not cover curriculum design at all, and this is something that I really regret. I think that my project would have benefitted from an additional investigation of best practice with how to design effective curricula. That said, my experience with understanding by design was extremely positive and I believe that my unit will be effective when implemented in my classroom.

Project Implications, Limitations and Recommendations for the Future

As noted above, I intend to use this project within my own classroom. This capstone intends to benefit kindergarten teachers in a wide variety of learning environments, by providing a practical introduction to kindergarten literacy skills and a foundation for discussing emotions. In my own experience, kindergarteners are expected to meet a number of academic standards while also learning to function within a school system. This unit aims to synthesize these two needs to help meet students where they are at both academically and emotionally. My hope is that this project will give other teachers a place to start when teaching students literature and social-emotional skills.

While I'm very proud of the unit that I created, a key limitation of this project is that it consists of a single unit that is focused on identifying emotions. Another limitation of the project is that it uses common folk tales as a foundation. While these stories are typically quite familiar to young children in the United States, it does center white-eurocentric culture rather than utilize more diverse sources. As this project is a starting point, both of these limitations can be addressed if implemented in the classroom and expanded on throughout the year.

As noted, this project is meant to serve as a starting point for kindergarten teachers at the beginning of the school year. In the future, this project should be expanded to include a broad

range of social-emotional skills and a wide variety of morals. This includes reading a diverse group of folk stories, fairy tales and fables from many different cultures. It is my hope that this unit serves as a first step for the creation of a much more detailed curriculum to be utilized within my and other classrooms.

Summary

This capstone project sought to understand the question: *How can educators use pedagogical storytelling with classical literature to address the social-emotional needs of their students while also increasing reading comprehension in early years?* This focus resulted in the creation of a two week and ten lesson literature unit that focuses on improving students' reading comprehension and emotional awareness. This chapter reflected upon my personal growth, revisited the literature and looked to the future of how this project might impact the teaching profession and influence my classroom going forward.

In conclusion, this project has taken my love of classical literature, passion for social emotional learning and awareness of the need to improve reading comprehension and created a cohesive tool to teach students all of these things. The months of research, work and thought that culminated in this paper have shaped the way I view myself as an educator and my understanding of our profession. I've seen the way that myself and my peers have poured ourselves into our classrooms and research topics, all with the intention of improving our pedagogy and the school system as a whole. This experience has been transformative and while my project has finished, the iterative process of researching, writing, editing has served as a powerful reflection of the ways that I hope to continue to refine my practice going forward.

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