

Media mentoring through digital storytimes: the experiences of public libraries in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract:

This paper reports selected results from a study investigating digital storytimes in children's programming in public libraries in New Zealand Aotearoa. The paper focuses specifically on the capacity of the librarians running digital storytimes to act as media mentors for families within their communities by demonstrating good practice in joint media engagement and acting as guides to good quality digital resources. The results suggest that while the librarians are offering advice to caregivers on appropriate apps and e-resources, they are less comfortable with modelling and explaining to caregivers how to use digital devices with their children to maximize their learning. It is suggested that part of the reason for this is continuing concern about young children's exposure to technology. It is recommended that librarians include more explicit messages about appropriate use of digital media with young children in their digital storytimes to enable caregivers to support their children's learning with technology and to overcome some of the resistance to digital media use.

Keywords: public libraries, storytimes, children's programming, digital media, media mentoring, social learning theory, New Zealand.

Introduction and background

In recent times, public libraries have experienced a rise in the number and range of programmes they offer, with an associated increase in the number of people attending activities and events within the library building (Fast Facts, 2011). This phenomenon can be partly attributed to the positioning of the public library as a community hub (Bourke, 2007) - a trusted local facility that is open and free for everyone and acts as a meeting place for a larger cross section of society than most other social or cultural institutions (Aabø & Audunson, 2012). Of course, programming for children and families has long been an important and prominent feature of public library activities and the public library's

democratic service mission (Herb & Willoughby-Herb, 2001) coupled with its educational roots sees it ideally placed to support families with their life-long learning needs. Talan (1999) outlines why public libraries are natural homes for family literacy initiatives, noting that their non-threatening, non-judgmental atmosphere, cross-generational perspective and community location support learning for the whole family. While studies exploring the role and success of programming for children has often focused on the extent to which it helps support children's literacy development (e.g. Campana et al., 2016), carefully planned and targeted programmes can also support parents and caregivers in their encouragement of children's learning. There has been research investigating "enhanced storytimes" where the library storytime leaders include "systematic adult asides", explaining to the caregivers how their practices will help support their children's literacy and learning development (Stewart et al., 2014) and although the results were mixed, the study indicates that public libraries are increasingly viewing caregiver training or mentoring as part of their role.

The role of librarian as mentor has also extended into supporting library users in their use of technology. Since the advent of public access computing in public libraries in the 1990s, library staff have assisted members of the public to get connected and access the online resources they require for study, work or leisure. The development of handheld devices has expanded librarians' role in providing advice and support for those using technology (Robinson, 2015) but for children and families, this guidance does not stop at helping them use their e-readers or tablets; it also extends to encouraging appropriate use of digital media. Known as "media mentoring", Campbell and Koester (2014, p. 9) propose that children's librarians can, "help families gain access to high quality resource materials from trusted institutions, then use those resources to make their own informed decisions about media use". They add that part of the role also involves encouraging and modelling appropriate joint media engagement, or "the new coviewing" (Takeuchi & Stevens, 2011).

This approach has its roots in Bandura's (1977) social learning theory which proposes that real-life experiences and exposures to experiences directly or indirectly shape behaviour. Bandura stated that "Most human behaviour is learned observationally through modelling" (p. 22) and although the experiments on which he based his ideas focused predominantly on children, his contention that learning takes place by watching, observing and modelling others has also been used as the basis for andragogy. His theory suggests that the processes through which learning take place can be diverse, and include imitation and reinforcement. This has implications for librarians' role as media mentors. Bandura explained that there are four conditions necessary for modelling to have an impact on behaviour:

- 1) Attention: paying attention to the good practice being modelled
- 2) Retention: remembering the messages and behaviour being practiced
- 3) Reproduction: copying the behaviour subsequently
- 4) Motivation: having a good reason to imitate

If librarians want to be media mentors, they need to engage caregivers through appropriate activities to capture and maintain their interest; model behaviours clearly so that caregivers are able to remember and replicate their actions and approach at home; and include clear messages about the importance and benefits of co-viewing to give caregivers incentive to mimic their good practice with their children away from the library.

The extent and nature of media mentoring in libraries has been explored in a couple of studies. A study in Taiwan (Sung, 2017) evaluated the effectiveness of adult-child mobile

technology workshops held in the public library for supporting adult mediation of pre-school children's digital technology use. It was found that as the workshop facilitator's style evolved from a directive to a more guiding approach, in line with mentoring principles and social learning theory, the caregivers became more involved with their children's use of devices. Generally, though, media mentoring in the public library takes place in more naturalistic ways. Library storytimes incorporating digital media can be a good format through which library staff model appropriate device use and joint engagement, supporting families' media use. Mills et al.'s (2015) survey of digital device use in public libraries in the United States provides a valuable snapshot of current practice in this regard. They found that although 71 percent of respondents reported using some kind of new media in their children's programmes, evidence of library staff incorporating media mentoring into their programming was limited.

Some of these issues relating to media mentoring were explored in a study investigating the use of digital media and devices in children's storytime programming in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research had three phases: an online questionnaire of library services (response rate 38%); nine telephone interviews with librarians with responsibility for children's services and programming; and an online questionnaire of caregivers (responses = 28). This paper will present findings from all three phases, focusing specifically on whether digital storytimes can play a role in helping families establish appropriate approaches to the use of technology and digital devices in the home. Digital storytimes are defined as pre-school storytime programmes in public libraries that include the use of digital technology and/or media to some degree.

Extent of and motivation for digital storytimes

The online survey of library services first sought to establish the extent to which digital technologies and media were being used in public library storytimes in Aotearoa New Zealand. The analysis indicated that 7 (28%) of responding library services regularly ran storytime that incorporated a range of technologies and devices including iPads and tablets, ebooks and digitised books. This is a small number and we cannot, therefore, consider the responses as representative of all library services running digital storytimes but the responses give an indication of how these respondents are using technology in their storytimes and why. Those who did use technology were asked to explain why they used technology in storytimes in a free-text response box. The responses were coded inductively and the results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Why use technology in storytimes?

Code	No.
Caregiver education	7
Novelty	5
Accessibility	3
Digital advantage	3
To support library service aims	2

The responses show high importance given to the idea of using storytime as a vehicle for media mentoring. The comments in relation to this fell into two themes: 1) modelling appropriate use of technology to caregivers; 2) positioning the library as a trusted source of advice on digital technology.

Modelling joint media engagement

In relation to modelling good practice, one library service respondent noted that s/he, “Models good techniques for parents to use – asking questions, interacting with the story rather than just passively using device”. Another, who noted that she had been “dead set against” digital storytimes initially echoed Campbell and Koester’s (2014) view that librarians had an opportunity and responsibility to encourage appropriate technology use for learning: “We are in a position to help our young parents, and older caregivers to show them how to implement these devices and still bring about love for stories and language skills”. The ideas of modelling and caregiver involvement in the digital storytime sessions were also explored in interview. One respondent noted that, in contrast to storytimes centred around conventional printed media, she probably did not spell out as explicitly how the caregivers could use technology appropriately with their children. For the regular storytimes, she explained that the library tried to have a PowerPoint slide projected at the beginning of the session giving key messages about reading with children. She noted that digital storytimes also supported the library’s early literacy aims because “it’s just another format, it’s still helping with literacy”. The fact that she explicitly mentioned to parents the benefits of reading in conventional storytimes but not the digital version is of interest. She was clearly aware of the links between joint reading (in whatever format) and children’s literacy skills development and it might have been assumed that this would have been given *more* emphasis in digital storytimes, rather than less.

The literature on co-reading emphasises the importance of parent-child interaction when book reading to develop literacy skills. As Bus (2001) explains, books may not be enjoyable or understandable without adult intervention. Children often need help to understand and take pleasure in stories and reading, therefore. Adults can assist by contextualising the story, explaining words and concepts by making them relevant to the individual child’s experiences. In so doing, caregivers can build and develop children’s print motivation (Jalongo, 2004) - being interested and enjoying books leading to reading engagement. If digital media are “just another format”, as suggested by the librarian quoted above, parental involvement is also vital to ensure children are supported to gain the most from their experiences with devices and their digital content. In fact, the child-caregiver interactivity considered so important in relation to print books is perhaps even more vital when engaging with ebooks and book apps on tablets because of the danger of passivity. Indeed, research around joint media engagement attaches great importance to caregivers and children sharing reading and viewing experiences in the digital format to ensure that the latter are engaging with technology in safe and constructive ways (Connell, Lauricella & Wartella, 2015). In this study, those who had led digital storytime sessions did not give much information about how they modelled effective joint media engagement. Interviewees talked of showing good practice of how to use digital media on a one-to-one basis with a child and of trying to be positive but the impression formed from the interviews was that the modelling was quite low-key and not explicit. One interviewee mentioned trying to model interactive use, asking the children questions etc., adding that she tried to do this in a positive manner, rather than saying what not to do. She felt that there was a fine line between being “preachy” and helpful.

Emphasising the positive aspects of digital media to be gained through co-viewing and modelling techniques through which these can be achieved may be one way of addressing caregiver concerns about children’s use of technology and digital media. A Turkish study found parents had mixed feelings about their preschool children’s use of smartphones, for example (Genc, 2014). Those with negative views were worried about smartphone use

causing physical or mental problems as well as fearing that their children could become introverted and isolated. In contrast, Vittrup et al.'s (2016) survey of American parents of children aged 2-7 found that, overall, parents showed more positive attitudes with very few believing that exposure to technology can lead to physical, emotion or intellectual development damage and a majority believing that it was important to introduce technology at a young age to help prepare children for their future careers. In addition, a majority also believed that children today "naturally" understand how to use technology and devices from a very young age. Caregivers attitudes are of interest because they can impact on how they respond to digital storytimes as a concept and practice and, importantly, how receptive they are to the mentoring and modelling of appropriate technology use that takes place during the sessions. Returning to Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, if caregivers have positive attitudes toward their children using digital media, or are at least open-minded about it, they are more likely to: 1) pay attention to the librarian's demonstration of good co-viewing practices; 2) remember how to do it and reproduce the behaviour with their own children at home; and, 3) having been told and internalised why good co-viewing practice is important, have the incentive to do so.

Caregiver attitudes

In the study reported here, the caregiver survey found that respondents also had mixed views about their young children's use of and exposure to digital technology and media. Interestingly, those who had attended digital storytime sessions with their children were more positively disposed towards them. This is perhaps not so surprising; those with concerns about the role of technology in their children's lives would be less likely to attend a session incorporating digital media while those more relaxed about their children's use of technology were liable to be more open to the experience. As Table 2 illustrates, respondents to the survey included caregivers who had attended storytimes using digital media as well as those who had not.

Table 2: Does the library storytime you attend include digital technology?

Response	No.
Yes	12
No	16

Those who answered in the affirmative were asked whether they liked the inclusion of digital media. The responses are presented in Table 3, suggesting that most enjoyed the practice (one respondent did not answer the supplementary question).

Table 3: Do you like the library using digital technology in storytime?

Response	No.
Yes	8
No	3

Those who had not attended digital storytimes were asked whether they would like their library to include technology in the sessions. Their responses given in Table 4 indicate that most of those who had not experienced a digital session were not keen to do so (one respondent did not answer the supplementary question).

Table 4: Would you like your local library to use digital technology in storytime?

Response	No.
Yes	3
No	12

Again, these are small numbers and no strong conclusions can be drawn from the data but the responses and the free text comments accompanying them indicate a range of opinions and attitudes which are interesting to explore further. When asked why they liked the inclusion of technology, one of the most common responses was that they liked children learning that they can use technology for reading rather than just playing. This implies that caregivers also appreciated being shown the more educational or literacy-related uses of digital media, suggesting that the modelling has been successful in this regard. The responses of those who had not liked the digital storytimes they had experienced and of those who did not want their libraries to go down this route were mostly focused of the value of stories being read from books by librarians. One of the comments was: “It just feels more personal to have real books read aloud”. While some of the comments suggest a misunderstanding of the digital storytime format - e.g. that the story is simply projected or played rather than the librarian engaging with the digital media to tell the story – some respondents clearly felt that young children’s literacy skills and learning were best developed through interaction with printed books. One survey respondent who had attended a digital storytime felt children’s retention of content from conventional storytimes was better: “the children don’t understand the story, they don’t join in or remember the story or rhymes in the same way afterwards”. Some of the librarians, particularly those who had not and/or did not want to provide digital storytimes, expressed similar sentiments to the parents who were unconvinced about the value of storytimes using digital technology, one library service survey respondent noting: “The librarian is the interactive device used to engage the children”. Another, who had experimented with using a tablet during storytimes, reinforced the comments made by the caregiver about children’s response to stories told in this way: “[I] found that more children could see and follow the books better than following the story on an iPad ... I felt they were less engaged in the story and more interested in touching the iPad!”. This discussion suggests that before librarians can demonstrate appropriate joint media engagement through digital storytime sessions, there are challenges to overcome with regard to caregivers’ (and some librarians’) attitudes towards children’s exposure to digital media and technology generally

A source of advice on digital media

The other aspect of caregiver education important in media mentoring through digital storytimes is the librarian acting as a source of advice on age appropriate apps and ebooks which will encourage children’s learning. The effectiveness of this was illustrated by comments by library service survey respondents, one commenting that, through the sessions: “parents realise there are ‘quality’ products online to help their child enjoy reading”. Another emphasised that the apps chosen aligned with the service’s aim of free (or cheap) access to resources and its ethos of building links in the community with families and caregivers: “Having products that families and educators can then explore in their own time (either they’re library-offered e-resources such as TumbleBooks, or because they’re free or low-cost apps) means that conversations can continue beyond the storytime setting as well”. The librarians interviewed who had led digital storytimes said that they were often asked for recommendations or the names of the apps used in the sessions. As a result, one had created a list of favourite apps with costs attached ready to share with caregivers and also the kindergartens she visited as part of the library service’s outreach activity. Another noted that

finding and using the right apps was important and she was asked by caregivers how to identify appropriate ones. She said that she gave the caregivers some advice and told them to check through them first before using them with their children, especially the free apps. In fact, one interviewee expressed some discomfort about recommending apps that had to be bought because of the library's emphasis on being a free service. Another librarian interviewed made the point that role of advisor was also one that librarians had always played in relation to printed books and that librarians leading conventional storytimes were often asked for recommendations for good storybooks.

One librarian interviewed took the guidance aspect a step further. Following the sessions, she asked caregivers if any of them would like to take the iPad and do what she had just done with their children. This is linked to one of the other codes listed in Table 1, that of digital advantage. Responses to the library service survey often emphasised this aspect with one respondent noting: "Using new technology in our storytimes can also give families and educators the chance to have a go with new devices or content". This was also picked up in the caregiver survey with many appreciating the role of digital storytimes in enabling families to experience technology that they do not have at home and exposing the children to digital skills that they will need in the future. One respondent commented: "Used well, it adds a new form of literacy to storytime".

Conclusion

The results suggest that some library services in New Zealand Aotearoa view the inclusion of digital media in preschool storytimes as an opportunity to model good practice related to joint media engagement. In this role, they can act as media mentors for families confused or concerned about how to integrate technology appropriately into their children's lives. There does seem to be a degree of ambivalence from librarians about their role as media mentors, however. While most of those running digital storytimes seem comfortable with recommending apps or ebooks and acting as a guide to digital media and resources, the extent to which they explicitly model good practice in joint media engagement is less clear. Direct observations would be needed to identify the amount and nature of behaviour guidance that takes place during the sessions but the interviews suggest that the librarians running the session do not always clearly explain good techniques for interacting with children and why these are important. Modelling effective practice seems to be the predominant strategy and while this is a good start and may be appropriate when staff worry about being "preachy", to gain the most from the storytimes and meet their stated aims of educating caregivers in the use of technologies with their children, librarians may need to become more directive.

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