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**Fortunate Madondo**  
University of Hertfordshire

**Graham Dampier**  
University of Johannesburg

# Storytelling strategies for facilitating the development of comprehension: A case for pre-schoolers in Zimbabwe

## ABSTRACT

The study explored storytelling strategies used by teachers to facilitate children's development of story comprehension. Seven educators and forty-four pre-schoolers, aged three to five years, participated in the study at a primary school situated in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Learners listened to six cultural stories randomly selected from different genres that included fables, myths, and legends. A Grounded Theory approach to data gathering and analysis was used to develop the 'recycling of knowledge' theory. Findings suggested that 'recycling of knowledge' served as the

primary social process, which provided teachers with the most effective strategies for improving children's comprehension of stories. The study recommended that Early Childhood Development (ECD) educators should implement strategies involved in the recycling of knowledge theory to improve children's early literacy and story comprehension.

**Keywords:** storytelling, early literacy, story comprehension, storyteller, listeners, pre-scholars, recycling of knowledge

## 1. Introduction

The average child is expected to master the skill of reading by the end of their first grade at school (Hill & Tyson, 2009). However, some children might face challenges in reaching various reading and writing milestones. The problem of failing to read and write may persist by the time some children complete grade three or, even later (Peissig, 2002; Terry, 2012). The current study acknowledged children's failure to read and write and sought to suggest the best model for advancing pre-reading and pre-writing skills development with particular interest on story comprehension. In the Zimbabwean context, reading and writing problems are generally attributed to the lack of teaching resources such as, computers and textbooks (Madondo, 2020). This is particularly problematic in rural Zimbabwean schools. Given this, the current study focuses on exploring the storytelling strategies used by educators to effectively facilitate the development of story comprehension. The current study aimed at advancing the best ways teachers can employ to improve story comprehension by pre-scholars to help determine their future reading and writing capabilities. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. How did teachers structure storytelling sessions to ensure the development of story comprehension by pre-scholars?
2. What challenges did teachers face in facilitating the development of story comprehension at pre-school level?
3. Which strategies could be put in place to address challenges faced by teachers in facilitating the development of story comprehension at pre-school level?

In the field of linguistics, when ECD teachers expose learners to activities such as storytelling, they intend to provide them with enriching learning experiences. For Zimbabwe's Shona culture, the art of storytelling has been passed on from one generation to another. Decades ago, storytelling was used as a way of sharing experiences and feelings through the spoken word. Stories were useful for preserving the nation's indigenous languages and culture (Egbokhare & Oyelude, 2010; Waungana, 2009). Storytelling was a way of entertaining and educating young children, who gathered around the fireplace in the evenings to listen to cultural stories from skilled storytellers, such as, the elderly people usually grandfathers and/or grandmothers. The oral narrative genre included folktales, fables, myths, or legends such as, Mbuya Nehanda and Sekuru Kaguvi. The two legendary spirit media were influential in advising the Shona warriors about colonialists' movement at the time of Zimbabwe's armed struggles known as Chimurenga 1 of 1896-1897 and Chimurenga 2 of 1966-1979, respectively. Hedemark (2017) argues that in contemporary times, storytelling practices are affected by the historical and institutional practices of the past. For instance, some educators still hold value and respect for storytelling as a teaching method for effective classroom instruction and for enhancing literacy development at ECD level.

## 2. Literature Review

### *Conceptualisation of storytelling*

Oral storytelling as a traditional teaching method has been widely used for centuries to prepare children for future learning success and the transmission of cultural norms, values, beliefs, and traditions (Bruner, 2003; Lambrou, 2014; Waungana, 2009). Nowadays, with limited teaching resources experienced by most schools both in rural and urban setups, the narrative discourse can be a useful way of overcoming issues to do with inadequate resources. While claims that anthropology has ignored children (Hirschfeld, 2002) have been successfully countered (Lancy, 2008), oral storytelling has undoubtedly served several purposes in the ECD curriculum. The purposes may include communication, language, creativity, reading, concentration, imagination, and emotional development and for children to tell their own narratives.

Several scholars have attempted to define the term storytelling. Allison (2007: 48) argues that “storytelling is about personal experience, it’s about making it real for the individual, and each person young or old will bring different things to the tale, so the learning will be unique.” From this definition, it can be deduced that storytelling involves sharing ideas, thoughts and emotions that are embedded in experience. Apart from that, storytelling is viewed as a coping mechanism, a means for learning, and a way of unearthing intersecting realities (Wessles, 2015; Williams & Gloviczki, 2018). A story is easily recognisable and distinguished from any given event. It is a way of organising language and life experiences through connecting with the past, present and future.

A story serves a very basic purpose of restructuring experiences to solve them, and it is an ancient, perhaps natural order of mind (Daniel, 2013; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Hiebet & Taylor, 2014). This perspective of a story recognizes its significance extending from understanding and remembering, to the arrangement of story structure in the human mind and how it is processed. It also suggests one of the several purposes of storytelling, that is, the organisation of language through experience. Stockwell (2002) argues that when it comes to storytelling, individuals are not conceived with the information for a particular place like a bar script (e.g., beer glasses, a barman, walking into a pub, getting a drink, ordering, and being served). Instead, individuals learn through experience (Sanford & Emmott, 2012). The same is related to the current study where young children learned new vocabulary from a storytelling script. A script is a socio-culturally defined mental protocol for negotiating a given situation, which serves to determine the way individuals experience language in specific contexts (Stockwell, 2002).

Fundamentally, there are three sorts of scripts, that is, situational (scripts like a pub script are situational), individual/personal (such as what to do and say to be a complaining passenger) and instrumental (scripts such as, how to switch on the computer, how to read, and so on). Knowledge about the type of script to be drawn upon in a specific

situation is largely dependent on headers that instantiate the script. “A script consists of slots that are assumed to pertain in a situation unless we are explicitly told otherwise: props; participants; entry conditions; results; and sequence of events” (Stockwell, 2002, p78). The idea of scripts links with storytelling which presents learners with opportunities to understand plot, characters, and the sequence of events. The use of information about scripts can add to the understanding of textual coherence and word order in stories. This corresponds with Smolik (2015) who investigated the comprehension of transitive sentences in Czech children and the findings suggested that children had some abstract knowledge of word order. In other words, children might have an idea of how to sequence words in sentences when narrating a story.

### ***The use of storytelling in classrooms***

Several studies on the use of storytelling have been conducted to authenticate their use in the classroom. Van Hell, Bosman, Wiggers, and Stoit (2003) conducted a study on children’s cultural background knowledge and how it affects storytelling performance for ten-year-olds. The researchers found out that children’s cultural experiences impacted positively on their level of storytelling execution regarding the length and coherence of stories. This corresponds with this study, which draws stories from children’s cultural experiences. In a longitudinal study of language development, Griffin, Hemphill, Camp and Wolf (2004) compared oral discourse in the pre-school years with later literacy development for children aged five and eight years. The findings from that study suggested that children’s capacity to mark the significance of narrated events using evaluation at age five predicted reading comprehension abilities at age eight. The current study extends the notion that story comprehension can be used to determine future reading and writing capabilities.

Other studies have argued that simply listening to and telling stories provides children with opportunities for developing decontextualized language skills, or thinking in the abstract (Pardo, 2002; Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000). Environments that value children’s language development are contexts that effectively promote children’s construction of meaning (Miller & Schwanenflugel, 2006; Westerveld, & Gillon, 2008). This can be achieved using storytelling during emergent literacy in the classroom environment. This study is the first we are aware of that utilises Grounded Theory to develop a theory grounded in data gathered at the ECD level of schooling at the Masvingo primary school (not its real name).

## **3. Methodology**

We used Grounded Theory, particularly Glaser’s systematic procedure to gather and analyse data including, open coding, selective coding and theoretical coding, and were guided by theoretical sampling, theoretical memos, and constant comparative analysis (Glaser, 1978). Grounded Theory is a qualitative research methodology, which allows

researchers to systematically gather and analyse data to develop a theory rooted in the data. In the current study, through open and selective coding, several codes and categories were generated from the data analysis. As categories and codes got saturated, the researchers regrouped theoretical memos and categories through sorting. Sorting included promoting some codes to categories and demoting some categories for fitness to the core-category.

In this study, a revelatory case study of the Masvingo primary school in the Masvingo urban district of Zimbabwe fitted well within a Grounded Theory approach. Permission was sought first from the relevant authorities in the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Zimbabwe before entering the field. Ethics related to protecting the identities and maintaining the confidentiality of the participants were considered. For instance, teachers' real names were replaced by pseudonyms such as, MT1-teacher Wayne, FT1-teacher Amanda, FT2-teacher Munyaradzi, FT3-teacher Makanaka, FT4-teacher Memory, FT5-teacher Christine, and FT6-teacher Chenge. Prior to the interview and observation sessions, consent forms were presented for learners to the teachers who further sent the consent forms to parents for signing on behalf of their children. All teachers participated in the study voluntarily and signed their own consent forms.

### ***The research procedure***

Seven educators and forty-four ECD A and B learners aged between three and five years participated in the study. Forty-one learners came from the Shona home language background. The remaining three learners originated from bilingual backgrounds where both parents either spoke different languages or spoke another home language different from Shona. Bilingualism is prevalent in Masvingo because of migration to the area for marital or work-related reasons. For instance, a mother spoke Ndebele and a father Tsonga, or a father spoke Venda and a mother spoke Kalanga, or a mother and father both spoke Ndebele. However, despite their different home language backgrounds, all the children listened to and told stories in Shona during the sessions held for the purpose of the study.

Learners listened to six randomly selected stories narrated in Shona. The stories were drawn from children's cultures and different genres that included fables, myths, and legends. The aim of varying the narratives was to widen the learners' vocabulary and emotional experiences. Daniel (2013) adds that the selection of various narratives is done to emotionally immerse the learners in the narrative's situations, probably more deeply than when using only one genre. Data was collected through participant observations, interviews, naturally occurring data, the writing of theoretical memos, and drawn representations of stories produced by learners.

The researchers observed exactly how stories were orally narrated by both the teachers and learners. Much attention was paid to gestures, facial expressions, body movement, the use of props, repeats of stories, the interactions occurring between the teachers and learners, the activities associated to storytelling such as responding to questions,

dramatizing, and drawing representations of stories in the form of pictures, as well as taking note of the behaviours exhibited by the learners. During each storytelling session, the teacher repeated a story twice and asked at least 3 different learners at random to repeat the same story in their own words and understanding. Teachers in the observed classes often narrated different stories to different groups of children when asked to be resource persons in other classes or narrated different stories to the same group of learners in their own classes. In one instance, all teachers were asked to narrate one similar story to different groups of learners. The teachers used the same strategy of repeating the same story twice in their different classes. Learners were given opportunities to repeat the story in their own understanding. Teachers narrated stories orally and read some stories from books, thereby showing learners some pictures depicting events and characters.

### **Data analysis**

Data from interviews were classified and organised using datasets to make them more useful. Tables were used to represent findings from structured interview data and for easy integration and analysis. Sorting enabled us to weave the fragmented data from unstructured interviews back together and tie in the story line. The data were organised into categories and themes and several codes emerged from the data itself. The interviews with ECD teachers lasted for about 30 minutes per session. Firstly, the researchers introduced themselves to the participants and explained the purpose of the study and requested permission to use an audio or video recorder during the sessions. All participants agreed to the use of recorders during the sessions since the researchers assured them that the data were to be used solely for academic purposes. The recorder was placed on the table in the classroom where interviews were conducted. During interviews, the researchers jotted some notes down to complement the data being recorded. The recorded data were transcribed verbatim into text. The reason for recording observations and interviews was that the researchers did not want to miss out on any naturally occurring data. To this end, data obtained from interview transcripts were merged and integrated with observational data using categories and themes emerging from both instruments for easy analysis.

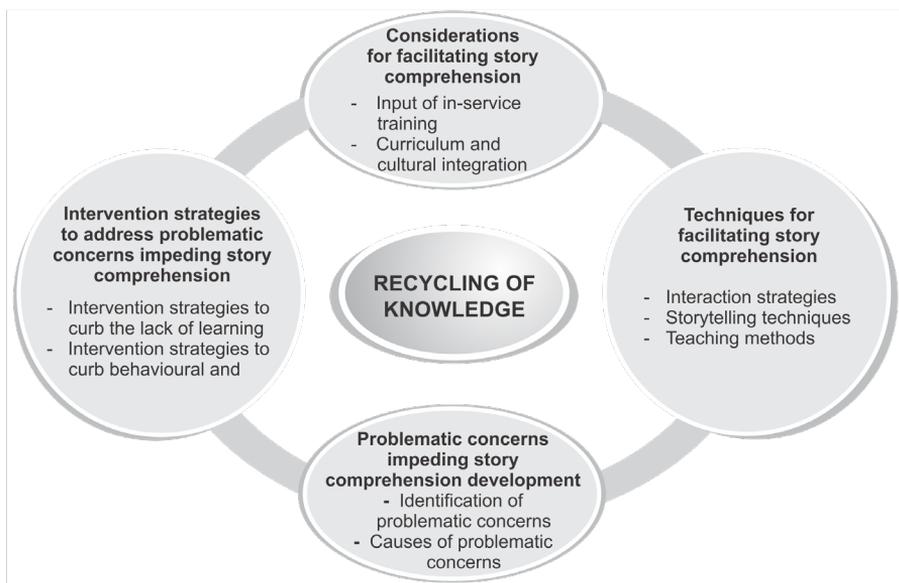
## **4. Findings**

Based on the findings obtained from this study, we developed a theory called the *recycling of knowledge*. Before proceeding, we take a moment to define the concept *recycling of knowledge* as used in this study. *Recycling* means to use again to avoid waste. The word *knowledge* as a noun refers to facts, information, and skills acquired through experience or education. We argue that the *recycling of knowledge* refers to how learners gathered information about the use of language from their educators and peers and converted this into their own use of language through imitation. Most importantly, evidence from the study indicated to us that the *recycling of knowledge* is a concept that

was encountered by both the teacher and the learners as they continuously interacted during oral storytelling. *We argue that the recycling of knowledge* is the primary social process through which the development of story comprehension was achieved in classroom interactions facilitated by teachers through storytelling. We also discovered that the *recycling of knowledge* as a procedure incorporated four major pedagogical processes that included: a) considering pertinent issues with regards to conducting oral storytelling, b) the use of various teaching techniques to effectively facilitate the development of comprehension, c) identifying problems impeding story comprehension development, and d) identifying intervention strategies to address problematic features affecting the development of story comprehension (See figure 3.1). In other words, ECD learners developed story comprehension from recycling the knowledge derived from a story and the knowledge held by the educator and other peers.

### **Considering pertinent issues for conducting oral storytelling**

It is necessary to note that the process of recycling knowledge was cyclic and iterative by nature (See the direction of the arrows shown in figure 3.1). It started with the educator considering in-service training programmes as well as considering curriculum and cultural integration. During the input of in-service training programmes along with curriculum and cultural integration, a teacher introduced new ways of managing a classroom. As one of the pedagogical processes, considerations for facilitating story comprehension development emerged as a critical component contributing to the *recycling of knowledge* (See figure 3.1).



**Figure 3.1: The process of recycling knowledge**

To elucidate the effectiveness of in-service training programmes, we formulated analytical codes such as, “learn new teaching techniques from others”; “learn appropriate teaching methods”; “learn new ways to manage classroom”; “develop techniques to shape behaviour”; “develop confidence”, and “develop awareness of current information”. We observed that the educators often applied these techniques when telling stories to ensure that active learning occurred. In addition, Table 3.1 summarises the themes we formulated from the input of in-service training programmes, which included, (a) enhancement of the personal growth of the educators; (b) increase in the knowledge base of teachers, and (c) exposure to current ECD related issues (See Table 3.1).

**Table 3.1 Input of in-service training programmes on learning**

<b>Input of in-service training programmes on learning</b>		
<b>Possible selective categories</b>	<b>Selective codes</b>	<b>Respondent Excerpts (MT =Male teacher) FT =Female teacher)</b>
<b>1. Enhancement of personal growth of educators</b>	‘Duty reminder.’	in-service training programmes remind us of our duties (FT1)
	‘Shape behaviour.’	techniques that we can use in shaping children’s behaviour (FT1)
	‘Build confidence.’	It helps us to have confidence (FT3)
<b>2. Increase in the knowledge base of educators</b>	‘Benefited a lot.’	I have benefited quite a lot from in-service training programmes (MT1)
	‘Current information.’	have information which is current (FT5)
	‘Relevant information.’	help the mentors with relevant, or I can say current information on ECD (FT5)
	‘Learn new ways’	I can learn other ways (MT1)
	‘Inadequate knowledge.’	I am also able to learn other techniques (MT1) you may not be well versed in those things (FT2)

## Input of in-service training programmes on learning

Possible selective categories	Selective codes	Respondent Excerpts (MT =Male teacher) FT =Female teacher)
<b>3. Exposure to current ECD-related issues</b>	‘Teaching reading and comprehension exposure.’	taught on how to teach reading and comprehension (FT2)

**Key:** *MT1 – teacher Wayne, FT1 – teacher Amanda, FT2 – teacher Munyaradzi, FT3 – teacher Makanaka, FT5 – teacher Christine*

Table 3.1 above illustrated that ECD teachers benefitted from in-service training programmes. The teachers insisted that the programmes equipped them with knowledge about managing the classroom and shaping children’s behaviour. For instance, FT1-teacher Amanda indicated that in-service training programmes had an impact on teaching ECD learners since they reminded educators of their duties. Teacher Wayne indicated that in-service training programmes were influential in keeping up to date with current information on ECD related issues (See table 3.1). Educators’ personal growth was enhanced in terms of classroom management and inspiring confidence.

The other pertinent issue we considered in the *recycling of knowledge* process was curriculum and cultural integration (See figure 3.1). We noted that educators integrated the curriculum by familiarizing learners with culturally relevant stories such as, animal stories that embedded concepts like animal sounds, names and colours. Table 3.2 illustrates the regrouping of codes, categories, and theoretical memos in selective coding regarding the consideration of cultural and curriculum integration.

**Table 3.2: Sorting of codes, categories, and theoretical memos in selective coding**

Regrouped codes and categories	Theoretical memos	Main theme
Cultural relevance, interest, influence on learning, exposure to culture, orientation to social roles, use of home language to narrate story, orientation to animal shelter, orientation to colours, orientation to times of the day, ordinal number sequencing, time sequencing, number sequencing, naming numbers, orientation to social roles, orientation to new vocabulary, orientation to numbers through song, orientation to subtraction through song	<p><i>Cultural and curriculum considerations to ensure knowledge recycling is a category which emerged from the responses given by the interviewees and observations of storytelling sessions. For instance, the researcher noted that the stories used had a link to the learners' culture. She open-coded this as cultural relevance. Apart from this, the interest of the learners was also considered to ensure knowledge recycling.</i></p> <p><i>In addition, cultural influence on learning and exposure to culture in general enabled learners to identify common and familiar things from their culture which was the basis for knowledge recycling as they used the already acquired knowledge to influence their improved comprehension.</i></p>	Cultural and curriculum integration to enhance knowledge reproduction

Findings suggested that through culture and curriculum integration, learners learned new vocabulary and how to formulate sentences in different structures based on what they already possessed from their cultures. They then managed to link their prior knowledge with the narrated stories.

### **Techniques for facilitating story comprehension**

As arrows moved in the clockwise direction, we based the second element for the *recycling of knowledge* model on effective techniques for facilitating story comprehension, which was further divided into three more elements namely *interaction strategies*, *storytelling techniques*, *teaching methods* and *parental involvement* (See figure 3.1). The development of story comprehension required nested storytelling techniques that considered the interconnectedness of the process involved in the *recycling of knowledge*.

Evidence in the study suggested that learners developed better story comprehension by following proper strategies and techniques (e.g., teacher narrated a story and asked questions based on the story) for telling stories.

Evidence indicated that storytellers employed various techniques with the aim to captivate learners' interest, needs, motivation and guarantee effective participation, emotional connections and enhance understanding. These techniques include the use of facial expressions, gestures, utilization of non-verbal communication, changing the tone of voice, stopping after uttering an expression, and using props. We noted that as teachers used these techniques, they were recycling their knowledge of previous storytelling experiences. This signifies that the *recycling of knowledge* was not only peculiar to learners but was also experienced by teachers. Table 4.3 demonstrated the various methods used by teachers in addressing challenges associated with the shortage of resources such as books to emphasize ideas and give learners an opportunity to internalize an utterance from the storyteller.

**Table 4.3: Addressing challenges related to the shortage of picture books**

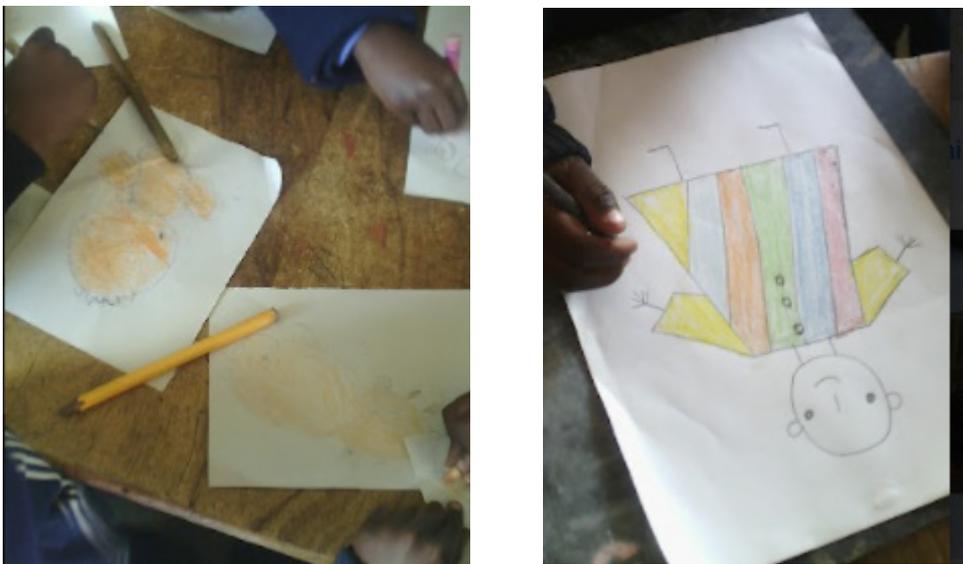
How do you address challenges to do with lack of resources such as picture books?		
<b>MT1 – teacher Wayne</b>	It's really challenging to address such a problem, but I always ensure that my pace of teaching is slow so that I can accommodate all the learners. For instance, when I am telling the story I go round and read the story showing learners the pictures on the page that I have just read so that they get stimulated and appreciate whatever is going on from the story. Pupils described the scenes from pictures by using words, phrases, new vocabulary, and utterances acquired from stories and sometimes included their creative linguistic skills.	<i>Difficult to address</i> <i>Always ensure</i> <i>Slow teaching pace</i> (slow teaching pace to accommodate various learning abilities) <i>Accommodative</i> <i>Move around</i> (reading and showing pictures for story appreciation) <i>Use of pictures for stimulation</i> <i>Creative language use</i>

The findings from this study suggest that using images depicting characters and events stimulated learners' interest and improved their understanding as they got into close contact with reality (See table 4.3). The *recycling of knowledge* occurred as pupils described the pictures and discussed what was happening in them. Evidence showed that creative descriptions of what was seen in pictures helped learners to retain memory of the story scenes easily. Teachers varied teaching methods during storytelling sessions as presented in Table 4.4.

**Table 4.4 Teaching methods used for enhancing understanding stories**

What teaching methods do you use to ensure that ECD learners display their understanding of the stories you tell them?		
FT4 – teacher Memory	I use dramatization. Pupils will act out the stories and retell the stories. At times I use drawings of the characters from the story. I also use games, rhymes and miming.	<i>Use of dramatization to act out story (recycle) and retell story (recycle) (Use of drawings for story characters) (Use of games, rhymes, and miming)</i>

The varied methods enhanced effective story comprehension among the ECD learners. For instance, learners used their imagination to visualize what happened in the story setting and the characters by drawing illustrations of their visions such as in the story of “A child called soil / *Chivhu*” where learners were asked to draw the child (See Figure 3.2).



**[Figure 3.2: These images show individual preschoolers at the Masvingo Primary school drawing a child called Chivhu].**

Similarly, the learners were asked to draw their favorite animal from the story titled “The year of hunger / *Gore renzara*”. Learners’ drawing skills reinforced understanding of a

story and the development of pre-writing skills. The educators asked learners to explain their drawings thereby establishing teacher-pupil interactional relationship. Learners used language to express emotions about their pictures thereby recycling the knowledge acquired from the story and their previous knowledge. One memo we wrote indicated that learners used their language creatively and that the compliments by teachers helped build their confidence to recycle their knowledge. The memo said,

*Through dramatization, rhymes, games and mimicking the learners freely explored language usage, retained words, phrases or sentences, characters, plot, setting, historical events and added their own utterances. The learners learned to use language in creative ways. Observations proved that children loved dramatizing the animal characters in the stories, and they tended to mimic the animal sounds and learned more about an animal shelter. As learners dramatized and repeated the stories to the class, the educator praised them and assisted them to get the story sequence right. (Memo E)*

In addition, evidence from the theory of *recycling of knowledge*, suggested that parental involvement was another strategy employed to effectively facilitate the development of story comprehension. Findings suggested that parents played a critical role of bridging the gap between the home and school by extending what was learned at school in the home. To achieve this, parents were encouraged to tell stories to their children at home. The children recycled their knowledge by narrating and repeating the same stories at school.

### ***Identification of problematic concerns impeding story comprehension and intervention strategies to mitigate them***

As noted above, the *recycling of knowledge* occurred in four stages. After the strategies and techniques for facilitating story comprehension stage, the cycle moved on and we identified another stage that is, problematic concerns impeding story comprehension. The problems included behaviour, large numbers of learners in classes which was further exacerbated by limited resources or a lack thereof.

In addition, behavioural issues that impacted negatively on story comprehension were also noted during sessions. These included disruptive behaviour, too much fidgeting, overexcitement, and aggressive behaviour. Findings revealed that although these behavioral concerns impeded effective story comprehension, children developed moral values resulting from interactions with others through dramatization and imitating repertoires by educators and peers. After listening to stories, learners were expected to identify and draw good and bad moral values from stories. Results suggested that these and other methods for condensing the key lessons gained from stories were critical in the *recycling of knowledge* process.

As obtained from the findings, lack of material resources remained enormous when telling stories. The result was that this tended to counteract the positive effect of the process of *recycling of knowledge*. Educators noted that it was difficult to provide adequate teaching aids for an overcrowded classroom especially when the two ECD B classes combined in one classroom. Combining classes occurred due to lack of classroom space at the school. When combined, pupils sat crowdedly on chairs, leaving no room for free movement with some even sharing a single small chair. Time and again fighting among learners and fidgeting erupted, the reason being that they were fighting for space. Otherwise, in a typical class with a reasonable number of learners, this should not have been problematic. The participants insisted that lack of carpets in classrooms for storytelling sessions was also a challenge.

As a way of addressing limited material resources such as the ones mentioned above, various intervention strategies were contextualized from the findings. These included the engagement of school authorities, construction of additional classroom blocks, rearrangement of furniture to create space in the classroom, improvisation of the carpet issue by making learners bring their own small blankets and mats for the purposes of storytelling, and improvisation of teaching and learning materials.

As the *recycling of knowledge* cycle continued to move in the clockwise direction, we noted that the final stage (intervention strategies to address problematic concerns impeding story comprehension) then triggered the first step (considerations for facilitating story comprehension) since the process was iterative. The results showed that depending on the educator's objectives, the procedure is repeatable to ensure effective understanding.

## 5. Discussion

The findings of the study suggested a reliable model for facilitating story comprehension in various settings and contexts. As such based on the findings from the current study we developed ***The Theory of Recycling Knowledge***. The results indicated that the *recycling of knowledge* theory could be used as a resource for designing early literacy programmes and as a pedagogy for classroom instruction. We argue that the early literacy mode of learning is very useful in that it can serve as the basis for teaching comprehension before children begin formal learning in the lower primary stage.

The findings suggested that the process of recycling knowledge was accomplished by narrating stories, retelling stories, dramatizing stories, discussing stories, responding to questioning about stories and even allowing learners to produce drawn representations of stories. In line with drawn representations of stories, recent work by Hedemark (2017) titled: *Telling Tales: An Observational Study of Storytelling for Children in Swedish Public Libraries*, reveal that children show great interest in pictures and artefacts as stories are narrated. The drawn representations of stories in the current study corresponds with this recent notion of children's interest in pictures and artefacts. We observed that recycling occurred because of consistent social interactions between the educators and learners

during storytelling sessions. Studies have shown that meaningful interactions involve adults and children engaging in decontextualized talk; that is language about situations beyond the immediate present (Purcell-Gates & Waterman, 2000; Tomasello, 2000; Tok & Mazi, 2015; Narasimhan & Dimroth, 2008; Pesco & Devlin, 2015). In the present study, storytelling proved to be an effective technique used to promote decontextualized language through prediction, explanation, inference and definition.

Findings revealed that choosing stories from children's culture purposefully supported the construction of meaning and enhanced meaningful collaborations to take place. Collaboration between teachers and learners occurred in a slip back and forth manner of storytelling and retelling to create meaning. Once given an opportunity to act out, respond to questioning, or discuss a story with peers, children were stimulated to say something acquired from the story and thereby recycled knowledge. However, other learners' attention was distracted, and teachers were quick to identify and occupy them. Gathercole and Alloway (2007) argue that sometimes distraction causes some learners' attention to be diverted during classroom instruction. Consequently, the learners do not participate fully in classroom activities as expected. Often it appears that the concerned learners are classified as reserved, when in fact they get easily distracted and may likely lose confidence to speak before an audience. Distractive behavior is associated with poor working memory (Gathercole & Alloway, 2007).

Based on the findings of the present study, we argue that listening to stories with no action, provided less stimulation for the learners. Considerable evidence from the current study suggested that the experiences learners were exposed to during storytelling such as, using bodily movements, stimulated action and understanding, and constituted the most effective methods for facilitating understanding. From birth, the child possesses initial theory like structures for organizing the world, which s/he then modifies and reshapes in later theorizing (Suggate, Lenhard, Neudecker & Schneider, 2013). The *recycling of knowledge* theorizes that learners possess theory-like structures for organizing the story schemas, which they modify and shape in their utterances. The recycled knowledge emanates from various sources such as observing others, or results from within due to maturity (Francis, 2001; Robin, 2015; Suggate et al., 2011).

Current developments focusing on increasing quality childhood development programmes have led to the rise of in-service training programmes by schools. In the Zimbabwean context, the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education in partnership with some Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) from time to time continue to organize some development training programmes for ECD teachers. The lack of in-service training of teachers may retard the professional growth of teachers and hinder children from reaching their full potential (Nesari & Heidari, 2014; Osamwonyi, 2016; Spratt, Pulverness & Williams, 2005). In-service training programmes help teachers build up knowledge and skills in a way that facilitates positive learning among learners. In the current study, in-service training programmes formed the basis for one of the four major themes in the *recycling of knowledge* theory. They improved the way educators administered storytelling, the way learners understood stories, and subsequently how they recycled their knowledge. We argue/contend that the teaching process does not

begin or end during storytelling sessions but goes beyond this. For instance, when recycling knowledge, the implementation of lessons obtained from in-service training programmes improved classroom instruction. Osamwonyi (2016) argues that for teachers to perform their functions effectively and efficiently, there is a need to enhance their training in new skills and modern methodology. The findings from the current study corroborates previous literature well in bringing forth the idea that in-service training programmes enable educators to learn new ways of managing their classes and enhance learning. Eduwen and Osagie-Obazee (2016) argue that education is key to human capital and development hence, the system should be subject to educational reforms such as sharing knowledge with others. For instance, we noted that, the *recycling of knowledge* model gained weight by considering collaborations among educators through attending in-service training programmes.

In addition, curriculum integration emerged as an important consideration for story comprehension in the *recycling of knowledge* process. Recent studies have documented that curriculum integration is the best strategy to teach content for different learning areas in the early years (Ghahari & Basanjideh, 2015; Van Hell et al., 2003). In the current study, learners used the acquired knowledge from their different cultures to formulate meaningful and creative utterances during storytelling sessions.

The results showed that the need to plan for the structure of stories well ahead of time to guarantee their effectiveness was vital. Planning is necessary since it forces teachers to reflect on what to teach, how to teach and evaluate (Allison, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Yildirim, 2003). Based on the evidence from the present study, we argue/contend that issues around story length and time were conceived as crucial when planning for children's stories. The structure of stories included an introduction, body and a conclusion coupled with regular intervals of questions and answers, prediction, repetition, discussion, and dramatization of stories. At the teaching level, these opportunities were set to support children's language acquisition, language use, vocabulary development, as well as the development of the sound system of a language, and phonological and metalinguistic awareness (Fernandez & Cairns, 2010; Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2003; Trisnawati, 2015). As learners engaged in different storytelling activities, they recycled words, phrases, and utterances acquired from the educators and/or peers. Given this, it is necessary to ensure a strong connection with the audience by constantly involving them during storytelling sessions (Cajete, 2017; Stirling, 2013).

To ensure effective interaction with learners, the educators placed subtle pressure on them to participate by regularly asking random individuals for their sentiments, own encounters, or some relevant information regarding the stories. This contributed to engaging learners and improving the learning process. This is supported by Cajete (2017) who argues that learner involvement is necessary as it sub-consciously prepare them to respond to subsequent questions. Evidence suggested that teachers improved and upgraded their storytelling techniques to ensure children's improved comprehension. The storytelling techniques employed were necessary for helping learners recycle words and utterances acquired from the educators in their attempts to retell, discuss and dramatize stories. Marsh (2012) argues that when telling stories, one should begin by introducing

a strong emotional connection and use their unique technique, voice tone and pitch, facial expression, targeted emphasis, body language and strategic silence to capture interest and invoke the listeners' emotions. The results from this study suggested that these techniques enabled learners to comprehend and understand by remembering and reviewing important ideas, even long after the narration of the story.

## 6. Recommendations

Based on the findings obtained in this study, we recommend that at school level, more approaches should be incorporated to assist in expanding comprehension skills when using stories, for example, puppetry, story sack/bags, adjusted pantomime, dramatization, and using music/musical instruments/balloons to mention a few. At policy level, Teacher Training Institutions should train more ECD teachers, and the Government should deploy trained teachers to schools to reduce the problems of very high teacher-pupil ratios experienced by certain schools. We also recommend that the Government should increase funding to the education sector, particularly at ECD level to mitigate problems associated with the lack of resources to ensure that effective learning takes place. Furthermore, we recommend that scholars should conduct future studies focusing on storytelling for the deaf and visually impaired learners with regards to the *recycling of knowledge* to fill the knowledge gap on how the *recycling of knowledge* influences active learning for children with special needs at ECD level. There is a need for expanding research to privately owned schools and/or schools with enough resources to try and develop a generic framework of how learners manage to recycle knowledge in different contexts.

## 7. Conclusion

The study revealed that storytelling is a collaborative effort between the educator and learners. For instance, on one hand, educators recycled knowledge by knowing and expanding the content and learning from previous story sessions and/or from in-service training programmes. On the other hand, learners recycled knowledge by retelling stories, responding to questioning, dramatizing, and drawing images to represent stories. To this end, we concluded that the specific contribution of the current theory is that at its highest level, the cyclic and iterative nature of the processes involved in the *recycling of knowledge* model inevitably lead learners from low to high cognition level of story comprehension development. The *recycling of knowledge* model can be used to extend children's zone of proximal development (ZPD); where ZPD is the difference between what the learner knows and what the learner knows with the assistance of a more knowledgeable other (Paradise & Rogoff, 2009). Putting this into perspective, we contend that teachers need to expose learners to more opportunities for recycling knowledge through storytelling to enhance their understanding and comprehension. The

other contribution our theory makes is that the activities involved in the *recycling of knowledge* are set out to cause certain behaviours to occur not only among learners (audience) but to the ECD teachers (storytellers) as well. We emphasize that the *recycling of knowledge* theory is adaptable in various contexts and can be applied to other fields of study apart from early literacy. The theory is not confined to early literacy and the development of story comprehension. It is flexible as it can be used to reinforce understanding of new concepts at different levels of learning in varied contexts because of recycling what has already been learned or conceptualized.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Fortunate Madondo**

University of Hertfordshire  
ORCID ID : 0000-0002-4549-7060

E-mail: madondofortunate@gmail.com

**Fortunate Madondo** is a Senior Lecturer and Programme Leader for the BA (Hons) Early Childhood Education at the University of Hertfordshire in the United Kingdom and is a member of Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD). Her research interests include issues related to Early Childhood Education and Development.

### **Graham Dampier**

University of Johannesburg  
ORCID ID : 0000-0003-2325-4196

E-mail: gadampier@uj.ac.za

**Graham Dampier** is a senior manager in the Academic Development Centre at the University of Johannesburg. His research interests include African communitarian philosophy, Marxism, the poetry of William Butler Yeats, as well as academic literacy in higher education.

