



Using storytelling to promote  
literacy, communication and  
socio-emotional development  
in the early years

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# Executive Summary

Story-telling and the development of narratives are valuable skills in the development of literacy and socio-emotional skills and are likely to sit alongside the development of phonemic awareness and vocabulary as one of the key predictors of literacy in childhood.

Tales Toolkit was developed in response to experience working in Early Years with children with high levels of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), English as an Additional Language (EAL) and pupil premium funding. It has its roots in research that robustly draws associations between early markers of literacy (i.e. vocabulary, narrative ability), social competence and school readiness and later academic outcomes. It provides resources and a framework for interactive, child-led activities using consistent and easy to remember symbols to represent story structure: Character, Setting, Problem and Solution.



Character



Setting



Problem



Solution

Adults working in early years settings are trained to use Tales Toolkit during online training sessions, and typically use Tales Toolkit at least once weekly with their children.

Currently, Tales Toolkit is used in over 130 schools across 11 countries, typically, although not exclusively, in early years settings. This evaluation report, carried out in collaboration with the Unit for School and Family Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, reports on data collected from 463 children aged two - five years using Tales Toolkit across ten settings, compared with 199 children not using Tales Toolkit. Teacher ratings of child development on the seven Early Years Foundation Stage areas of learning were collected in Autumn (as baseline) and Summer during one academic year. The evaluation also collected information from interviews with practitioners involved in using Tales Toolkit in early years settings.



“Story-telling  
provides an  
important bridge  
to literacy”

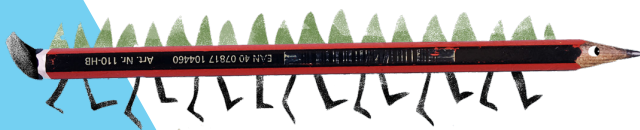


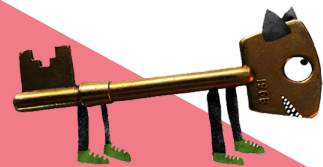


Analyses of these data, controlling for performance at baseline, suggests that children in the Tales Toolkit group made greater progress (with differences represented by medium effect sizes) on all seven EYFS areas of learning than comparison children whose schools had not yet had Tales Toolkit training. We also examined whether child's sex had any additional influence on the outcomes. For Literacy, boys who attended a Tales Toolkit school showed more catch-up to girls' scores than boys not in settings using Tales Toolkit. Similar outcomes are seen for Maths and Expressive Arts and Design.

Teachers told us that they appreciated the simplicity of Tales Toolkit as a resource, and that they could choose to extend its use to best fit their own setting. The online training allowed teachers and teaching assistants to train alongside each other, allowing sharing of enthusiasm, learning and consistency of practice. Teachers also appreciated that Tales Toolkit provided a space for children to try out social problem-solving ideas; exploring aggression and violence, and their potential consequences in a safe and structured space. Teachers reported seeing children grow in confidence, contribute to class activities and enjoy taking ownership of the stories that the groups told together.

This is the first report in our evaluation. Future work will focus more carefully on children in the categories of EYPP, EAL and SEND, and we will follow new avenues of using Tales Toolkit with parents, in Key Stage One, and in other settings.





“ there is no right or wrong answer in the creation of a story ”



# Foreword

by Dr Julian Grenier, Headteacher, Author, National Leader of Education  
and Co-founder of the East London Early Years and Schools Partnership

I'm delighted to have a chance to share some of my thoughts about Tales Toolkit with you.

Kate Shelley developed Tales Toolkit because she understood that children's language, vocabulary and story-telling won't necessarily develop "naturally". Working in disadvantaged areas in East London, Kate knew that plenty of children come into nursery or reception with limited talk.

Every child and family is unique and has its own strengths. But we know, at a general level, that child poverty causes real damage to child development. Many studies, including the EPPSE study, also tell us that high quality early education, in a respectful partnership with parents, can help children to overcome early disadvantage.

Back to those silent children in the early years: we've probably all seen the child who stays away from play that requires them to talk with others. They don't get involved in those long negotiations about who gets to be "mummy" in the home corner. They never develop their story about Superman with a group of friends outside. Quietly playing with construction materials or going round and round on solo trikes, they miss out on opportunities to talk and to learn new words. Formal carpet times and literacy sessions don't enable them to say more than a word or two at best.

Neither a heavily structured programme, nor a "free play" approach, will work for them.

Tales Toolkit builds on learning in another space: where there is adult support and guidance, but also lots of freedom and choice for the child.

At Sheringham Nursery School, we've seen how Tales Toolkit and other guided, playful approaches to early years provision make a big difference to the most disadvantaged children. Our assessment information, which is included in this report, suggests that these approaches help them make fast progress. We see how they start to catch up with other children. We see children joyfully sharing their ideas and stories with practitioners and with their parents. The gains in confidence and enjoyment have been striking.

Kate and the Tales Toolkit team really believe in children. Kate's lived out that belief by creating this exciting and very promising new resource. Her great enthusiasm for children as thinkers and creators informs everything about Tales Toolkit. That's why I'm delighted to have a chance to contribute to this report.





“...guided, playful approaches to early years provision make a big difference...”



## Story, a super powerful learning gizmo

Telling tales is an ancient activity, seen across cultures, ages and settings, and has the capacity to capture attention, emotions and imagination of children and adults. Given the opportunity, preschoolers will often spontaneously engage in early literacy activities. Children are often happy to listen to a story being read or may leaf through a storybook, constructing a story of their own.

Child story-telling is positively associated with language skills and creative play. Literacy comprises a complex set of skills, some of which we can see emerge during infancy, and develop over the pre-school period; understanding turn-taking, nonverbal and verbal communication, vocabulary, mark-making, song and rhyme and the recognition of symbols all act as building blocks for the development of what most people might understand as functional literacy. Story-telling provides an important bridge to literacy for young children, promoting imagination and language skills.

Children's oral vocabulary is particularly important for later reading comprehension. Once a child has mastered the 'learning to read' phase (around 4-6 years of age) and has entered the 'reading to learn' phase (around 7-9 years), their oral vocabulary is necessary for understanding the content of what they are reading. Oral language skills comprise more than just vocabulary: other important skills include children's phonemic awareness and their understanding and expression of larger story structures or narratives. Narrative ability has an important influence on later literacy. One study reports that the quality of a child's narrations



“Child story-telling is positively associated with language skills and creative play”





at six and seven years predicts reading ability one year later (Reese et al., 2010), more so than phonic awareness and vocabulary.

Learning about telling narratives is also valuable for other aspects of a child's emotional world. The development of social-emotional skills is crucial to a child's ability to manage pre-school and school environments successfully, and plays an important role in enabling and promoting cognitive development, learning, and academic success.

Verbal storytelling also provides an opportunity for children to have high-quality interactions with adults and/or peers. Many factors impact children's development in early years but of particular significance is the quality of the interactions with people around them, affecting social and cognitive outcomes. High-quality preschool settings include frequent warm and stimulating interactions between caregivers and children and clear intentional instruction. Early education quality has been associated specifically with language and literacy development, and with the development of social-emotional abilities. There is some evidence to suggest that high-quality early education settings may offer some compensation for children growing up in socially disadvantaged circumstances. One method of high-quality interaction in early years is guided play, or playful learning.

Playful learning has been shown to enhance vocabulary development in low-income preschoolers relative to more didactic practices, similar findings have been reported for maths-relevant knowledge.

Storytelling based interventions have the advantage of being able to promote a child's own imagination and creativity in a low-stakes environment - there is no right and wrong answer in the creation of a story, and teachers involved with these interventions report that children tend to find them engaging and fun. Following their classroom-based intervention, Spencer et al (2014) recommend that "given the foundation narrative skills, including storytelling and story comprehension, provide for reading and reading comprehension, teacher-implemented narrative interventions are well suited for preschool classrooms" (p.22).



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Playful learning has  
been shown to enhance  
vocabulary development”

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# Tales of Tales Toolkit

Tales Toolkit was developed in response to experience working in Early Years with children with high levels of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), English as an Additional Language (EAL) and pupil premium funding. It has its roots in research that robustly draws associations between early markers of literacy (i.e. vocabulary, narrative ability), social competence and school readiness and later academic outcomes.

Tales Toolkit provides interactive, child-led resources using consistent and easy to remember symbols to represent story structure: Character, Setting, Problem and Solution.



Character



Setting



Problem



Solution

Tales Toolkit is first introduced to the children during group sessions using the big kit. Objects are added into the different bags starting with props that the group can easily identify. Children are encouraged to come up with their own narrative that includes a 'problem' and a solution to that problem. Sessions are interactive and often include movement, song, sounds, etc.

Adults working in Early Years Settings are trained to use Tales Toolkit during online training sessions, and typically use Tales Toolkit at least once weekly with their children. When the children are familiar with the story structure adults move them towards more independent use of Tales Toolkit, embedding the symbols widely across the learning space, making links with their own experiences and including early writing resources for them to record their stories. Adults are encouraged to scribe for the young children, with older children being supported to start writing their own stories. Tales Toolkit also provides suggestions for mark-making stories that support developing early muscles for writing. Resources are provided without props because the training encourages adults to use items from their setting that are familiar to the children, taking inspiration from their interests and the cultures of their families. Over time adults introduce more props to encourage thinking and move towards using abstract, open ended items.

Training to administer Tales Toolkit is run online. There are 5x50min online films, run as staff meetings delivered over 5 months. Films allow time for activities and discussion and include footage of sessions with children, and interviews with experts. Tasks are completed by





staff between sessions. One member of staff assumes responsibility for leading the training sessions, and their duties extend only to collecting resources and giving out handouts during sessions. Sessions are typically run in staff meetings, meaning all staff can attend and benefit from the training. This online training package can be accessed at any point during the year. Every member of staff is allocated a login, so they can revisit films in their own time. Additional resources are provided on the website, including webinars and videos demonstrating good practice.

Tales Toolkit currently runs in over 130 schools across 11 countries. Schools have used Tales Toolkit with children aged 2-7 years, but the majority of settings use Tales Toolkit in early-years with a smaller number moving into Key Stage One. Tales Toolkit works with Nursery Schools, Primary Schools and are starting to trial with childminders and private, voluntary and independent nurseries.





## The story in statistics

Tales Toolkit has been independently evaluated by the Unit for School and Family Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. The aim of this work was to evaluate the effects of training in and using Tales Toolkit in Early Years settings by examining outcomes relating to the seven learning areas of the Early Years Foundation Stages, and in particular look at the possibility of additive effects on children with Early Years Pupil Premium funding, English as an Additional Language or Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (EYPP, EAL and SEND). Given documented gender differences in the development of literacy, one further aim was to examine differences between boys and girls. We also spoke with practitioners of Tales Toolkit to find out more about their reasons for taking up the programme, their experiences and outcomes for their settings.

In this evaluation, data is available for 463 children attending settings using Tales Toolkit, and 199 children who did not use Tales Toolkit, during that year across ten settings. Children were aged between two and five years of age. The two groups are matched on age and gender. Data was collected on children's EYFS levels at the start of academic year (Autumn baseline) and at the end of the year (Summer), and gains over the year were compared between groups. The school early years data was converted into numbers for the purpose of this evaluation. The table below shows how the numbers relate to the school data.

Score for the purpose of this evaluation	Description
11	22-36 months working within
12	22-36 months securely within
13	30-50 months emerging
14	30-50 months working within
15	30-50 months securely within
16	40-60 months emerging

### EYFS Outcomes

Analyses of the data, controlling for performance at baseline, suggests that children in the Tales Toolkit group made greater gains (with differences represented by medium effect sizes) on all seven EYFS areas of learning than comparison children whose schools had not yet had Tales Toolkit training.

Although it appears that the Tales Toolkit group outperformed the comparison group in all areas at baseline, these differences are not statistically significant in all cases, and these initial baseline scores were accounted for in the analyses.



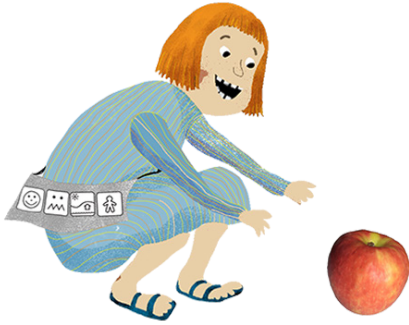


“children in the Tales Toolkit group made greater gains”

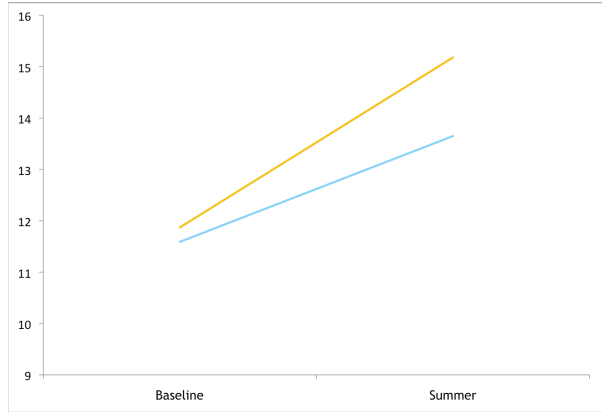


We also wanted to examine differences in outcome for children with English as an Additional Language and/or those eligible for pupil premium. In this sample there were no statistically significant differences between these groups and the rest of the sample at baseline, so the lack of difference also observed for the summer data is not entirely surprising. Future work will aim to recruit more EAL and PP children into our evaluation so that we can examine this area in more detail.

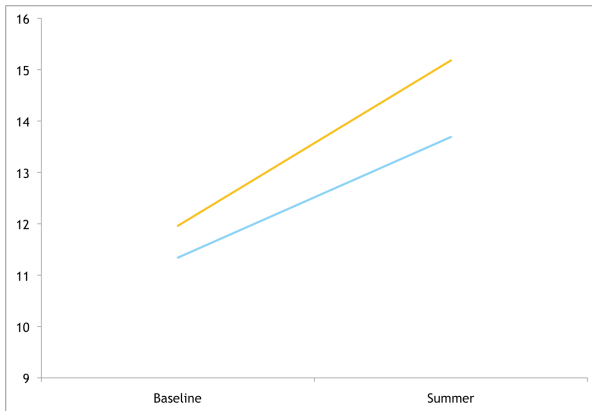
The graphs opposite show the main areas of learning impacted through the use of Tales Toolkit. You can see between baseline and summer assessments the gap widens between trial and comparison groups as children in schools using Tales Toolkit make more progress. In all cases, the difference between Tales Toolkit and comparison schools at the summer timepoint are statistically significant (after taking into account baseline scores).



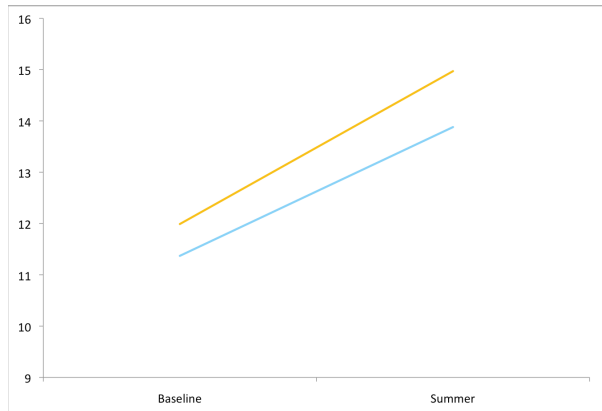
## Personal Social & Emotional Development



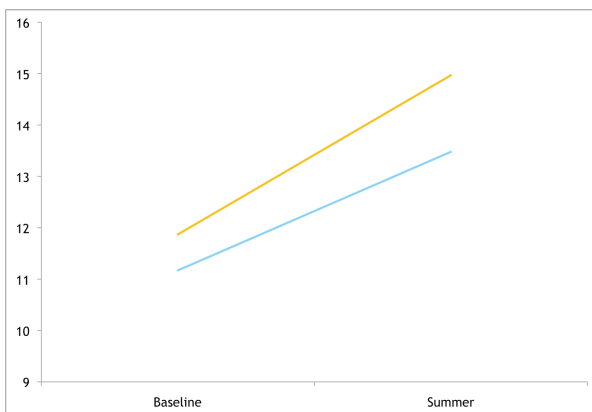
## Communication & Language



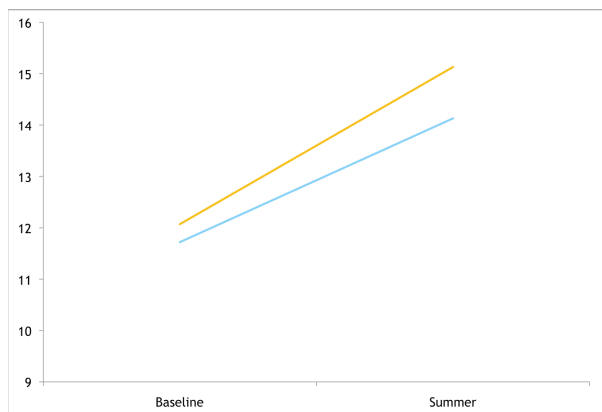
## Literacy



## Understanding the World



## Expressive Arts & Design



Comparison schools

Schools using Tales Toolkit



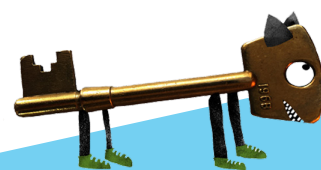


We were also interested in any potential effect of Tales Toolkit on boys' early literacy. We examined whether child's sex had any additional influence on the outcomes.

For Literacy, our key area of interest, there is an interaction effect of sex. Boys who had a year of doing Tales Toolkit showed significantly greater catch-up with their female peers than boys who had not been in a Tales Toolkit setting. At baseline, boys were around one point below girls across all settings, but by the summer, boys in Tales Toolkit settings had seen that gap close by 62%, where there was no longer any statistically significant difference between boys and girls literacy scores. For Tales Toolkit schools, not only were children performing better in literacy overall by the summer, boys and girls were doing similarly well. In non-Tales Toolkit settings, this gap remained statistically significant, and actually widened by 22%. Similar outcomes are seen for Maths and Expressive Arts and Design.

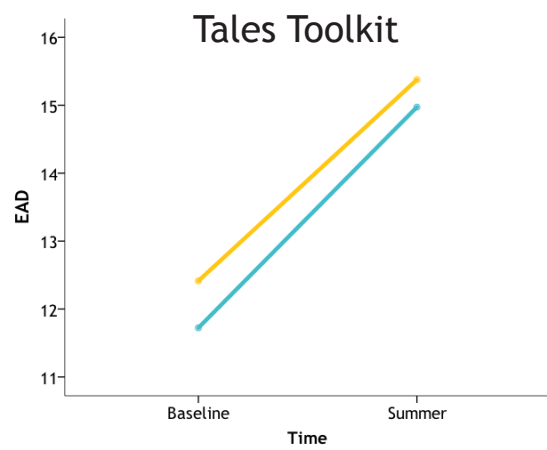
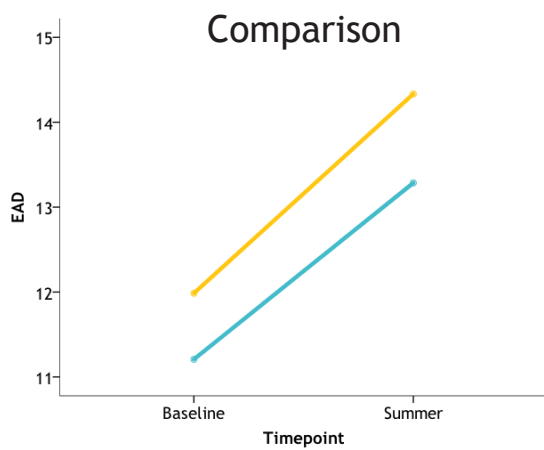
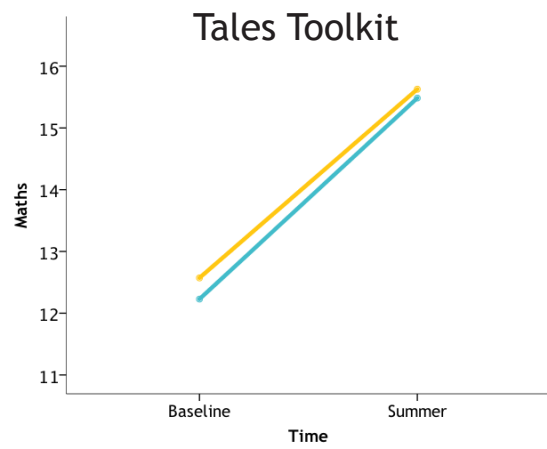
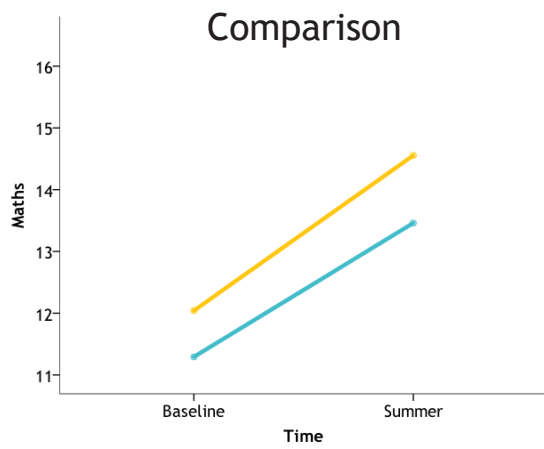
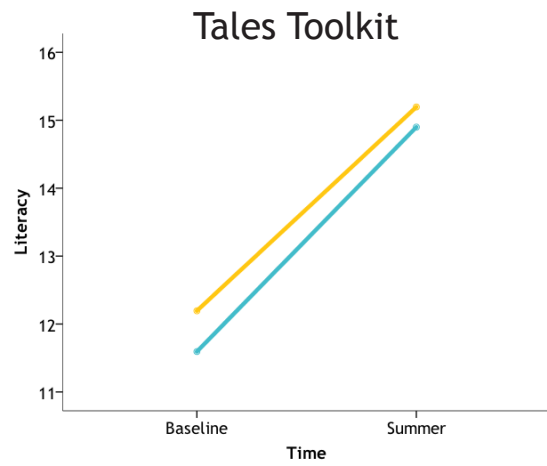
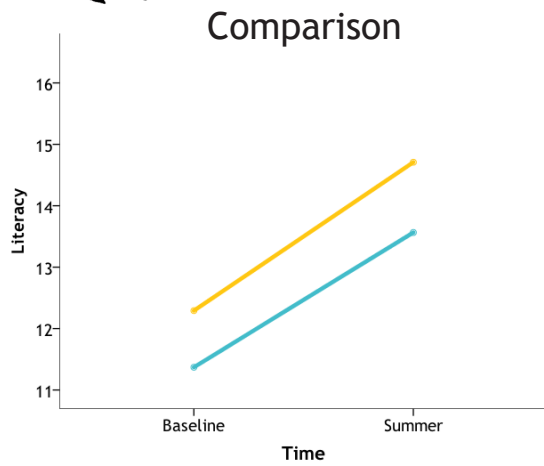
For four EYFS areas (Communication and Language, Physical Development, Understanding the World or the Overall Phase of Development), there was no effect of sex. For these areas, boys and girls were doing similarly well as each other at baseline and at the summer assessment point.

The graphs opposite show the baseline and summer scores for girls and boys. When you compare the graphs from the schools using Tales Toolkit with the comparison school graphs for the same area of learning you can see the gap narrowing as the boys make additional progress when using Tales Toolkit.





Girls Boys





“  
...move quickly from  
providing few word details  
to giving richer descriptions  
of their narrative”





## What teachers told us

Our interviews with practitioners were clear that one of the key considerations when taking on a new intervention was the ability to demonstrate impact. We talked with practitioners from several local authorities who reported that teachers and children enjoyed using Tales Toolkit, and that they could see developments in students, particularly those with early language difficulties and more complex learning needs. Teachers told us about the gains in confidence made in their children; children who had previously been more quiet and solitary in their nursery activities were more engaged, and looked to be showing more signs of enjoyment during group activities. Children were reported by their teachers to be better motivated to engage in telling stories, both orally and starting to write their own sentences. Children are reported to take real ownership of their stories, and move quickly from providing few word details to giving richer descriptions of their narrative.

**“The idea of visual symbols appealed... Accessibility of learning for children with language needs, especially EAL”**

All practitioners were interested in training in an intervention that focused on literacy development, the Early Learning Goal domain that is most likely not to be met by children at the end of their Reception year. Practitioners discussed the particular need to interest and make improvements in boys' literacy activities during early years.

Practitioners said that they valued the flexibility and inclusiveness of the resources. Tales Toolkit allows practitioners the freedom to be creative and fun with their children, providing a structure, but not dictating content. Although Tales Toolkit appeals to practitioners because of its ease of use, practitioners noted that the training was vital in order to develop skills in leading sessions and responding to children's ideas.

**“Its simplicity as a tool, but the principles of interaction go much deeper”**

Practitioners discussed the effect on children in terms of engagement with literacy, including writing. There was also a genuine interest in helping children make sense of their world using narratives. Tales Toolkit provides a space for children to try out their understanding of different problems, some of which may reflect real life situations, and to explore what kind of solutions might work best. There were reports of appreciation of the inclusion of relevant information about child development during the training, including managing aggressive or violent language, and understanding how narrative and storytelling might be useful across early years development.

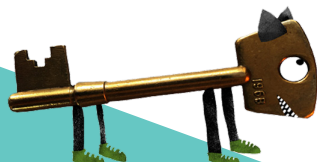


One of the schools using Tales Toolkit has also reported that it was a feature of good practice in their recent OFSTED report, and was linked to “exceptionally strong” progress in language and literacy development.

“ One approach focuses on storytelling and supports children’s pre-reading and writing skills. Children use a range of toys and other props to tell stories in groups, skillfully facilitated by an adult. Even the newest children are encouraged to tell stories, discussing a character, setting, problem and solution. Staff are highly effective in using these sessions to promote children’s language skills. Your assessment information shows that last year children’s progress in this area of learning was exceptionally strong. ”

Quote taken from Ofsted report October 2018

Teachers were keen to think about how to extend the use of Tales Toolkit in their schools. There was an interest in using Tales Toolkit in Key Stage One classrooms, as an aid to transition, but also as a literacy activity. Some had started trialing one-to-one sessions with children who they thought would benefit from extra language input, and others had also invited parents to share in the resources and activities at school and home. One school sent home pictures of their class authored story strips, and asked families to ask their child about the stories. Parents reported soon noticing a difference with their children moving from short few word descriptions, to something more rich and detailed.





One further practical point of consideration was training method. The ability to train all members of staff using the online system was also reported to be helpful for schools managing limited budgets. Training was described as being easy, with one person only needing to be designated a leader to get the materials ready. The ability to see sessions online, and to share ideas about practice appealed to practitioners who felt that these aspects were particularly important to those less experienced, or requiring a bit of extra support in doing guided play-based activities. The online resources (webinars and Facebook group) post-training were also reported to be useful to teachers, allowing sharing of good practice.

**“It’s unusual to train alongside TAs, so to buy something in that everyone can access together is really good. There’s enthusiasm about learning together and consistency of approach”**

This first evaluation of Tales Toolkit suggests that practitioners enjoy the training and using the kit in their nursery and school settings. Teachers report that their students engage with the activities and their reports of student development in areas key for literacy, especially for boys, appears to be supported by the analysis of EYFS data. Research suggests that children learn best in active and interactive environments when the learning materials are meaningful to them. When children’s interests are at the centre of the learning activities, they are more likely to remaining engaged, allowing them to benefit from feedback from adults and peers. By making children feel comfortable enough to ask questions, make suggestions and explore the material, the sort of guided play offered by Tales Toolkit provides a relaxed opportunity for adults to scaffold children’s learning.

The opportunity to use guided play to support the development of narrative and literacy skills in the early years appears to be one that has potential. Evaluation of Tales Toolkit will continue, with focus on outcomes for students who are particularly vulnerable to poorer EYFS outcomes, including those with special educational needs and disabilities, and using Tales Toolkit in both Key Stage One, and with parents. Local authorities or schools who are interested in examining a particular aspect of their practice are welcome to get in contact to discuss developing research.





# Acknowledgements

We'd like to say a big thank you to all of the people involved in creating this report.

All the schools involved for their time, enthusiasm and creativity.

Borough leads who believed in us and helped spread the word about Tales Toolkit.

Shakara Watson, member of the Unit for School and Families Studies at Goldsmiths University who gave her own time building relationships with schools and collecting the data for the report.

And to all those who believed in Tales Toolkit, giving their time, expertise and support.



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