

# **DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: EXPLORING THE EDUCATIVE POTENTIAL OF TELEVISION**

Erin Schryer

As an emerging language and literacy researcher I have quickly learned the importance of considering and exploring the varied contexts in which language and literacy education occur; the many trends, historically and current, that shape the field, and the various perspectives and lenses under which language and literacy education can be viewed and understood. My research is framed by a theory of language and literacy education in which children's knowledge is constructed through occurrences of dialogue and interaction situated within various cultural contexts relevant to the learner. Purcell-Gates (1996) has indicated that for young children, influential cultural contexts include first and foremost the child's home and community.

Research demonstrates that home and community influences significantly impact children's language and literacy development, thus molding their literacy trajectories from an early age (Hart & Risley, 1995). Significant research efforts have thus focused on examining the literacy environments in which young children are reared and cared for to determine aspects of the environment that positively and negatively affect children's literacy. Indicators used to measure the quality of the early literacy environment typically include measures around the availability and quality of print materials—including books and writing utensils—as well as the quality of conversation or talk, between caregivers and children.

Working under a socio-cultural frame of language and literacy learning, and building further upon Purcell-Gates's evidence regarding the significant relations between home and community and children's language and literacy development, I began my doctoral program by systematically considering the entire range of language and literacy experiences that many North American children experience at home and in daycare. The purpose of this exercise was to determine whether, and to what extent, these experiences could be reorganized, or repurposed, to more strategically support children's early literacy development. As a result of this preliminary work my attention has turned to exploring the language and literacy implications associated with young children's engagement with screen-media, including television.

Screen-media include portable mobile devices such as smart phones, video games and tablets, as well as more traditional screen-media forms such as desktop computers and television sets. Wainwright and Linebarger (2006) suggest that 99% of American children have access to a television at home; further, television viewing continues to dominate American children's media usage representing 74% of their media diet versus 13% for the computer and just 4% for cell phones, iPods, and iPads

(Common Sense Media, 2011). Leatherdale & Ahmed (2011) found a similar trend in Canada, indicating that Canadian children and youth spend an average of 7 hours and 48 minutes per day in front of a screen with the largest source of screen time being television.

At present, educational media is being actively researched in the United States under the *Ready to Learn* (RTL) initiative funded by the US Department of Education. In 2010, three RTL grants worth more than 27 million dollars were awarded to support the production and formative research of educational television programs targeted at increasing young children's early literacy and mathematics skills. Literacy programs investigated include *SuperWhy!*, *Between the Lions*, and *Martha Speaks*—all of which have been found to significantly increase children's early language and literacy skills. Notably, research stemming from the RTL grants awarded in 2010 is in addition to over 30 years of research conducted on *Sesame Street* that overwhelmingly demonstrated that children can learn various academic skills, including foundational language and literacy skills, from television (Fisch, 2004).

Through my ongoing research work, I intend to explore how children's educational television viewing may be integrated successfully into a balanced approach to early literacy instruction. This research is important to demonstrate to educators, researchers, policymakers, and parents alike that educational television viewing can be an effective, authentic and motivating language and literacy learning experience for young children.

I ask readers to consider that the relevant research question is no longer, *can television teach?*—as was demanded when *Sesame Street* first aired over thirty years ago—but that contemporary research can now shift some focus to the question of *how* educational television can be used to support young children's language and literacy learning. Exploring the educative potential of digital media, including television, as a complement to quality live education is an opportunity not to be missed.

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### **Biography**

Erin Schryer's research interests focus on young children who exhibit vulnerabilities in language and literacy acquisition and the development of parent and teacher-led interventions to support their learning. Currently, her doctoral work at the University of New Brunswick explores the educative potential of digital screen-media to support children's language and literacy learning toward developing an intervention model that reaches more children who may require early language and literacy support.