Chapter 6
Toys or Tools?
Educators’ Use of Tablet Applications to Empower Young Students Through Open-Ended Literacy Learning

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ABSTRACT

This research study examined 27 educators’ experiences and comfort levels using open-ended tablet applications to support young children’s oral and visual literacy learning. The open-ended applications used positioned students as the producers and creators of the literacy content. While the educators did experience some structural, technological, and pedagogical challenges using the applications, they reported many teaching and learning benefits. They found that using the applications empowered them with additional tools to support children in creating, documenting, and reflecting on their learning. Students were also empowered through being able to represent and archive their experiences in multiple modes and in their own voice. Through viewing the slideshows, parents were able to share in their children’s school lives.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter will report on a research study that is examining teachers’ experiences using an open-ended tablet application to support young children’s early literacy skills (aged 3-6 years). The findings reported here reflect the first year of the study’s implementation during the 2015-2016 school year. The study is expected to take place over 3 years.

Early findings indicate that all children can experience an increased level of empowerment through the use of mobile digital technologies. This sense of empowerment applies to a wide range of children including those with special learning needs, English Language Learners, and those who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Benefits were also noted for young children’s early literacy learning outcomes as they became the creators and producers of knowledge in multimodal ways. This chapter will report on three case studies to highlight examples of empowerment that arose through the development of literacy knowledge, skills, and dispositions while children employed an open-ended tablet application.

While the kindergarten educators came to believe that the mobile technology employed in the study was empowering for their students, they identified several challenges early in its implementation. This chapter will outline these challenges, but also the strategies that enabled the teachers to manage these hurdles. These strategies and the observed benefits of the mobile technology for young children’s early literacy development will support recommendations for classroom practice and future research.

BACKGROUND

Digital Technology for Early Literacy Learning

While literacy remains the cornerstone of learning (Allington, 2013; Beers, 2003; Booth, 2009; Fisher & Fry, 2012), our literacy practices are undergoing dramatic changes as an array of emerging digital tools extend the boundaries of learning and communication (Kress, 2010). Young children, aged 3-6 years, are exposed to many forms of emerging digital technologies, both inside formal learning settings and elsewhere, yet there are few studies that offer insight into how we might best prepare young children to thrive in an increasingly interconnected knowledge-based society. Educators are being asked to teach literacy in ways they did not experience as students, and most likely did not learn about in teacher education programs (Darling-Hammond, 2006a, 2006b; Kirkwood, 2009). The increasing complexity in how we communicate as a global society means that we need highly skilled teach-
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