Storytime at Irish Libraries
How public libraries can boost early literacy through reading promotion events

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Abstract: The purpose of this Master’s thesis is to explore how libraries’ storytime for babies and toddlers can be construed as a reading promotion event which boosts early literacy, by ways of a multiple-case study of storytime at four public libraries in western Ireland. The study will also explore how the different libraries design these events and include different elements of traditional reading and storytelling, multimodal reading and technology, participation, and accessibility and inclusion through a sociocultural lens. The theoretical framework is constructed on the concepts and theory related to literacy development and reading promotion, and works as an analytical tool through which the empirical data collection will be examined. Data was collected through observations of storytimes at four public libraries in Ireland, as well as interviews with the involved librarians. The results show that although the librarians do not actively work to implement national and EU storytime templates, they offer programmes which are in tune with their participants’ needs, and invoke engagement and excitement about reading among children and parents or guardians alike.

Keywords: library and information science, reading promotion, early literacy, storytime, children’s library, sociocultural perspective, digital technologies, multimodal learning.
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1 Introduction

Storytime is a common occurrence at public libraries in many parts of the world. They are often part of a national reading promotion strategy which is aimed at small children and their parents or guardians, with the objective of enhancing early literacy through shared reading and interactions with books, other participants, the storyteller, and the accompanying parent(s)/guardian. Sometimes libraries or bookshops call such events storytelling or story reading. For the purpose of this thesis these terms will be used synonymously. In Ireland, there are national library strategies which aim to enhance reading and literacy promotion programmes for young children. On a global level, EU directives and cross-national Library and Information Science (LIS) advocates, such as IFLA, also continuously work to promote the benefits of reading and literacy promotion activities at public libraries.

The driving factor for this study is the latest Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, which revealed a worldwide decline in literacy among 15-year-old students. PISA is a triennial international survey which assesses 15-year-olds at the end of their compulsory education across approximately 90 countries around the globe in reading, mathematics and science (“About - PISA”, 2019). The objective of PISA is to assess how well 15-year-olds are able to apply the skills and knowledge that they have learned throughout their education up to that point to real-life situations, and thus how well prepared they are for adulthood (Ibid.). On a personal level, storytime and early literacy is of special interest to me as a parent to a toddler and a motivating influence for the study’s choice of topic.

The definition of literacy has evolved significantly in the last decade. Some definitions will be explored in Chapter 3.2 in order to determine the skills that are required to achieve literacy and how these are touched upon doing storytime. My own definition of literacy, which is based on a combination of those of the researcher’s in Chapter 3.2, is as follows: exhibiting the necessary both analogue and digital skills that are required to communicate in today’s society, of which critical thinking is a crucial necessity.

My hope is that my qualitative multi-case study will lead to further insight on how storytime practices at Irish libraries can be understood as a reading promotion event, and what role and impact it may have on early literacy.

1.1 Problem formulation and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how library storytime can help boost language development and early literacy. Studies show that starting early is key when it comes to emergent literacy and that a commitment to literacy early on leads to a greater vocabulary and reading skills amongst teenagers. On the other hand, when young children fall behind with such habits and skills, this tends to continue onto their school years, and may affect academic or social opportunities later on (Duff et al, 2015; Stanovich, 1986). This is a process called the Matthew Effect (Ibid.). In their article, Irwin and colleagues (2012) highlight the role of library storytime on promoting emergent language and literacy. Of its possible impact on counteracting the Matthew
effect, Irwin et al state, “The library storytime (...) can provide young children with an opportunity to practice the skills essential to pre-literacy development.” (2012, p. 23)

Through reading promotion events such as storytime, most public libraries in developed countries or areas help boost early literacy. Reading promotion events, or literacy events, refer to practices in which the participants’ reading interests are nurtured and facilitated, and their reading habits and skills enhanced (Dolatkhah et al., 2015).

However, storytime is still a largely unexplored territory in Ireland. It will be explored here by way of a qualitative multiple-case study of storytime programmes at four public libraries in the west of Ireland.

This thesis will also explore how the use of new technologies in literary activities for young children can be understood and utilised to further boost early literacy, more specifically in a library context. In the context of this study, digital and new technologies are used synonymously throughout this thesis, and refer to both 1) hardware or tools which are portable and classified as smart, such as tablets or smartphones, and 2) software, such as multimodal apps and screen or sound settings, as well as social media platforms, in some instances. Furthermore, multimodality or multimodal reading (Chapter 3.4) refers to the use of books or devices which are non-linear, digitally interactive and stimulate more senses than traditional or linear reading, through animation, sound, light, and colour effects. Digital storytelling may also be referred to synonymously as multimodal reading in this text. Note that other authors’ definitions may differ from such stated here.

The storytime programmes are led by librarians and will be examined with regard to the librarian’s pedagogical approach toward early literacy, accessibility and inclusiveness, participation, and implementation of national and international library and early literacy strategies. It is my hope that this study will contribute to increased knowledge about the role of libraries, and of storytime in particular, in cultivating early literacy in the modern day. To this end, the following research questions are posed:

- How do the libraries work to meet national and European library strategies related to early literacy?
- How can storytime be understood as a literacy promotion event?
- How do librarians work with multimodality to enhance early literacy among their target group?

This study concerns several fields of research, including LIS, pedagogy, early childhood development, and computer science (digital technologies). Acquiring further research on this cross disciplinary topic is crucial to identify the opportunities of children’s library programmes and their contributions to reading and literacy development (Rydsjö, Hultgren & Limberg, 2010). The basis for the theoretical framework derive from theories on reading practices and processes, and learning development, which will be further presented in Chapter 4. The theoretical framework will be utilised as an analytical tool under which common themes in library storytime for toddlers will be explored in relation to how the programme can be construed as a reading promotion event which boosts early literacy, what reading and learning development processes take place, and the impact of social events and interactions with others and with technology play in storytime on early literacy development.
1.2 Limitations

This study is done within the chassis of a master's thesis, which makes certain limitations with regard to time and expenses leeway necessary.

The empirical data collection consists of structured interviews and observations at four Irish public libraries which regularly host storytime sessions for the stated age group, which is babies and toddlers (0-3-year-olds), as well as their parents. Two of these libraries are county libraries, and two are branch libraries. This is to explore what storytime looks like at different regional levels. All libraries are located in western Ireland, in two of the largest counties on the island, for geographical convenience. Although a larger study of 100 or more libraries (Ireland has 330 public libraries) would undoubtedly lead to greater certainty on the topic, the limited timeframe made it necessary to focus on a smaller sample.

There will be a smaller focus directed at exploring how technology is being or can be used to promote early reading and literacy.

1.3 Study overview

In chapter 1 the study’s topic will be introduced, and the problem formulation, research statement, and research questions will be presented, along with the study’s limitations.

In chapter 2 the background will present an overview of the PISA results and relevant EU and national strategies for Ireland which concern reading promotion strategies for early literacy and public libraries.

In chapter 3 the literature review will introduce to the reader some previous research on certain key aspects of the topic and study, which will be put into context.

The study’s theoretical framework is presented in chapter 4. Here the chosen sociocultural concepts and the thesis’ analytical tools will be described.

In chapter 5 the study’s research strategy and design will be presented and detailed. Here the data analysis method will also be explained.

In chapter 6 the results from the empirical data collection are presented and analysed through the previously presented theoretical framework to better understand the processes of early literacy development and how storytime may be construed as reading and literacy promotion programmes.

In chapter 7 the results of the data collection and analysis are discussed in relation to the study’s thesis statement and research questions. The chosen research and analysis methods as well as suggestions for further studies will be reflected upon.
2 Background

In this chapter, a summary of the PISA results which instigated this study will be presented. Other national and international documents which are related to and follow up the PISA results are also explored in order to identify possible causes of the results, as well as the impact on Irish national educational strategies that followed. Intergovernmental strategies for emergent and early literacy will also be presented in this chapter. The results that stem from these documents helped put my interest in early literacy and libraries’ role into context, and motivated me to learn more about storytime in an Irish context.

2.1 PISA results

PISA was launched in 2000, by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) as part of their intergovernmental strategy to promote policies which aim to improve economic and social situations for people around the world (OECD, 2019B). The latest PISA survey took place in Spring 2018 and included over 5,000 Irish 15-year-old students across 157 national post-primary schools (“PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment”, 2019), in addition to the international faction. However, the results of the evaluations will not be released before 3 December 2019, and so the basis for this thesis are the results of the previous cycles.

According to PISA, reading literacy refers to “understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (OECD, 2016B, p. 49). Through OECD’s indicator (OECD, 2019A), I was able to summarise the Irish results from the PISA reading literacy assessment from all published cycles in the table below, which illustrates a trend of decline in reading literacy skills among Irish students every few years (OECD, 2019A).

![Graph showing points scored in PISA cycles 2000-2015]

Table 1. (This figure does not represent the latest results, which are set to be released in December 2019).
In the first cycle, in 2000, Irish students scored 527 in the reading literacy assessment. The following cycle, in 2003, showed a drop down to 515 points among Irish students. 2006 reported a turnover by 2 points up to 517, before falling again in 2009 down to 496 points - the lowest Ireland has ever scored to this date. This trend turned in 2012, in which that year’s students scored 523 points. However, the following cycle in 2015 reported another dip down to 521 points (see Table 1 above).

In a different report, the OECD attest that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is a main contributing factor to how students perform in PISA, as well as in later education (OECD, 2016A, p. 298). It reported that in the countries where students disclosed to have attended at least one year of pre-primary education, tend to display higher performance scores than those who had not (Ibid.). PISA stresses the importance of early childhood education, particularly for children with an immigrant background, however availability and accessibility of early childhood education, as well as parental preferences and socioeconomic backgrounds can affect the likelihood of attending pre-primary education. Immigrants, especially newly so, often do not share the same liberties with regards to economic status or social prospects. According to PISA, one year of pre-primary education equals scoring 49 points higher in the reading assessment amongst immigrants (OECD, 2016A). Furthermore, enrolling children in early childhood education boosts literacy and mathematical skills and prepares children to succeed in formal schooling, which contributes to mitigating social inequalities and leading a better quality of life (OECD, 2016A, p. 298, 300f).

Shiel, Kelleher, McKeown & Denner (2016, p. 44f) further report that student background, such as parental education, economic, social and cultural status (ESCS), level of interaction with parents, accessible books in the home, number of siblings, language spoken at home and more are all factors that affected the Irish students’ performance results in PISA 2006. However, the authors do not highlight a possible correlation between several of these characteristics. For example, students who did not speak English or Irish at home, scored significantly lower in that cycle (499.6 compared to 510.8). This group is likely to consists of immigrants, if another language other than Irish or English is spoken at home. Uprooting and settling in a new country is often accompanied with lower economic and social status, parental education (in English), knowledge of the new culture or how the system works and level of interaction with parents as they are often preoccupied with assimilating and work. However, the benefits and opportunities of multilingualism, in life outside of the PISA assessment, remain unacknowledged by Shiel et al (2016, p. 44f).

The PISA results lead to changes to the UNESCO Education Sustainable Development Goal and education reform for children, young people and adults in the participating countries (Shiel et al. 2016, p. 44f; Education for Sustainable Development Goals: learning objectives, 2017). The aim of this thesis is to, using the PISA results as a departure point, explore the possibilities of libraries’ reading promotion events aimed at young children in boosting early literacy and how this impacts later school results and life outcomes. Some of the questions in the interview guide (Appendix A) are formulated specifically to explore how familiar public librarians are with the PISA results and their position on enhancing literacy and the correlation to early literacy reading promotion.
2.2 EU early literacy directives

On an EU level, both United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) stress the libraries’ role and potential in boosting early literacy and learning (UNESCO, n.d.; Farmer & Stricevic, 2011). UNESCO concludes that, outside of family and school setting, libraries also have a largely beneficial impact on the development of literacy. Public libraries offer reading and literacy promotion programmes to even the youngest citizens of our society. According to UNESCO and IFLA, developing literacy skills requires continuous practice, and the work of schools and parents in teaching these skills could be complemented with library visits (Ibid.). Different library types across the world (public libraries, school libraries, academic libraries, and prison libraries) all work to promote reading and literacy through different measures on national and local levels, and this service, which is free in many countries, should be taken advantage of (UNESCO, n.d., p. 7).

2.3 Irish national documents

In direct response to the results of the Irish students in PISA’s evaluations, Ireland’s government set out to reprioritise and reformulate early childhood education and literacy strategies. The national documents below highlight the importance of early literacy in an Irish context.

In 2011, the Irish Department of Education and Skills (DES) launched the National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011-2020 (DES, 2011). In DES’s report, the Irish Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn, TD describes why it is important to set new targets to “improve the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy.” (Department of Education and Skills, 2011, p. 5). The current ECEC climate requires re-prioritising literacy and numeracy, which are crucial tools to children’s development as individuals, and to participate in modern society and democratic processes (Ibid.). Strong literacy and numeracy skills will contribute to a less ignorant and dangerous society, and a more fact-based, just and equitable society, the enrichment of cultures and diversity, and it will open up countless opportunities - whether professional, personal or political - for citizens in modern society (DES, 2011).

While ECCE is at a tipping point in Ireland, Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) advocate a reform within the faction on behalf of children and families in Ireland (Early Childhood Ireland, 2015). ECI’s vision shifts the focus from higher performance on exams, to the individual needs of children and families, and providing an educational landscape in Ireland in which “every young child is thriving and learning in quality early childhood settings.” (Ibid., p. 2).

Apart from ECI, several more Irish divisions aim to optimise national ECEC practices that are relevant to early literacy enhancement. The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed Aistear, an Irish Early Childhood Curriculum Framework for children from birth to six years. The previously introduced DES also developed Siolta, the National Quality Framework For Early Childhood Education and Care. Barnardos Ireland is a partner organisation under the EU Fund for European Aid
to the Most Deprived (FEAD) Programme which is administered by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and supported by the EU (“Our Services”, 2019). These all work to better early childhood and school age childcare services in Ireland (“Introduction - Information”, n.d.). In 2009, the Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) developed Aistear in collaboration with practitioners, children, parents, experts in education and training, researchers, and policy makers to ensure that the framework is built on practice in early childhood settings, informed by research, and follows national policies and legislations (“Aistear”, 2019; NCCA, 2009). Together with Barnados’ report Early Literacy and Numeracy Matters by early childhood specialist Geraldine French (French, 2013, p. 37ff); A Balanced Approach to Literacy Development in the Early Years (Literacy Working Group, National Educational Psychological Service, 2015, p. 22); ECI (“Literacy and Numeracy”, n.d.); the Irish National Adult Literacy Agency (“Family literacy in Ireland”, n.d.); and the NCCA’s Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education (3-8 years) (NCCA, 2012, p. 120ff), they strongly highlight the benefits of storytelling, both at home and in early childhood education and library settings, hailing it as an activity which has a large impact on developing oral language skills.

According to the Professional Pedagogy Project (PPP), an investigation of early childhood education in Ireland by Donegal County Childcare Committee (DCCC) and in support by Pobal, Siolta and Aistear, and which also shares a socio-cultural view of learning, it is important for children’s well-being to develop a healthy and balanced learning approach which, as they grow, will help them develop a healthy sense of their identity and self-worth, evolve their independent thinking and curiosity for exploring, as well as advance their communication skills (DCCC, 2012, p. 59). The report also stresses the benefits of playful learning by the use of multimodal devices when reading aloud with young children for the above developmental processes (Ibid., p.9ff). As PPP states, the foundation of self-worth and self-esteem is laid from day one in life, when babies develop attachments with the adults who care for them, the people they look up to, and the educators in their lives (Ibid., p. 25f). As will be highlighted by other authors in Chapter 3, PPP also argues that “A child will become a reader for life not by merely learning to read but when he [or she] has developed an interest and passion for the process of reading,” and in order to do so, it is important to make reading activities enjoyable and interesting from the earliest age (DCCC, 2012, p. 15).

Two other Irish governmental documents were explored: the new national Irish public library strategy (Department of Rural and Community Development, 2018B) and the national report, Young People And Public Libraries In Ireland: Issues And Opportunities, by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2018). The latter highlights the importance of dedicated spaces, wide-ranging collections which include multimodal formats, literacy promotion programmes and creative activities for today’s children and youth at local libraries (Department of Children and Youth Affairs, 2018). In addition, the new public library strategy urges public libraries around the island to prioritise reading promotion activities for children, with following implementations (Department of Rural and Communities Development, 2018B):

- Providing appropriate and dedicated spaces staffed by specialised librarians;
• Providing a separate budget allocation for young people’s book fund;
• Developing study facilities and homework clubs;
• Providing greater online services and support;
• Developing closer collaboration between schools and public libraries, and school libraries where they exist;
• Promoting the benefits of literacy and reading development for all ages and provide opportunities for people to develop as literate and informed individuals;
• Delivering a national literacy and reading programme, such as “Right to Read”, through a core set of services and resources;
• Prioritising ICT equipment and software to facilitate this;
• Activities such as workshops relating to learning, writing or performing music and/or drama;
• Promoting and supporting lifelong learning.

However, it is unclear whether these official directives from the government are all compulsory for every public library in the country. In a previous case study for a course paper, I found that while most aspects were met by the selected library, it had not implemented some key changes which would help modernise the branch (O’Driscoll, 2019). According to the librarian who was interviewed for the study, this was due to cuts in funding. This caught my attention, as the minister of the Irish Department of Rural and Community Development (DRCD), which oversees public library development and strategies in Ireland, had announced in mid 2018 that supplementary funding would be allocated to public libraries in Ireland by the Irish government (Ibid.). However, according to the announcement, which included certain details, the most prioritised libraries are those situated in built-up areas (with at least two of the libraries being new state-of-the-art libraries in higher-income areas), rather than libraries in rural communities in need of support and modernisation, as is the DRCD’s core objective (DRCD, 2018B).

Nonetheless, some of the questions in the interview guide (Appendix A) have been devised to learn the scope of influence that national governmental strategies do have on the selected public libraries’ day-to-day practice or curriculum, and the librarians’ storytime events.

3 Literature review

The field of LIS and the librarian profession must be ever evolving in order to keep up with the modern users’ information needs. In order to gain further knowledge on early literacy development and insight into what library reading programmes for early learners looks like today, previous research in this area was studied.
There are seven previous studies on library or school reading promotion work aimed at young children which have helped outline this study and will be presented below. These studies are of varying perspectives and a few different focuses. What they all have in common is that they are LIS Bachelor and Master studies from the time period 2009-2018, which highlight reading promotion work.

In Det litterära spädbarnet - en undersökning av folkbibliotekens program för de allra yngsta barnen [The literary baby - an investigation of the library programs for very young children], Molin (2009) studied six Swedish public libraries with regard to their reading promotion programmes for infants, to identify how these impact this age group, and how the infant’s perspective and needs are taken into consideration when designing and implementing reading promotion activities. Molin’s study provided fresh insight and theories that I had not come across in previous papers. Molin (2009) implemented a qualitative approach, focussing only on interviews and interview knowledge, whereas this study includes observations and participation in the storytime sessions to complement the interview knowledge.

In a case study of library’s use of new technology in reading promotion, Hanna Agebjörn and Mia Nilsson (2013) explored how modern technologies can be utilised as literacy and reading tools in reading promotion activities by libraries. The authors observed a project which was developed by a Swedish public library in collaboration with a local preschool, called A fairytale workshop - making my own e-book, as well as interviewed the professionals involved in the project. At the workshop sessions, the involved librarians and preschool teacher led the five-year-old participants in creating their own fairytales using apps on an iPad over the course of five weeks. The authors found that the digital technologies (apps and iPad) that were used may afford both positive and negative consequences. They did identify that the project contributed to further understanding of and enhancing the preschoolers’ literacies. Although Agebjörn & Nilsson’s study (2013) revolve around an older age group than both Molin’s (2009) and the present thesis’, it has influenced this study in regards to exploring the impact of digital technologies on early literacy throughout this study. Agebjörn & Nilsson (2013) put their case study in a wider societal context as they also problematise the PISA results and its implications on reading promotion work.

In a thesis about literacy and librarians’ motivational reading strategies towards children and teenagers, Elin Halin and Michelle Lampis Mörck (2014) also explore the decrease in literacy among Swedish 15-year-olds (most countries illustrated a decrease rather than improvement) that was reported by the PISA results, and how school and public librarians can help to change that trend. The study is based on qualitative interviews with school librarians who cater for 13 to 18-year-old-students at Swedish schools (högstadie- och gymnasiärskurser), as well as public librarians who cater for children and young adults of all ages. As well as differences in methods, choice of user group and respondents, Halin and Lampis Mörck explore all the opportunities provided by libraries and librarians, rather than one specific event. This study also introduced me to relevant sociocultural theoretical frameworks and provided insight into how reading and learning development progresses beyond early years, in adolescence.

Similarly to Halin and Lampis Mörck, Benatti (2015) also examines the reading promotion work of school librarians in terms of direct and indirect measures incorporated by the school libraries to increase reading among students. The study also explores how the participating school librarians can measure the impact of their reading promotion services. While this study also focuses on an older user group and a different
library type, a similar method strategy of both interviews and observations has been recreated in this multi-case study.

In a different study on librarians’ reading promotion work for children, Bengtsson and Svärd explore how children’s librarians work toward reading and literacy promotion for children, and more specifically, boys between the ages of 9 to 12. The study looks at what the librarians’ goals are and how these are implemented into reading promotion methods. Although the user group in focus here is different, Bengtsson and Svärd’s study (2015) contributed to identifying key themes within reading promotion work such as signage and placement of books, inclusion, implementation of research, and discerning the importance of reading - all of which are encompassed into this study.

In Anne Sjölin’s study (2016), storytime is examined at three middle to large public libraries in southern Sweden. The study covers a similar age group, includes many themes which are relevant to the topic of both studies, and worked as a guide when outlining the interview and observation guides in this study. Sjölin also contributed to the research strategy of this study, and both studies share a sociocultural perspective which places the storytime leader/librarian as the focal source of knowledge in understanding the operation and phenomena that is storytime. Although the libraries have several differences - some of these being the size and population, financial situations, and character of the cities in which they are located - when it comes to their storytime programmes, they share similar policies. Sjölin found that storytime at all three libraries are rooted in a literacy promotion framework which aims to promote not only reading but also visiting the library and utilising their services. At all three libraries, different props or technologies were used to enhance the storytelling and the children’s interest. The props and technologies that were used, were also enhanced by the storytimes’ spaces at two of the libraries, which contributed to setting the scene during the storytelling as well as enhance the focus on the reading. However, Sjölin’s thesis is a comparative study between the three chosen libraries with a major focus on the role and impact of the story room or story space on learning development. Sjölin also highlights how the use of technology, and the interactions between the children, as well as between the children and the story leader, can boost literacy, which is also of interest to me and is explored in this study.

In their study, Staf and Svidén (2018) examine a different reading promotion programme, called Bookstart, for children aged 1-3 at the public library in Landskröna, in south Sweden. Bookstart is an outreach reading promotion programme in which the librarians reach out to “preschools, open preschools and child health care centers to develop a long-term reading promotion collaboration with the institutions.” (Ibid., p. 2) This study highlights the collaboration between professionals from different fields. The authors seek to better understand the work behind such a collaboration for the involved professions, and the opportunities that stem from them for young children and families in Sweden. The programme was launched in 2015 and aims to encourage parents to talk and read to their children from a young age to support their language development. This study highlights research on “family literacy” and the impact of having reading role models at home who encourage and regularly read with their children. Another important issue which is highlighted is one that is overlooked in the other studies: reaching out to and supporting immigrant families and children to read through collaborations like Bookstart. The respondents (preschool teachers, librarians and nurses) in this study stress the importance of preserving the children’s first languages and encouraging and supporting multilingualism through various measures (Staf &
This topic is of special interest to me in other ways than on a professional level, as I have personal experience of being an immigrant child in Sweden and growing up in an environment where my mother tongue was encouraged and supported throughout the Swedish educational system; and now when raising a bilingual child of my own in an English speaking country.

These studies have guided me in my method choices and approach in this study. The PISA results and existing national and international guidelines presented above are studied in relation to how they may influence storytime at Irish public libraries. This study differs from all above studies in that it explores the Irish storytime and library reading promotion landscape. While Bengtsson and Svärd (2014), Halin and Lampis Mörck (2014) and Benatti (2015) are concerned with older user groups, they provided important insight into this research topic and how to research it. Molin (2009), Agebjörn and Nilsson (2013), and Sjölin (2016) introduced to this study relevant research and theoretical frameworks, relevant data collection strategies, and helped identify recurring themes in reading promotion work for this age group. Staf and Svidén (2018) are concerned with how different institutions can collaborate with reading promotion programmes and raise noteworthy issues that are of both personal and professional interest to me and contributed to this study with further insight on this field of research. As previously explained, storytime and similar library reading promotion events is a largely unexplored field in Ireland which mainly consists of reports by the aforementioned Irish national departments. This is the reason I have looked to previous theses on storytime in Sweden. These have contributed to this thesis with interesting insights on how to study this topic, and their strategies have been adapted to an Irish context. Despite expressing a personal interest in the topic, it is my intention to remain objective throughout this study, all the more so with regards to my use of Swedish studies. I believe it to be of importance to not draw comparisons or predetermined expectations in this study based on the studies done in Swedish libraries - this would be counterproductive, considering the differences in governmental agendas and national infrastructures in the two countries. Additional differences in culture and parents’ perspective on childcare may also contribute to differences in storytime participation and study results. The implications of such differences may arguably influence my definition of key concepts in this study, and my interpretation and discussion of the study’s empirical data. Although due to the scarce research on storytime in Ireland, appointing the results of Swedish early literacy programmes as an archetype against which to measure the findings of this thesis may seem as solace in this unprecedented quest, it is not my intention to do so. Instead, the tried Swedish research strategies will be assimilated in this pilot study and the findings will be explored and analysed against theories on early reading and learning development processes, rather than held up against the findings of the above studies. In the following subchapters research by more established contributors to this field will be presented. Both types of research will be discussed intermittently throughout the rest of this thesis in terms of their methods or findings on early literacy development and early reading promotion library programmes.

### 3.1 Research on storytime at libraries

There are several institutions on different levels in today’s society which actively work with literacy and reading promotion for children and young adults and aim to help the world’s population develop their literacy skills and reach their full potential (Dolatkhah,
Hultgren & Johansson, 2017). In taking part in such motivating practices and encouraging settings, children grow into people who are able to participate in education, work, social life, and develop their own interests, realise the value in lifelong learning. At political level, reading is linked to being a way to develop as individuals a sense of critical thinking, gain democratic values and understanding of democratic processes, and promote awareness of the experiences of other members of society and inequalities or accessibility barriers, which is often declared to be an asset for democracy (Dolatkhah et al, 2017).

One of the active actors campaigning for literacy and reading promotion for children is the library. This section will present different examples of how libraries work with reading promotion and help boost literacy around the world.

The children's library, which refers to a division in libraries that holds all children’s and young adult books and additional equipment, is one of several social settings which many children encounter today (Rydsjö et al, 2010). Some children accompany their parents to the library for the first time merely weeks after being born. As they grow older, a number of factors influence how children (and later, as adults) continue their relationship with the library: such as their parents’ relationship to reading and the library, the attitudes of their peers towards reading, encouragement from teachers, accessibility and availability, available stock and formats, cost of books, and technological advances. And as new generations grow up, libraries work to grow and progress too, and lay down foundations to better meet the needs of all their users. For example, children’s libraries and children as readers are a paramount part of the public library’s democratic mission to help all people in society to be able to participate and contribute toward a more progressed, educated and inclusive world. To this end, librarians continue to build relationships with schools, teachers, and parents, to find ways to collaborate on reading promotion programmes for children, and keep improving the service. Many libraries also continuously work on the physical children’s library space to create a setting which reflects the interests and needs of their users. In many countries library services such as storytime are free and are constantly developing to reflect the needs of the population and society.

Children's library activities aim to support children's development, and thus children’s empowerment (Rydsjö et al, 2010). The term empowerment can be interpreted in many ways and implemented for different purposes (Johansson, 2010). However, in relation to children's libraries the concept is an attitude, a set of values including self values, that should be mediated by children’s libraries (Rydsjö et al, 2010).

In a study of librarian’s work for early literacy, Hedemark and Lindberg (2018) conduct a study on the children’s librarians’ work to help enhance the development of emergent literacy among young babies. The empirical data is based on transcripts from a focus-group interview with seven children’s librarians, as well as field notes from observations of program sessions at three Swedish public libraries. The results, which were interpreted through a qualitative content analytical lens, revealed that corporality - physical activities like dancing to nursery rhymes and enacting the stories that are read can promote communication and participation for the little ones in literacy practices. Hedemark and Lindberg find that literacy activities in libraries that are aimed at the early childhood years often do involve body and physical participation. According to the children’s librarians participating in Hedemark & Lindberg’s study, this process stimulates early literacy development, and engages both the children and parents in this process. In this illuminating study the authors tell us, “the kind of learning taking place
in library programs is to a great extent practical, material, and concrete in its nature.” (Hedemark & Lindberg, 2018, p. 438)

Sandin (2011) highlights the concepts participation, inclusion, cooperation and attitudes within the library’s reading promotion work and how each can affect the outcome and what young children and families learn from the experience. Sandin also advocates that the development of children’s library activities is a work that will never end, explaining that librarians will never fully finish their work and find one-size-fits-all methods and tools, as people and society are under constant development and moving forward to different times and routines etc. This is why projects, small-scale as well as wide-reaching, continue to play an important role in encouraging and contributing to the overall reading promotion effort. This is also why it is important to question, provoke and inspire new change within the children’s library organisation in order to better cater for its patrons in new ages (Ibid.).

Johansson and Hultgren describe the children’s library reading promotion mission as follows (in my own translation and summarisation):

> It is one of our oldest cultural institutions for children. In Sweden, from the time the first children’s library opened up its doors approximately 100 years ago, children have diligently used its services and they have become established as one of the library’s most prioritised user groups. The work that children’s librarians accomplish is essentially an interplay with the surrounding society, conditions and expectations relating to children’s development and educational and personal progress. Through this interplay, and in the meeting with their user group, as well as established national and international guidelines and children’s rights formulations, children’s librarians continuously develop their identity, goals and work strategies. An important consideration in their mission is the UN’s Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has been in focus in the last decade in Sweden in the ongoing work of developing children’s library strategies and mission formulations to improve its services and include more people. The convention speaks for including the child’s perspective and developing methods which incorporate participation, inclusion and empowerment of children as well as creating designated spaces for them - which are all part of the children’s librarian’s identity. Because society is constantly developing, it is important that children’s libraries transform with it while keeping a children’s perspective and are reflecting the needs of the children of today. (Johansson & Hultgren, 2018, p. 21)

Johansson and Hultgren highlight the role of not only people, but the space and objects, as actors which influence the impact of children’s libraries. A children’s space conveys a message of who the room is for and what the library’s values and services are. A children’s space which encourages inclusion and participation is referred to by the authors as a “möjliggörande miljö” which translates to an enabling environment (Johansson & Hultgren, 2015, p. 108f). This also relates to the sentiment of UNESCO (n.d., p.7), Rydsjö et al (2010), Sjölin (2016), Hultgren and Johansson (2017). An enabling environment is achieved a child’s perspective is maintained while designing the space and its activities in a way that will reflect that child’s perspective (Johansson & Hultgren, 2015). This includes every detail, such as the soft carpets to soften the unpreventable stumbles of early walkers and toddlers, toys, the low shelves that easy to
reach, places to crawl into and (low) objects to attempt climbing up on, even the glass window that reaches down to the floor - every detail illustrates that it is a space in which even the very youngest members of our society can participate, move freely, explore and become familiar with the library. All the while catering the parents who are also playing on the floor with their children or keep a watchful eye from a comfortable seated area (because parents deserve comfort too) (Ibid.).

The children’s space should then be supplemented with reading promotion events such as storytime. In Läsa med de yngsta [Reading with the littlest ones], Johansson and Hillén (2016, p. 16) summarise the objectives of reading promotion events for young children:

1) To stimulate children’s love of reading and interest in books,
2) To stimulate creativity both in children both also the staff,
3) To promote learning,
4) Empower children by helping them to define their sense of self, develop their ability to relate to and empathise with individuals in other situations, and develop their language skills and confidence in expressing themselves,
5) Provide children with experiences which stimulate their fantasy, curiosity, closeness to stories and reading, and strengthen their sense and relationship with the local community, no matter their age or language ability,
6) To inspire parents through stimulating their interest in books and reading to read to even their youngest children and visit the library,
7) To promote collaboration between preschools, libraries and parents.

In Sjölin’s study where the importance of a storytime space designed from a child’s perspective is also highlighted, the author describes the intent of storytime to aid language development, out of which future readers will be born. At such a young age, this is achieved by foremost providing toddlers with positive experiences. This will result in the new generations associating storytime with positive library visits and experiences with books, which is the definition of reading promotion (Sjölin, 2016).

In a Canadian 2009 study, Stooke and McKenzie (professors at The University of Western Ontario with backgrounds in working with young children’s literacy and family literacy respectively) investigated library and community programmes for infants and toddlers and their accompanying adults, through fifty observations at eight different libraries in two Canadian provinces. Based on the insights gained during those observations, the authors concluded that the programmes which they attended served as “contexts for institutional work associated with Canadian policy goals for early childhood education and care (ECEC),” in that they effectively promoted early childhood literacy in their programmes (Stooke & McKenzie, 2009, p. 657).

In an ethnographic study of storytime at five Swedish public libraries, Hedemark (2017) explored the interactions between storytime participants as well as their interactions
with different materials used in the storytelling session. During nine observations and interviews with librarians at the libraries, the author found that the practice of storytime in Sweden today are bound by previous, old-fashioned literacy practices, and that there exists “a distance between policies and practice.” (Hedemark, 2017, p. 121) It was also concluded that the librarians’ at the selected libraries displayed “very high ambitions” to enhance this group’s participation, emergent literacy and interest in books and libraries, but that these ambitions may sometimes be stonewalled, as interactions between participants and storytelling materials are “complex and intricate” at this age and the librarians expectations may not always be realistic (Ibid.). Hedemark states that further studies in this area are needed in order to ensure storytime’s impact on emergent literacy and to prepare practicing librarians to the interchangeable nature of young babies and toddlers. Based on my literature review and coming up short on studies on Irish library reading promotion events or specifically storytime, I believe that a more research on this topic needs to be done in this part of the world as well.

### 3.2 Research on emergent or early literacy

According to Hall, Larson and Marsh (2003), early literacy is a recent, still evolving, and complex social practice that is linked to the long-established cultural, linguistic and child development research fields, with roots in sociocultural perspectives.

Early literacy has several definitions and meanings. Only two decades ago, children’s literacy referred to the mastering of reading and writing, and communication by these skills. In recent times, however, the definition of literacy has evolved and become more complex. According to Björklund (2010), it is impossible to limit literacy, through which humans acquire knowledge and understanding of the world, to merely reading and writing. Today it is possible to communicate and interact with one another and the world through texts, symbols, images, sounds and various combinations of these. Every new generation redefines language and communication processes thanks to the knowledge that is passed on to them (Ibid.), their adaptability, and other qualities which are becoming more and more valued by society in modern times, such as inventiveness, individuality and expressiveness. Thus, all the different ways of communicating must be acknowledged and the concept of literacy, even early literacy, needs to be redefined. Not acknowledging or including new technologies in formal (early) learning settings and literacy practices results in ignorance - lack of knowledge among populations of their potential and lack of understanding of the repercussions of not having these skills. In modern day, digital literacy and critical thinking are concepts that should be included in the definition of literacy. This attitude to literacy and the wider range of communication skills which are apparent and required in today’s society is also supported by Fast (2009). In her book, Fast emphasises the importance of expanding the concept of literacy in ECEC settings, stating that including nontraditional definitions of literacy and communication in early literacy practices, will encourage young children, in particular multilinguals, to develop their inherent communication skills and languages.

The previously mentioned NCCA report *Literacy in Early Childhood and Primary Education* (3-8 years), to which field experts Eithne Kennedy, Elizabeth Dunphy, Bernadette Dwyer, Geraldine Hayes, Thérèse McPhillips, Jackie Marsh, Maura O’Connor and Gerry Shiel all contributed, define early literacy as follows: Reading fluency which is supported by the development of word recognition and reading
comprehension, and the construction of meaning from texts (NCCA, 2012). The official and more explicit definition by the Irish DES reads: “the capacity to read, understand and critically appreciate various forms of communication including spoken language, printed text, broadcast media, and digital media.” (DES, 2011, p. 8) Some of the contributing factors which affect the nature, foundation and use of literacy in early childhood, and the resulting literacy skills, are considered to be social, cultural, political and economic situations (Hall et al, 2003).

As Staf and Svidén (2018) highlight the important role of “family literacy” and having reading role models at home, Hultgren (2015) further explains why the reading interest and literacy of children and young adults are strongly influenced by having or lacking reading role models. In order for a young reader to have a fulfilling and rich reading experience which will encourage them to read again, they must have access to texts on topics that interest them. Oftentimes it is thanks to a knowledgeable intermediary such as the child’s parent(s), a teacher, librarian, relative or friend that an especially interesting book finds the hands of a child (Ibid.). In an overview of research on reading for pleasure, Hultgren also identifies other factors that influence children’s interest in books and development of literacy skills, which are: gender, age, social background, ethnic background, family (relationships and situations), and school (teachers and school librarians, available means and priorities, and peers) (Ibid.). Hultgren also refers to Stanovich’s Matthew effect which was introduced earlier in this study in Chapter 1.1. According to Stanovich, children who grow up in an environment where reading is valued, encouraged and supported through access to books and parents who prioritise reading and literacy, will most likely develop an interest in books themselves and develop better reading and literacy skills (Stanovich, 1986). This is supported by a 2004 study by Strommen and Mates, where students who were avid readers reported that they inherited their interest in reading from other people in their surroundings (Hultgren, 2015); while students who identified themselves as reluctant readers reported that they did not have anyone in their circles who actively encouraged reading and lacked family members who were able to share reading suggestions and books that might have been of interest to them (Hultgren, 2015). Hultgren also suggests that parents’ approach to reading is also important, more specifically that parents facilitate their children’s reading in an encouraging way, rather than pressurise (Ibid.).

In a study on behalf of the official journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), Hutton and colleagues (2015) studied the effect of parent-child reading on cognitive development. According to Hutton et al, it is widely recommended to begin the practice of shared reading (parent-child reading) from birth, as there are “direct, lasting benefits for the developing brain.” (Hutton et al, 2015, p. 467) In their study, the authors conducted a longitudinal study of brain development of 19 children. The children who participated in the study were between the ages of 3 and 5, born after a full-term gestation, healthy, right-handed, and native English speakers - 38% were nonwhite, 55% female, with a median household income of $42 500. The reason for these research population requirements was that they reflected the real life US population at the time (Ibid.). In the study, the children underwent blood oxygen level dependent functional magnetic resonance imaging (BOLD fMRI) using a story listening task. The results showed that regular exposure to reading correlated with “neural activation in the left-sided parietal-temporal-occipital association cortex, a ‘hub’ region supporting semantic language processing, controlling for household income.” (Hutton et al, 2015 p. 466) In layman’s terms, Hutton et al were able to verify that little or lack of exposure to reading in the home environment may result in reading disability and lower
oral language skills, while regular parent-child reading in early childhood improves oral language skills and helps shape the developing brain (Hutton et al, 2015). In confirming this, the authors note that this study provides a useful tool in emergent literacy promotion and an insightful eco-bio-developmental blueprint of emergent literacy. Shared reading will be further explored below.

3.3 The three I’s: inclusion, inspiration, involvement

This chapter will present research on the impact of inclusion, inspiration and involvement in early reading promotion activities on early literacy development.

In Including babies and toddlers: a new model of participation, Hultgren and Johansson (2018) propose a new way to measure how young children participate in activities and society as valued members and regardless of age, explain why promoting participation for this age should entail trying to find new ways of including, inspiring and challenging the ever mesmerising mind and abilities of this young age group, and essentially, include these young citizens in the society which they will lead someday. Below, Hultgren and Johansson’s three I’s will be introduced and explain how these concepts can apply to enabling participation in democratic activities such as library reading promotion events to ensure that babies and toddlers get the most out of them.

According to Hultgren and Johansson (2018), inclusion is a prerequisite for participation, or being able to participate, and is manifested in the convenience and accessibility of physical arrangements. For example, is the library free and are the library hours suitable and accessible for families with young children? Are they able to visit the library easily without barriers such as inconveniently placed parking or bus stops? Is the entrance to the library suitable for buggies and wheelchairs, and is there a designated area to leave buggies? Can children see and reach the materials and seats by themselves? Are there accessible toilets and changing facilities available? These and other factors which present barriers experienced by young children or families need to be taken into consideration as a necessary step toward inclusion and participation. Hultgren and Johansson (2017) point out that selecting texts (books) on diverse topics is also a way to include all children and encourage everyone to participate in a reading.

The third concept, Inspiration, is concerned with how inviting or exciting a space is to its intended user group. A space set up specifically to invite the little ones and their parents/guardians to exploring, creative activities, exciting experiences, new challenges and which stimulates the young mind through decor, type and placement of furniture and sitting areas, toys, and technologies that can add new sound and/or light effects to storytelling, can encourage young children, and their parents/guardians, to feel looked after and at home at the library (Hultgren & Johansson, 2018).

According to Hultgren and Johansson, involvement refers to involving the user group in creating an activity or setting up a space. For the sake of this study, I would like to include parents/guardians’ involvement and participation as an important variable which helps young children feel valued, boosts their confidence and encourages them to explore the space and the activities in it (Ibid.).
3.4 Multimodal reading and learning

In recent years both early literacy research and practices have shifted from the traditional linear reading at parent and toddler storytime at the local library, to exploring the benefits of digital technologies on literacy events. Research on the latter has especially become more and more recurring; while in practice, the use of digital technologies in public library reading promotion programmes for small children has been slower to takeoff, and furthermore, there is a lack of studies done on storytime in an Irish context leaves gaps in knowledge for researchers and professionals who are assigned with managing storytime at Irish libraries. After initial inquiries on the use of digital technologies at storytime events at larger public libraries around Ireland, I came to the realisation that Irish libraries in general do not integrate digital technology with early literacy promotion. And as such, it is my hope that this thesis will highlight this issue and contribute to future studies in this area.

In *Att stimulera läsintresse med stöd av digitala redskap* [To stimulate reading interest with the support of digital tools], Glimstedt, Elber, Hulgnen and Johansson (2015) argue that digital technologies may help to encourage children to read and improve children’s literacy. Glimstedt et al suggest that there are two possible approaches to using digital tools as a form of learning: 1) a technology-centred approach, and 2) a reading stimulating approach. A technology-centred approach is necessary in certain contexts where it is important for children to learn how to use a technology in a constructive and educational environment. A reading stimulating approach is optimal in order to promote reading interest by using digital technologies to create an interactive as well as inclusive reading experience (Ibid.).

Author Jason Boog (2015) proposes three additional ways of making storytime more interactive. Boog claims that pointing out and naming objects, characters or colours, making dramatic sounds and voices that reflect the emotions or moods of characters or situations develops a baby’s understanding of different situations and helps boost their emotional IQ. By reading your baby’s body language or expressions one can know that they are either happily participating in the story telling, or becoming restless or unhappy, in the case of the latter, Boog advises the storyteller to move on to a different activity rather than force reading. Otherwise the child might associate reading with feeling unhappy. Boog also recommends sensory books, with flaps, different fabrics and textures, or levers, velcro or buttons and always having a book nearby (in different rooms, car, nappy bag etc) or at hand.

Wessel-Powell, Kargin and Wohlwend (2016) claim that assessing children’s literacy abilities solely based on written evaluations is inefficient and overlooks the other ways in which children know how to communicate today (like sound effects, gestures, images, and slang. Instead they offer a unique method for multimodal storytelling: creating an environment in which children are encouraged to create their own stories and perform them may help them to connect with stories, books and writing on a different level (Wessel-Powell et al, 2006). In Sweden, LIS-students often do a module or course on drama, and so both they, and children, may benefit from this aspect of LIS-education. This idea is similar to the case study which Agebjörn and Nilsson (2013) examined with the purpose to explore how iPads are used in literacy activities for children at the library (presented earlier in this chapter).
In *Storytime in a Digital World: Making a Case for Thinking Outside the Book*, Paganelli (2016) explains the benefits of moving forward from a passive storytime to interactive, and promotes teaching kids basic coding as it will open up many educational and creative opportunities. The author adds that coding may illustrate the difference between reading texts and creating text/content. While researching for respondents for this study, I discovered that one of the libraries participating, along with a few other larger public libraries in Ireland, do offer coding classes for children - however, it is in no way connected to their storytime or other reading promotion programmes for younger children. Bliss (2017) also promotes the benefits of using digital tools in reading promotion programmes and presents empirical data on how implementing digital technologies in a storytime session to co-create a digital story can help lead to a deeper understanding of different disabilities and how to include people with disabilities in a knowledge creation process, which also introduces to them new ways of participating in social and educational practices (Bliss, 2017). Another way through which storytime can become more inclusive is by utilising interactive children’s e-books, which studies have proven to be a useful learning tool for children on the spectrum, dyslexia, concentration difficulties, and visual impairments (Holmgaard et al, 2013; Bergström et al, 2017).

In *Animation: Children, autism and new possibilities for learning*, Holmgaard et al (2013) revealed that interactive, animated stories help children with autism to discover a new and better suited way to learn, a way that retains their concentration by challenging or occupying several of their senses. Holmgaard et al discovered that children who have shown signs of dyslexia and were reluctant readers, showed significantly improved literacy skills thanks to this approach, than through traditional, linear reading (Ibid.). Furthermore, Bergström et al (2017) previously revealed that interactive features in e-books and the screen settings choices of a tablet (such as font size, font colour, background colour, etc.) in e-books is a groundbreaking aid for both children or adults who struggle with reading and literacy, whereas linear reading (noninteractive books) relies on vision and concentration, which excludes children and adults with reading inefficiency due to visual impairments, dyslexia, autism, or other concentration issues. Holmgaard et al stated that the project “In Animation: children, autism and new possibilities for learning” was an eyeopener regarding how difficult learning and expressing oneself can be for someone with autism spectrum disorder, and how much of a difference implementing alternative ways of learning can do:

…In animation, we are offered an opportunity to understand and express ourselves which differs markedly from the spoken language of expression. The two children with autism spectrum disorders in our project have used the animation medium to capture and express their ideas in new ways and were able to experiment and learn storytelling skills in a concrete and pictorial way that they had not previously been seen. Movement, timing and perspective are essential ingredients in animation, and when you learn to deal with these, you learn something about what is most difficult for a person with autism disorders, namely to understand that the world looks different from your perspective than from mine, that your feelings are different than mine, and that emotions can be read in the characters’ movements. (Holmgaard et al, 2013, p. 61f).
In a more recent study, *Improving Learning Outcomes: The iPad and Preschool Children with Disabilities*, Chmiliar (2017) conducted a study in which 8 preschoolers with disabilities (attention, speech and language, social interaction, social behaviour, fine motor skills, confidence, transitions, aged between 3 and 5 years, were given iPads to use in class and at home under 21 weeks. In the report, Chmiliar summarises the results, which also highlight the interactive and learning opportunities that digital technologies provide to young children (Ibid., p.8):

1) Using a tablet and learning apps sparks interest among young children, which as a result, makes the learning more fun and engaging,

2) This also leads to increased concentration and increased interest in learning tasks which are multimodal,

3) An increase in attention quality and span was also observed among the children,

4) Certain apps encouraged a lot of “self-talk” among the children as they were solving tasks, imitating words and repeating phrases that were read back to them, or recording their own voices.

Chmiliar also noted that while some of the young children required help to get started with the tablet, others demonstrated impressive digital efficiency. One of the participants, a 5-year-old, with the identifier “Child 6”, had been disclosed to have difficulties with speech and language, attention span, fine motor skills, and impulsivity, but was recognised to have been using the tablet “in very different ways than the other children in the study. Child 6 changed the picture on her screen and every week a new creation was on display. This child created many stories, pictures, and videos independently. In addition to her creations, Child 6 was observed to make many learning gains. She demonstrated improvements in puzzle completion, shape and color recognition, and counting.” (Ibid. p. 6) It is unclear how many or whether at all any of these skills had been acquired prior to the study and through lengthy experience those apps, and whether there is a correlation to the child’s home environment and her parents social standing and education. However, it remains certain that it is astounding to see such a young child create such a portfolio while experiencing several conditions which hinders what is the old-fashioned definition of literacy. This is only one of many examples which illustrate the benefits of promoting digital literacy from an early age.

Chmiliar (2017) problematizes the scarce amount of research on the use of digital technology to support young children with disabilities. Chmiliar also reported that the participating children’s classroom teacher indicated several concerns about implementing tablets into her classroom: she felt that setting up the iPad with a number of relevant apps and regularly changing the apps was time consuming, and that implementing it into the classroom would also require additional supervision and help monitoring. In another study, by Flewitt, Messer and Kucirkova (2014), iPads were lent to one preschool (3-4-year-olds), a primary school reception class (junior infants in Ireland, 4-5-year-olds) and a Special School (7-13-year-olds) for a two-month period and studied in terms of how they were integrated into learning practices. The authors gained similar results to Chmiliar’s study, in that literacy activities with the iPads stimulated children’s motivation and concentration, increased communication, collaborative interaction, independent learning, and built up the children’s confidence (Flewitt et al, 2014). The authors also observed that these instances led teachers to
re-evaluate the children’s literacy competence (Ibid.). This supports the notion that the previous curriculum, the traditional learning definitions and methods has been failing many children all along and resulted them to be deemed of lower literacy competence by the adults in their surroundings, which in turn may affect an individual’s self-esteem and future. This study exemplifies why it is important to find and accept different ways in which different people learn, and how accepting and integrating multimodal reading and learning will benefit more members of the society than traditional learning and teaching curricula.

As digital technology use is not on this study’s main focus, the research presented on the topic is limited to highlighting the opportunities which arise from integrating technology into early literacy practices; whereas an extensive research review would have further explored any other concerns to do with interacting with digital technologies at a young age.

In several studies, Ofra Korat argues for the benefits of e-books to increase early literacy. In Electronic(E)-books as a Support for Young Children’s Language and Early Literacy, Korat and Segal-Drori describe what makes multimodal reading so efficient:

Reading e-books which incorporate multimedia, such as animation, music, sound effects, illuminated text, and text read out loud by a narrator, provides synergy where there is a joint and integrated operation of two or more factors that might affect the reader. The combined operation of these actions is perceived as more effective than the employment of each factor separately. According to this theory, young children, especially children at risk for language learning, may benefit more by studying in a way which incorporates the use of several types of media than by using only a single medium. (Korat and Segal-Drori, 2016, p. 1)

Shamir, Korat and Fellah (2012) further examine this theory in a study including 110 children aged 5-7, of whom all were reported to have developmental delays which risked resulting in the children falling behind their peers and placed them at risk for learning disabilities. The children were randomly divided into three groups, in which the children read/interacted with the same book¹ in different formats. All three groups were evaluated with regards to emergent literacy skills such as vocabulary, phonological awareness, and Concept About Print (CAP), before and after the test commenced. The first group were giving the e-book, which allowed the children in this group to 1) read the story, 2) read the story with a dictionary, and 3) read the story and play (Shamir et al, 2012). The e-books also allowed for automatic dynamic visuals which transformed the e-book into a motion picture. The second group listened to the book’s printed version read aloud by an adult. And the third group was a control group in which the children participated in their usual kindergarten activities and curriculum. The results of the study revealed that the children in the first group, who interacted with the e-book showed a significantly higher improvement in emergent literacy in terms of vocabulary, phonological awareness, and CAP, compared to the two other groups (Shamir et al, 2012).

The same notions as above were already being researched by experts in this field a decade ago, in 2004, right before the launches of iPhones, Ipads, and Android phones

¹ Confused Yuval by Miriam Roth (2000).
and other tablets (Rajput, 2015). This was also before the rise of Facebook, and all the launches that followed: Reddit (2005), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), Tumblr (2007), Omegle (2009), Pinterest (2010), Instagram (2010), Snapchat (2011), Vine (2013), Periscope (2015) and TikTok (2019) (Wikipedia contributors, 2019). In Literacy Moves On, edited by Janet Evans (2004), several experts in the field explored how using popular culture and new technologies may transform the primary classroom curriculum. Fast forward to today, and one can say that there is no longer a choice. Smartphones, tablets, social media platforms and different apps find their way to the hands and minds of children from an increasingly younger age. In a society so consumed by apps and social media and online networking, it is only a matter of time before our children, too, become as engrossed in it all as we are. After all, they learn from watching us and doing as we do, rather than doing as we say. Evans also discusses the changing nature of literacy in the 21st century, and how children’s out-of-school interests can and should be used to enhance their literacy skills by modernising the school curriculum and integrating children’s interests in the teaching and learning process. In the book, the authors also argue for the benefits of new or different literacies, which alternatively are referred to as digital literacy or technological literacy and are acquired through also integrating multimodal texts into learning curriculums (Evans, 2004). By making learning a fun progress and encouraging children to think about, observe and describe the progress of multimodal text production, talking about critical thinking, and helping children (and parents) find different alternatives in terms of reading sources, children’s literacies and understanding of learning and multimodal production processes will be enhanced significantly (Ibid.). One of the contributing experts, Jackie Marsh, explained already in 2004, that by not including any type of media production or “key aspects of contemporary ways of communicating” in early childhood education settings will have several implications on the children, some of which are that children’s early skills and knowledge of media will be underestimated and, as a result, insufficiently developed in schools (Ibid., p. 31.). Some of the points that were being made in this book are that introducing multimodal texts and integrating their out-of-school interests into children’s education curriculum from an early age will contribute to a playful learning experience that will stimulate their interest in learning and enhance their language development in ways that the educational system is lacking in today (Evans, 2004).

Agebjörn and Nilsson (2013) note that today the word literacy encompasses a wider collection of skills than previously. In their study, the authors explain that in this day and age it is important to not only acquire skills to read and write linear texts, but also become literate in multimodal reading and writing (sounds, images, symbols, non-linear texts etc), how to utilise different technologies for that purpose, and acquire critical thinking in relation to the different tools and information that is now instantly accessible with these new tools (Ibid.). As highlighted in 3.4, being introduced to, and educated in, how to work digital technologies from a young age has shown to have positive effects on both individuals with and without learning difficulties (Bergström et al, 2017; Holmgaard, et al, 2013, 61f; Flewitt et al, 2014, p. 297ff; Shamir et al 2012, p. 45, 51f; Korat & Segal-Drori, 2016, p. 1).

Though the age groups concerned in the studies above range between being slightly or significantly older than that of this study, and some of the studies were conducted within the context of a preschool setting, this research may also be applied to LIS research and practice to further our understanding of different ways in which early literacy may be improved and supported. It is possible that the results from Shamir et al’s (2012) evaluations of the 5-7-year-olds, or Marsh’s 4-year-olds (Evans, 2004) could
also be manifested in even younger children, however it might not be ethically sound to expose this age group to such testing. It is my interpretation that the 4-7-year-olds in the above studies merely exhibited results at this age that they already developed as toddlers.

4 Theoretical framework

Literacy and learning as a phenomenon can best be understood through sociocultural perspectives which draw from language, culture and learning development processes (Hall et al, 2003). The studies presented in Chapter 3 introduced me to sociocultural perspectives, and using this approach I will frame theories and concepts for use in the analysis of the empirical material to identify and better understand the processes and themes of reading development at a very young age, in the context of the storyline sessions held at the chosen libraries. Björklund (2010) maintains that Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural perspective as a framework is often utilised in studies on preschools, schools, and reading and writing literacy learning processes.

4.1 Development and learning from sociocultural perspectives

Säljö (2011) describes learning through a sociocultural perspective as a process which takes place within the individual as a result of his or her interaction with their surroundings. He explains that the difference between the non-literate child’s and the literate child’s perspective and ways of interpreting the world are not caused by biological differences, nor is it mother tongue or thought processes which differentiate the two - but the sociocultural resources which are available and are utilised when we interact with the outside world (Ibid.). It is the combination of how the language-based knowledge society differs and utilises a written language in relation to interaction with other people and in relation to the development of new knowledge which makes us “intellectually equipped to handle reality in special ways.” (My translation of Säljö, 2011, p. 74). Learning takes place when one acquires methods by which to write a language as well as learn how to use necessary tools in order to do so (pencil, paper, typewriter, word processors, or in this day and age, digital technologies and social media) (Ibid.). Säljö claims that all these skills are affected by the environment one lives in and whether the written language is viewed as an important tool for communication and participation in society (He contrasts this with other literate cultures where the spoken language is more valued and prioritised and so the written language falls away) (Ibid.). From a sociocultural perspective, language is evidence of the learning and acquirement of certain intellectual and physical tools. In the context of a library storyline session, one may say that these meetings, on a weekly basis, promote, encourage and instill exactly that.

Both Säljö, as well as Vygotsky before him, argue that learning is a social event, and Vygotsky particularly, that children’s learning happens through interactions with others (peers and adults) in joint activities, and during those activities different cultures and world perspectives and thinking processes are shared (Smidt, 2010).
4.1.1 Literacy and reading

There are different perspectives on literacy, what it is and how it is acquired. Below a few theories relevant to this study’s research topic will be explored.

To understand how people relate to texts (linear and multimodal) and reach literacy, a sociocultural perspective emphasizes that reading should be understood as social and creative processes through which meaning and knowledge is created (Agebjörn & Nilsson, 2013; Smidt, 2010). I believe that storytime can be considered an instrumental practice or forum for learning about both old and new mediating tools from a young age. To explore how storytime may contribute to early literacy, sociocultural theories on children’s development and learning will be applied as analytical tools through which to analyse the opportunities that storytime offers.

Mats Dolatkhah (2010) poses the question of what exactly is promoted by children’s libraries? What is at the center or the core value of a reading promotion event: the interpretation process, alphabetic knowledge, or the book as a medium? He suggests that rather than evaluating each skill and deciding which is most important, children’s libraries should consider all three as important codependent aspects of acquiring literacy (Ibid.).

Through his observations of children in classrooms, Chambers (2012) developed a model of the reading process. He poses the question of why many young people today do not read books and considers six possible explanations: 1) they are from homes where their parents do not read for themselves, did not read aloud to them as young children, and there are very few books; 2) they have very specific preferences when it comes to books (short, easy to read, paperbacks, which portrayed their hobbies or people like themselves); 3) deficit reading skills in relation to books aimed at their age group or from the school curriculum; 4) they lack a connection to books; 5) they have not anyone to talk to about the books that they read; and 6) reading is not prioritised in their homes and schools need to set aside time every day especially for this cause (Ibid.). Chambers’ reading circle describes a process that parents and teachers can use in order to encourage reading among young people. The reading circle can also be applied to reading promotion work by librarians.

![Figure 1, Reading Circle (Chambers, 2011, p. 15).](image-url)
The reading circle starts with selection, which according to Chambers (2011), is always where reading begins. Selection refers to selecting something to read, but also selecting when and where to read, and selecting to read rather than any other activity, and who to talk to about what you read. The selection phase may be affecting by what books are available in the bookstock, whether the book(s) is accessible to a young reader, and the appearance of books (Ibid.). Within a storytime context, this highlights the role of books and the importance of knowing, anticipating or reading into what topics are popular among the participating toddlers, and making them accessible to all toddlers.

The reading stage encompasses not only the activity of following the printed text with your eyes, but also taking the time to read out the words, think about them, imagine the characters, events and scenes that the words describe (Ibid.). Another equally important aspect of reading is hearing the words read aloud, “because we cannot easily read what we have not heard said.” (Chambers, 2012, p. 14) This aspect is the core of all storytimes, reading aloud, and taking time to explain and enact words and scenes.

The response refers to the importance of following up a book, especially one which was exciting and stimulating to read, with a talk or conversation about the book, Chambers (2012) explains. Whether it is “formal talk” or “book gossip” (Ibid.), people are social creatures, and often want to talk about their experience with something that made an impact on them. In the context of storytime, this highlights the importance of the social aspect - the interaction between the toddlers, with their story teller, and their accompanying adult. Which brings us to the core of the reading circle, and what is always at the centre and root of reading - the source of encouragement and the facilitator of reading: the enabling adult.

As Chambers, who as an avid reader as well as a Young Adult author, amusingly puts it, “It is a truth not universally acknowledged that readers are made by readers, and nonreaders are made by nonreaders.” (2012, p. 2). From infancy, children grow up copying adults, especially ones that they admire (Ibid.). They learn and reach different developmental milestones by imitating what we do (smiling (although in the earliest stages this is more of a reflex than a conscious mirroring action), talking, playing with their toys and building blocks, walking, jumping, dancing, playing an instrument, and reading, and everything in between that they produce or accomplish in attempt of those milestones. The same goes for reading interests and habits, beyond that adorable scene that plays out in their ones or twos when they for the first time pick up a book and imitate the way we read it. The enabling adult (at home, school and/or the library) is the key factor in reading development, of encouraging it, teaching it, and enabling it, from infancy throughout their school years and beyond. To this I would like to add, that it is also possible, though perhaps an uncommon occurrence, to be surrounded by nonreaders at home and at school, and through circumstances still find your way to the library and to books. However, as Chambers (2012), Shiel et al (2016), Staf and Svidén (2018), Hultgren (2015), and more, stress, a reading role model is at the core of reading promotion, because as Chambers put it “we cannot easily read what we have not heard said,” (2012, p. 14) and because we cannot know what we have not been shown is possible.
The application of Chambers’ reading circle in the analysis of the empirical data collection will help to identify the processes of early literacy development within the context of storytime sessions at the chosen libraries.

4.1.2 Social interaction and space

Vygotsky argued that language develops in a social context through communication with others (“outer speech”), and subsequently becomes a tool through which to develop one’s own thinking and knowledge (“inner speech”) (Smidt, 2009, p. 58f). As previously described in Chapter 3.3, both Säljö and Vygotsky argue that humans are social creatures and that knowledge is formed through interaction with others, while Hultgren and Johansson (2018), Johansson and Hultgren (2018), Rydsjö et al (2010), Hultgren and Johansson (2017), UNESCO (n.d.), and Sjölin (2016) also highlight the role of a social space, or an enabling environment, on learning. In this study, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theories on the social contexts and interactions and their influence on development and formation of knowledge may help illustrate how storytime contributes to boosting early literacy.

5 Method

Below, this study’s data collection and data analysis methods will be presented. The choice of research methods was based with the study’s problem formulation and research questions in mind. These choices will also be motivated in relation to alternative methods which were initially considered but ultimately dismissed in favour of the research strategy below.

5.1 Research strategy and design: A qualitative multi-case study

This thesis is based on a multiple-case study research strategy which will include empirical data collection by ways of interviews and observations at four different libraries in two counties in Ireland. A multiple-case or multi-case study is optimal for examining the circumstances of more than one case to better understanding an operation or concept (Bryman, 2016). Such cases can either be compared and studied on the basis of their differences, or be selected on the basis of similarity in order to establish patterns and gain knowledge of a common phenomena (Ibid.). This study will adopt the latter approach, which is more open-ended in nature in terms of selection; “Selecting cases in terms of pre-existing difference means that the researcher is suggesting that he or she expects one or more factors to be significant for the focus of the research (...) [whereas with the chosen approach] the researcher is able to say that any differences that are found between the cases in terms of the main focus of the research are likely to be due to the factors that the researcher reveals as important rather than to differences between the cases at the outset.” (Bryman, 2016, p. 61) The aim of adapting this approach and focus is to uncover the factors that the observed storytime events are based upon.
According to Bryman, qualitative research studies are inductive by nature and embody a view of social reality as a constantly shifting emergent property of individuals’ creation and examine how individuals interpret their social world. This inductive approach emphasises both producing new theories, testing current or previous theories, or shedding light on them - a method which allows consideration for individual experiences and truths (Ibid.). With interpretivism for epistemological orientation and constructionism as its ontological orientation, qualitative research is the optimal strategy for a study that aims to learn of a specific social event (storytime at libraries), how it came to be and what are its contributions to our social worlds (early reading and literacy), as construed by the persons who manage such events (the librarians).

Both quantitative and qualitative methods have their advantages and disadvantages. Quantification makes it possible for researchers to precisely track and make sense of a substantial amount of research data in research areas where specificity in numbers are necessary. In studies which emphasise individuality, this approach may marginalise and trivialise the results of few individual experiences in favour of the majority. Instead, for studies such as this qualitative methods are therefore the most compatible research strategy.

5.1.1 Ontological and epistemological views
As this thesis seeks to learn about a specific social event, such as storytime at libraries, and its contributions to social reality through the subjective lens of the librarians who construct the events, these are the epistemological and ontological underpinnings which forms the foundation for the choice of research methods. The nature of the study’s research questions drive both the selection of epistemological and ontological stances (Wildemuth, 2017).

In social sciences, a constructionist ontological perspective emphasises the important role of social actors, or individuals, in the construction of social reality. Researchers of this position essentially are exploring the ways in which “social reality is an ongoing accomplishment of social actors rather than something external to them…” (Bryman, 2016, p. 28f). Additionally, researchers of the interpretivism epistemological theory believe that inquiries of the social world require a different logic in their research strategy than natural sciences - one which reflects the distinctiveness of humans and put value to individuality (Bryman, 2016). Interpretive research, such as this thesis, is of the predisposed hypothesis that social behaviours or situations are inherently subjective and reality is socially constructed by the participants of those settings, wherefore understanding of a social reality is acquired by a subjective and qualitative study of data (Wildemuth, 2017).

5.2 Empirical data collection
Within qualitative and quantitative studies, there are different approaches to collecting empirical data. The basis for the chosen methods will be explained below.
5.2.1 Qualitative interviews

Through qualitative interviews with four storyline leaders at each of the selected libraries, I hope to gain insight into how the libraries work with reading promotion aimed at early literacy. I have chosen to conduct structured interviews, because I believe that following a clear structure lowers the mistakes or error rate, and that carefully designed questions can ensure that the study's research questions are answered. After all, “in the fields of observation chance favors only those minds which are prepared.” (Pasteur, 1954, p. 473). Hence while drafting the interview guide (which is outlined in Appendix A), careful consideration was put into composing as open-ended questions as possible in order to give the respondents room to further develop their answers. The objective of data collection through qualitative interviews is to gain an understanding of a situation through the respondent’s perspective, while open-ended questions prevents the interview from becoming too steered by the interviewer and the answers too limiting (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

As any data collection method, conducting interviews is a strategy with both advantages and disadvantages. Interviews were chosen for this dissertation, as it is an effective way of collecting data on one person’s experience with and knowledge of a concept or situation (Wildemuth, 2017). Having a clear interview guide results in a well-designed plan with questions on key aspects of the research questions (Ibid.).

In Kvalitativa intervjuer [Qualitative interviews], Jan Trost (2005) argues that quantitative methods often focus on answering quantification-oriented questions such as how often something occurs or the quantity (i.e., “how many?”). Because the aim of this study is to gain knowledge on the visions and work behind each library’s storyline events for toddlers through the librarians’ insight and experience, this approach seemed unsuitable in this case study. The reason structured interviews were chosen over other qualitative methods such as unstructured interviews is that with the latter, there is a greater risk of human error and omitting certain subject areas and themes due to not remembering them or the interview session and the topics becoming too steered by the interviewee, rather than the interviewer (Bell, 2011). Gustavsson (2004) also emphasises the advantages of structured interviews with arguments claiming that a clear structure with thoroughly thought-out questions beforehand lead to a higher probability of the study’s research questions being answered, as it leaves less room for themes or certain focusses to get overlooked. This was deemed favourable over semi-structured interviews as well, as the latter is most suitable in instances or studies with a limited focus (Merriam, 1994). Case studies which focus on current social science issues or conditions which the researcher wants to go into in-depth, require a more methodical strategy and data collection plan. An extensive close-up of a specific case offers a deeper understanding of reality and the situation at the chosen place (Budd, 2012). The collected material is then interpreted, rather than tested, in order to form a new understanding, or theory within the specified research field, which is what I hope to do with this thesis (Merriam, 1994; Budd, 2012). How this is done will be presented in Chapters 5.4 and 5.5.

The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix A.
5.2.2 Observations
Within case studies, observations are also a common practice in order to gain further insight and obtain as an informative representation of the case as possible. Therefore, in addition to the interviews, observations will be conducted at all four libraries. The observation guide (see Appendix B) was outlined predominantly with Sjölin’s study (2016) as basis, and further customised to specifically befit this study’s research questions and capture the different elements and themes within them.

The reason observations were chosen as an additional data collection method, is to through visiting the space and event in person, and participating, gain direct experience and knowledge of storytime in an Irish context. Participant observation as a data collection approach offers an opportunity to experience the space, the interactions, participation and communication personally, and observe any potential results (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011, 98f). Barbara Czarniawska (2007) refers to this type of observation and participation as “shadowing”. However, there is a possible downside to this approach, when the presence of observer may influence the situation (Ibid.). Merriam (1994) goes as far as arguing that any type of participation by a researcher, whether passive or active, will always have an effect on the observational occasion. This contributed to my decision to participate in each storytime in my role as a parent accompanying my toddler, and to initiate contact after the participation. This approach was tried at all four libraries. I have found that in some contexts in Ireland meeting face to face seems to be a preferable way to make contact and the way which leads to results.

Participant observation will be further discussed in Chapter 5.4.1

5.3 Selection of participants
When it comes to selection of respondents for a qualitative study, there are no predetermined sets of rules to follow, in the same way that determining quantitative study respondents requires (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011). Nonetheless, transparency and consent are important factors in qualitative studies. Below the selection process will be explained and will include a short description of the chosen libraries.

According to Ahrne and Svensson (2011), there are two selection strategies: random selection, or non-random selection. The participation selection of this study was based on specific criteria: 1) the libraries are located in western Ireland, 2) the libraries offer weekly storytime during school term or all year round, 3) the respondents are the librarians who organise storytime at the libraries. These criteria were necessary for a number of reasons: the first criteria is necessary due to time and funding restraints of the study, while the other two criteria are crucial to answering the study’s research questions, as it seems logical that the libraries and librarians who actively work with reading promotion for toddlers would be the ones who have the most insight into storytime. As previously stated, this study is from the perspective of librarians, for the same reason as above; it made most sense that the librarians at the selected libraries who actively work with reading promotion for toddlers would be the ones who have the most extensive knowledge regarding the reading promotion initiative, the goals and work behind the initiative, as well as insight into any possible results.
Two of these libraries are main county libraries, and two are smaller branch libraries. This is to explore what storytime looks like at different levels, however identifying potential differences is not of significance to focus of this study. All libraries are located in western Ireland, in some of the larger counties in the country. It is feasible to believe that a larger study with observations and interviews at several more libraries (Ireland has 330 active public libraries as of Spring 2019) may lead to greater insight of the storytime practice in an Irish context. However, the limited timeframe and funds made it necessary to focus on a smaller sample and within a reasonable commute distance. As this is a qualitative small scale case study, a sample of four libraries located in some of the more populated places western Ireland should provide a sufficient amount of data to answer the study’s research questions.

This study is especially interested in how libraries work with storytime as an early literacy reading promotion event toward babies and toddlers around the age of 0-36 months - as well as their accompanying parent(s) or guardian - from the librarian’s perspective. This topic is of special interest to the author and the choice of this specific age group reflects my wish to personally learn how to cater to the reading and learning development processes of my own toddler at this stage in her life, in a way that will set a foundation for her future reading and learning habits and practices.

### 5.4 Design and conduct of interviews and observations

As previously disclosed, four librarians were interviewed at each of the selected libraries. The selection of respondents for this study was based on specific criteria which are introduced above. The first step in finding libraries that do storytime was visiting the two counties’ library websites and Facebook pages. Both sources stated that the two county libraries offer storytime, but there was no current information about storytime at other branch libraries. For this reason two lists were compiled of all public libraries in the two counties, whereupon the libraries in the largest of towns or villages were contacted during their opening hours until in total four libraries confirmed that they offer storytime regularly: the two county libraries (CL1 and CL3) and two branch libraries (L2 and L4). Having previous experience with trying to initiate contact by phone and email with libraries regarding participation in a previous course paper and again for a thesis with different research topic, I decided it to be necessary to establish contact and introduce my study in person (as summarised in the interview guide in Appendix A). In the next step, I visited the first and closest selected library with my family to participate in a storytime session (as a parent with my toddler), and after the session I introduced myself and the purpose of my thesis to the storytelling librarian. When requesting if they would be interested in participating in this thesis, the librarian was informed of who will have access to the data collection material and results, as well as their right to withdraw their consent and therefore participation, and view the study in its completed form. This approach was used at all four libraries, in which participant consent was given, and all four interviews took place on the same day, either immediately after storytime or some time later when the librarian would be available again.

The observation and interview at the first library (CL1) was conducted on March 28. This library was visited a second time this past spring, though the second visit was a personal one, as a request from my toddler and this being the closest library at the time
who offered storytime or storytelling. Due to several reasons, the remaining observations and interviews took place at a much later time than initially planned. The observation and interview at the second library (L2) took place on May 2nd, 2019, and at the third library (CL3) and fourth library (L4) both on May 3rd following their storytime on Friday morning (CL3) and afternoon (L4). No notes were taken prior to introducing myself to the storytelling librarians and getting their consent to participate in this study. The durations of storytime, interview and observation varied, depending on the participating children’s needs and moods and the respondents’ availability. The storytime session at CL1 was ca 40 minutes long and was followed by an interview of about 25 minutes. The storytime at L2 was ca 10-15 minutes long, followed by an interview of under 20 minutes. At CL3, the storytime session was also ca 40 minutes, and the interview later that day just over 30 minutes. The storytime session at L4 was ca 25 minutes long with an interview shortly after that was ca 20 minutes long.

As described previously, the interview that followed at each library, was with the same librarian who organises the event. At CL1 and L2, the interviews took place soon after storytime, and the observation guides were filled out subsequently. At CL3 and L4, as the storytelling librarians were not immediately available after storytime, this gave me the opportunity to reflect over the session and fill out the observation guides directly after obtaining the librarians’ consent to participate in the study. The themes in Sjölin’s study (2016) are closely relevant to the research questions in this study and helped thematise the aspects of storytime that I wanted to find answers to in the observation guide (Appendix B). These themes are: Space, Interaction, and Organisation/Practice. According to Sjölin (2016), these themes emerged from the study’s research questions and mission, which are similar to those of the present study apart from being designed to give context to the storytime phenomenon in a Swedish library landscape. This study’s mission is similar to Sjölin’s in that I seek to explore how library’s storytime may boost emergent and early literacy. However, there were aspects that went amiss in the above study that have been incorporated into this study’s observation in order to gain insight on additional features of storytime - such as the correlation between storytime participators, PISA participators and literacy results, whereafter the theme Participants was added to my observation guide (Appendix B), which also consists of questions about the background and status of the participating families.

Previous studies on reading promotion events similar to storytime for young children guided in the choice of data collection and analysis methods and implementation strategy of this study, as well as helped shape the interview and observation guides. Sjölin (2016), Agebjörn and Nilsson (2013), Lampis Mörck and Halin (2014), Bengtsson and Svärd (2015), and Benatti (2015) all contributed outlining the interview guide (Appendix A), while Sjölin (2016) in particular helped shape the observation guide (Appendix B). However, all the above studies examine storytime and reading promotion events in a Swedish context at different Swedish public libraries, and focus on different user groups and/or aspects of the phenomena, hence necessary changes and adaptations were made in order to fit the purpose and research questions of this study. Nonetheless, they have contributed to my study as they provided a research model for this research topic, which I have assimilated in my thesis and adapted to an Irish context.
5.4.1 Criticism of approach

I recognise that observations at a few occasions does not give one a complete comprehension of a phenomena, but rather it is my hope that a combined data collection method consisting of the interviews and observations, will offer insight into how storytime looks at four different public libraries in western Ireland. I am also aware of criticism toward participant observations as a data collection method, such as that of Merriam (1994) who points out that both passive and active participation by the researcher will always have an effect on the observational occasion. Furthermore, my unconventional procedure for approaching the librarians and sharing the purpose of my presence in itself may influence the interview knowledge. In her book, Wildemuth (2017) continues to explain not only the advantages of participant observation, but also the implications on the data results. The author recommends this method for observing “behaviours in the context in which they ‘naturally’ occur,” (Ibid., p. 219) in order to gain knowledge of how, in this case, storytime programmes are organised and their potential impacts on early literacy. However, as Wildemuth points out, the most obvious concern for this method is that the researcher’s role or presence during participant observation may influence the phenomena that is being observed or its characteristics (Ibid., p. 223). Furthermore, a participant observer who is fully involved and an active participant in an event or setting may be considered a true member of the phenomena that is being studied, which is a realistic reflection of my case. This may affect the researcher’s objectivity and neutrality in the presentation and analysis of the observation. In order to maintain a balance between the two roles of the researcher - as the participant and the observer - in this case, Wildemuth argues for the importance of exhibiting empathic neutrality (Ibid., p. 220). The author and editor of the book explains that exhibiting empathy toward the other participants, as well as neutrality within the context of the observation and its subsequent analysis and discussion, will contribute to the researcher gaining both an affective connection with as well as a cognitive understanding of the phenomena or practice (Ibid.). It can also convey to the storytime librarian that the researcher is not in fact present in the event with an agenda to prove a predisposed hypothesis of their storytime events, nor manipulate the setting in any way (Wildemuth, 2017).

As stated before, there is a risk that the study’s unconventional data collection approach, which became most evident when processing the data from L2, in which the observer and her family were the only participant’s in that week’s storytime programme, may influence the trustworthiness of the interview knowledge due to such researcher effects and power relationships considered above. However, I hope that as a researcher being aware of my dual roles and allowing for the informant to decide whether they want to participate in the study and when it may suit them ultimately conveyed the message that their participation in the study would be on their terms. Furthermore, it has been my resolution to maintain neutral during the observations and interviews and assert critical thinking during the analysis of the study's empirical data. Additionally, having little to none experience with and pre-constructed knowledge of the libraries prior to this study, I believe, contributed to being able to remain objective in the data collection, processing and analysis. However, as Wildemuth herself maintains, “as with any other method of data collection, participant observation has certain inherent characteristics that can cause a researcher to stumble.” (Wildemuth, 2017, p. 223)
5.5 Processing and analysis of collected data

The analytical tools of the collected data will be rooted in the sociocultural theories relating to different aspects of and influences on learning, literacy and reading presented in Chapter 4. In the analysis, the interview results will be interpreted through the lens of Chambers’ reading circle, and Hultgren and colleagues’ reading role models and enabling spaces. These, but predominantly the latter, will also be applied to analysing the knowledge gained from the observations. By applying these theories to the analysis of the interview answers, I hope to understand more concretely the influence that storytime at the chosen libraries may have on early literacy for the toddlers participating in them.

In her book, Wildemuth points out that the primary focus of LIS is “recorded information and people’s relationships with it.” (Wildemuth, 2017, p. 307) For this reason content analysis has a long history of being a useful data analysis method in our field, and it has also been implemented in this study.

According to Wildemuth (2017), the aim of content analysis is to identify important themes related to the study’s research questions or topic within “a body of content and to provide a rich description of the social reality created by those [themes] as they are lived out in a particular setting.” (Ibid., p. 328) However, for qualitative case studies, Wildemuth recommends a qualitative thematic analysis approach. Vaismoradi, Turunen and Bondas (2013) further explain that a thematic analysis is optimal for studies which aim to answer research questions such as: “what are the concerns of people about an event? What reasons do people have for using or not using a service or procedure?” (Vaismoradi et al, 2013, p. 400) As this relates to the nature of the present thesis’ research statement, a thematic analysis has been applied here, in which themes identified in the socio-cultural framework are explored and analysed in the storytime setting of the four chosen libraries.

5.6 Ethical considerations

There are two vital aspects to any ethically sound research; transparency and consent (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). To this I would also add safety as a third vital ethical research rule. As Bryman (2016) stresses, causing harm or distress to participants, whether it is physically, cognitively or mentally, is equally unacceptable.

It is my intent to display an exemplary transparency level throughout this study, in the hopes of in anyway contributing to future research on storytime at libraries in which my model could be replicated.

The informants of this study were asked for their consent in participating in this thesis prior to any data collection at the libraries. This occurred in relation to the observation at each library’s storytime event, however, no recording was done neither in the form of note-taking, filling out the observation guide nor audio recordings prior to the librarians’ agreement to participate in this survey and having the library’s consent. Due to practical circumstances, there was a limited number of opportunities in which visits to the different storytime at the selected libraries were possible within the timeframe of this study. For this reason, and having previous experience with unsuccessful contact initiation per email and phone with libraries in Ireland, I decided to establish contact and
introduce my study on the day of storytime in person, which is why there was no prior introduction or contact (other than the phone calls to establish which libraries offer storytime). At the time of requesting their participation in this study, all respondents were informed of the purposes of the study, who will have access to the data collection material and results, and the study upon its completion, as well as their right to withdraw their consent or view the study in its completed form.

Due to the updated General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2016/679 in EU/EEA, University of Borås advices to present any results from data collection methods in an anonymised form, so that no personal information can be traced to any individual respondents. This is regular practice for research within the humanities and social sciences (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011). It is for this reason that the participating libraries and respondents will remain anonymous and be assigned identifiers in this study. The precaution is especially necessary to keep anonymity in a small country such as the Republic of Ireland. Not all libraries requested to be anonymous, however it would not be possible to keep the identity of the informants anonymous if the locations or names of the libraries became public.

5.6.1 Reliability, validity and representativeness

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), qualitative interviews as a data collection method may affect the reliability and validity of a study’s interview knowledge. This pertains to uncertainties regarding the consistency and trustworthiness of interview knowledge due to the interchangeable nature of humans, and questions on whether interview knowledge can provide valid and accurate results which can be viewed as sustainable proof or facts (Ibid.). Regarding validity, Bryman stresses why it might be the most important quality criteria: validity is concerned with the integrity of the results of a study (Bryman, 2016) and whether they are trustworthy. The issue here lies with whether interview knowledge can lead to a valid and correct conclusion (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The aim of my interviews is to get a representational picture of storytime at the chosen libraries. I will, to the best of my ability, assess the results of these interviews and base any conclusions on the truth in the interview knowledge. This thesis does not claim to achieve any more than this, nor that the findings are representative of storytime at all or other libraries.

In qualitative research reliability also often translates to credibility. The interview and observation results provide several accounts of a social reality that is storytime at four different libraries in western Ireland. According to Bryman (2016), the credibility of such accounts can be determined by carrying out a study in accordance with the principles of good research practice. This can include an effort to present the results to those who participated in the study in order to receive their confirmation that the researcher and the study has correctly understood their social worlds. This study strives to follow good research practice principles such as reliability, transparency, trustworthiness and validity. In addition, it is my hope to be able to present all participants with copies of this thesis once its standard has been deemed acceptable in the near future and acquire the respondents’ validation.

Bryman describes reliability as the issue concerning the implemented measures in social studies and whether they are stable, and consequently whether the results of a study are repeatable using the very same approach. The question of reliability is also related to replicability, in which the same measures and methods can be employed by other
researchers seeking out the answers to the same or similar research topic at different times and/or places (Ibid.). To allow for this, a study must be replicable. This study follows methods preceded by Sjölin (2016), Agebjörn and Nilsson (2013), Lampis Mörck and Halin (2014), Bengtsson and Svärd (2015), and Benatti (2015), to explore storytime in an Irish context. This is a research area which is largely untouched in Ireland, and as such, it is my hope that this study will contribute to further studies and findings on the topic by offering a clear research model that is suitable for the Irish library landscape. Replicability is the definition of Isaac Newton’s saying regarding standing on the shoulders of giants, or as Keith et al put it, “discovering truth by building on previous discoveries.” (2016, p. 1)

Representativeness refers to a sample which represents a population accurately (Bryman, 2016). As this is a multi-case study, exploring how specific libraries in specific areas in Ireland work with storytime, there is no claim that the results of data collection at these libraries reflect or represent the work with storytime at all Irish public libraries. A quantitative study which would investigate the phenomena at all public libraries in Ireland would undoubtedly lead to interesting and illuminating results, however, the time and funds required for such an extensive study are outside the scope of this thesis. It is proposed that instead, qualitative studies should be measured by other research quality criteria than those most common in evaluating quantitative studies (Bryman, 2016), such as trustworthiness. This criteria concerns the credibility (how believable is the empirical data?), transferability and dependability (can the results apply to other samples or contexts or times?), and confirmability (has the investigator remained objective or have they allowed their predisposed bias to influence the study?) (Ibid.). This study explores and highlights only four accounts of realities that are true to their specific situations; it does not claim to be reflective of all storytime or similar reading promotion events at libraries, nor representative of them. However, as this method was adapted from similar studies - with various results - it is my experience that this research model is transferable to - even if the results are not representative of - storytime outside of Ireland or rural Ireland. It is my hope that this method will help explore the relationship between storytime at Irish public libraries and boosting early literacy in Ireland.

5.6.2 Generalisability
Similarly to representativeness, generalisability refers to how applicable the findings of a study of one or two cases is to other or all cases within the same topic. This is especially a concern within qualitative studies, which often focus on collecting data of one or more cases, and raise questions on whether it is possible for the findings of such a small sample to be representative of all cases (Bryman, 2016). Again, the aim of this qualitative study is to gain understanding of storytime at these specific libraries and there is no intention to attain generalisable results, however it is my hope that this study will lead to further research at more Irish libraries.
6 Results: presentation and analysis of the empirical data

In this chapter, the results of the study's empirical data will be presented in terms of each library’s storytime operation, their goals, their links to national and international strategies or theoretical influences, storytime’s participants and accompanying adults, the social space, their links to reading and literacy development, the three I:s (inclusion, inspiration and involvement) and implementation of multimodal reading and learning. This is done by ways of a thematic analysis, in which Vaismoradi et al’s (2013) summary of the thematic data analysis process was utilised:

![Thematic analysis diagram](image)

Figure 2, Vaismoradi et al’s processes of data analysis in thematic analysis (2013).

After the empirical data collection at the libraries was completed, the first step in the data analysis consisted of reading and rereading fieldnotes (Step 1), after which followed - rather than Vaismoradi et al’s “coding” - noting interesting and recurring features of storytime across the entire data set (Step 2). Thereafter followed searches for themes within both interviews and observations (Step 3). During this time it became most apparent how the two data collection methods complemented each other not only in theory, but also in practice. After this the themes were reviewed and matched with key themes from the study’s socio-cultural framework (Step 4). The rest of the process included a continuous analysis in which the implications of each existing theme was defined and explained against the theoretical framework in order to contextualise the knowledge gained from the visited storytime (Step 5). In this final step the analysis was completed in a text format, in which, in accordance to Vaismoradi et al (Ibid.), compelling extract examples were selected, and final analysis was conducted of selected extracts, relating back to the theoretical models presented in Chapter 4.

6.1 The storytime space

The storytime space at the chosen libraries will be presented here, with certain emphasis on themes highlighted by Hultgren and Johansson (2018, summarised in 3.3), such as the accessibility and convenience of the physical arrangements, as well as the availability of a diverse range of children’s literature for the specified age group.
6.1.1 At CL1
At the first library, CL1, storytime takes place in a designated room which is also the children’s department. Despite CL1 being a county library, it is not a very large building, and so the size of the children’s department reflects that. The storytime/children’s space is situated right inside the entrance of the library on the left hand side, and across from the circulation desks. The space has glass walls all around and a glass door. This makes the space easy to spot, accessible, and bright; however, there lack of a designated “buggy parking” space was impractical, resulting in parents leaving the buggies either right outside of the door to the storytime space (on the main library floor), or right inside the space, and partly obstructing access on both sides of that door. The room is open plan, with low shelves that are reachable for the attending toddler, that are holding books of all shapes and sizes, which seemed to mesmerise both toddlers and parents alike (some books were the size of A1 or A2 paper sheets). Ireland is a bilingual country, and this is reflected in the children’s section which contained a shelf stocked with gaelic language books which look modern and attractive even to those like myself who do not speak the language. The space is reminiscent of a well stocked playroom; it is carpeted, with several sets of children’s tables and mini-chairs to one side, and cushions are handed out at the start of storytime, while the toddlers are encouraged to choose their own spots in front of where the story telling librarian (who is also this study’s informant at this library) is seated. During this storytime, some of the children did this, while others chose to stay close to their parents who were sat on sofas or chairs on the sidelines of the reading area, or at the small tables and chairs, which occupied the other side of the room. There was excitement apparent amongst the toddlers who seemed to be regular participants - which was evident from their familiarity with the session’s programme and the storytime librarian knowing their names - as well as some of the parents (particularly when seeing their children participating and interacting).

6.1.2 At L2
Storytime at L2 takes place out on the library plan. There is a designated children’s area, however it lacks the space and furniture to cater for more than a small-to-medium-sized group at a time. The space is situated precisely to the left of the entrance of the library and across from the circulation desks, similarly to the position of the space at this county’s main library (CL1). Because the area is just inside the library as you come in, it is very accessible, but not signed and so you either ask someone at the library or wait for families to gather to find out where it is if you are a first time visitor here. There is no designated buggy area here, so wherever you leave it there is a risk of it obstructing access to bookshelves, not only for the participants, but also other library patrons visiting the Children’s or Young Adult (YA) shelves. The space has sofas on two sides facing each other, which is reminiscent of common waiting or newspaper/magazine reading areas at Swedish public libraries. As there is no designated room for storytime, the current layout provided an atmosphere which was somewhat restricted and muted, as to not disturb other library patrons. The children’s department begins to the right of the sofas and storytime, has low bookshelves holding the books for the youngest of children; the signage is not obvious, although the book covers, formats and titles may indicate the intended age group for each shelf. This library, too, has a low children’s shelf which houses gaelic language books. At the start of storytime, the librarian came
over, bringing a few pre-selected books and a chair which was placed in front of her audience. The week that I visited the library with my family, we were the only ones attending storytime. The storytime at this library takes place on the same day as at the county library, however at a later time slot.

Before and during the session, a regular library visitor was reading on the sofa opposite of the storytime. Although we were a small group and my toddler was in no mood to run around or sing, this still affected the storytime’s atmosphere and created a subdued vibe as to not disturb other patrons. However, if the librarian has discerned any issues regarding storytime being held out in the open library space on a regular basis, it was not communicated during the interview.

6.1.3 At CL3

At CL3, the children’s section is comprised of an entire children’s library within the county library building, roughly the size of the entire ground floor of CL1. It should be noted that CL3 is located quite centrally in a large city and so caters for a large and diverse population. The entrance to the children’s library is across the room from the main entrance, and is well signed. Beyond its wide doors is also a wide, slightly slanting hall which leads down to the open plan children’s library, undoubtedly this enhances the convenience and access for both regular or double (twin) buggies. User accessibility and convenience permeated throughout the entire children’s library. At the foot of the open entrance to the children’s library is an unoccupied area close to the circulation desks where most of the buggys were parked (others preferred to keep them closer to where they were seated). The children’s library is large with approximately a third of the space occupied by the participating toddlers and families once the storytime started. It is a large, brightly lit space, has large windows, many seating choices (chairs, stools, sofas, cushions), it is carpeted, and contains both low and high shelves, several rows of gaelic language books, and in the middle of it all, a handcrafted papier-maché enchanted tree that looks like it derived from one of the fairytales from the library’s shelves. At the foot of it is a low working top with drawers full of toys. The storytelling takes place around the seating area, and although my headcount was 20 or over babies and toddlers (not counting the parents), there was no concern about the noise level disrupting other visitors or obstructing the shelves or the floor, as the location seems to be specifically designed for what it was being used for. Similarly to the other county library, cushions were handed out at the start of storytime and the toddlers were encouraged in front of where the storyteller (who is also this study’s respondent at this library) was seated. The atmosphere was full of excitement, expectation, and toddling toddlers. The first approximately 20 minutes of the storytime consisted of singing nursery rhymes and dancing along, in which most of the toddlers participated (the few others who did not, appeared shy or tired and snuggled up on their parent’s lap, or much too busy with the toys in front of the crafty tree). Anything the children were doing, was encouraged. The availability of the toys throughout the session did not cause disruption to those focusing on storytime. The children were encouraged to participate and contribute in various ways - by choosing songs, animal sounds, they were asked questions about what was pictured on the pages and would happen next to draw their attention. The reading, which was almost as animated as the singing and dancing beforehand, wrapped after about 15 minutes, after which followed another song or two that concluded the storytime. Throughout most of the session, many parents were equally participating, interacting and enthusiastic as the toddlers, if not more at times (a bit of initial shyness at the very
start, and tiredness near the end). My, at the time 28-month-old daughter, who had previously known Itsy Bitsy Spider only the way I sing it to her in Swedish, learned that there is another way to sing it. There was constant encouragement throughout - to join in the dialogue, to contribute with songs and stories requests, to move freely, make noise, and to choose to spend their time at the library in whatever way makes them comfortable. There were no technologies, props or other special effects (lighting or audio) used during this storytime. The storytime session at this library was an ideal example of Johansson and Hultgren’s enabling environment (2015) and a children’s space that in itself conveys the message of who the room is for. UNESCO (n.d.), Rydssjö et al (2010), Johansson and Hultgren (2015), and Hultgren and Johansson (2017) - further described in Chapter 3.1 - all highlight the significant role of an enabling environment that inspires and encourages curiosity, participation and inclusion at the children’s library.

6.1.4 At L4
At the fourth library, a branch library in the same county as CL3, storytime takes place in a room allocated specifically for the event. The small room is located across from the circulation desks, and right next to the children’s section. Both the children’s section and the storytime space are conveniently located, with a wide entrance to the storytime room, which is separated from the main library by glass walls. There are no windows in the room, and there is no sign indicating to newcomers that this is the storyroom; however the low shelves with children’s books on display, the children’s carpets, cushions on the floor, and book cover posters will likely inform any prospective participaters of who the space is meant for. This library is also missing a buggy parking space, and buggies that are left outside entrance to the storytime space partially obstruct the books on the shelves on each side of the entrance. However, I did not observe any complaints regarding this at the day of my visit there, nor was it raised as an issue during the interview by the librarian. Right outside the storytime space is the children’s section, with small tables and chairs, sofas and low shelves of a larger collection than inside the storytime space, including rows of gaelic language children’s books.

When the storyteller (and this study’s respondent at L4) entered the room, she laid out cushions in a circle in the middle of the floor, and sat down on a footstool before the circle. Five families participated in this storytime (including us), and all children sat on the cushions (with parents sitting on the floor beside them) for most of the time. The atmosphere at this storytime appeared more relaxed than the excitement at the previous libraries, however this may be expected on a Friday afternoon. At L4, storytime commenced with the reading. The toddlers sat listening mostly attentively for some time, before they got distracted from the reading, and becoming restless, and started distracting the remaining listeners. At that point, after finishing the story that was being read, the librarian gathered everyone close again for a song in gaelic. The children did not sing along like in other storytime sessions but each one of them remained seated and listening attentively until the librarian finished and said goodbye to everyone. Based on the one observation it seemed like a regular storytime activity at this library, which was confirmed later in the interview.

The reading, which started with a book that the librarian had brought in with her, went on for about 20 minutes with short breaks in between stories during which the librarian struck up conversations with the toddlers and parents. The librarian also encouraged
participation with questions about the pictures in the books and asking the toddlers which story they want to read next, which enables the toddlers to be involved in the process of creating, or designing, an activity aimed toward them (Hultgren & Johansson, 2018). This helps boost their confidence and contributes to giving them positive experiences with storytime, reading, and libraries. The gaelic song was not more than two-three minutes long. As far as themes go, all the stories were fiction and about animals, but this was most probably a coincidence due to animals being a popular theme among toddlers, considering that the librarian lets the participants help to pick out the stories rather than following a predetermined template. Apart from the storytelling and encouragement to participate, similarly to the previous libraries, no other information on reading or literacy activities (at the library or at home) were promoted at this storytime.

6.2 Implementation of strategies and research or pedagogical models

Storytime at CL1 is a very informal event. It is clear that the librarian has a plan, but also that she is in tune with the room and her user group, and lets the children lead. She comes in with books already picked out, but after reading a couple of them (5-minutes tales at the most), she encourages the toddlers to pick the next book. Throughout the session the librarian vividly enacting with different voices, sounds and movements which most participants enjoyed and laughed along with. When the children become (inevitably) tired or restless (at this age some, if not most, still nap during the day), the librarian rounds up the reading and begins gathering everyone who wants to join for nursery rhymes and dancing. The nurseries are a selection of the most common nurseries in English speaking countries (Old MacDonald Had a Farm, The Wheels on the Bus and more, and included very easy choreography that go along with the words. When most toddlers become noticeably tired of this or lose interest, as toddlers often do, the librarian concludes storytime and brings out fruits for snacks and toy boxes for those families who remain in the library. The reading itself was about 15 minutes, the singing and dancing about 5-10 minutes, and play and snack time 5-20 minutes, with some leaving as soon as the stories have been read while others linger in the room long past the stories. As far as themes go, all the stories were fiction, and there was no ‘theme-scheme” that had been determined in advance evident during the observation; but rather, the young children were encouraged to contribute to participate in the dialog by selecting some of the books - and therefore, help shape the storytime at this library. Apart from reading the books, there were no other reading events, activities or information being promoted at this time. When asked in the interview how CL1 works with reading promotion, the librarian answered that although she is the storyteller at the library, apart from the storytime sessions, she is not involved with any other reading promotion work or strategies at CL1. In this scenario, a semi-structured interview would have allowed me to ask a follow-up question, such as how it came to be that she oversees storytime when history is her specialty. Instead, storytime at this library seems to be an informal operation run on a volunteer-basis that is not connected to national early literacy promotion strategies nor requires the expertise of a specialised children’s librarian.

However, the respondent explained that the library participates in the national Summer Stars initiative for children up to 12 years of age, in which the participants read 6 books
during the summer followed by submitting a book report or a painting related to each book, which is organised by a colleague of the respondent. In addition, the librarian is aware of a local polish community which sometimes organises their own storytime. It would have been interesting to further pursue this and learn more about how this community organises their own storytime, what caused them to start it, what it looks like, and for whom it is provided. However, due to time restraints it was necessary to remain focused on the four public libraries with this study.

Rather than operating under established standards or philosophies, the respondent conveyed that the storytime programme at CL1 for this age group is independent of national or international directives, field research, or theoretical ideology on reading and learning development. The vision for storytime at CL1 is:

“To promote the love of books, respect of books. By doing storytime, it shows the importance of books, bonding (...) the joy of the story, which awakens the curiosity of the child to the outside world. I encourage parents to become library members and their children as well. If the parent might pick books for her child, she might pick books for herself and renew her love of books and reading.” (CL1 Interview)

This is an interesting notion which refers to a type of role reversal of Hultgren’s (2015) study on reading role models and is reminiscent of Chambers theory on the importance of, as an adult, remembering one's own childhood reading experiences (Chambers, 2011). In this case, the librarian hopes that the child will nurture the parent’s interest in books by reminding them of how much they used to enjoy books and reading. Hultgren emphasises that being a reading role model who also partakes in reading aloud sessions or book talks with children will encourage them to do the same (Hultgren, 2015). Chambers supports this in that, “readers are made by readers.” (2011, p. 89)

Storytime at L2 was also an informal, flexible event which took its user group into consideration throughout the session. Although the librarian had already selected a number of books, she happily swapped them for a different book that my toddler seemed interested in (at the time, her naptime coincided with the 1-hour drive to L2 but she had instead stayed awake until around ten minutes before we arrived to the town, resulting in a very grumpy two-year-old) - Peppa Pig: Peppa Meets the Queen (Astley & Baker, 2015). The librarian read a second book, about a dog (always a popular topic with toddlers, in the Paw Patrol-era that is 2019), and decided to leave it at that. The librarian attempted to sing nursery rhymes, too, to give the tired toddler’s mood an uplift, but it was a non-starter, as the librarian and us parents more committed to this than the overtired storytime participant at this event. The reading itself was only about 10 minutes, but as explained, this was because the librarian was reading her audience. Despite the long drive, in my opinion the librarian made the right decision to conclude the session early, rather than sticking to a strict programme that did not take the needs of the participating young children into consideration and trying to work “against the stream”. Even with just one toddler at storytime the week the observation took place, the librarian did try to encourage participation by posing questions about the pictures in the books, though she had a tough crowd at this session. As far as selecting stories and themes goes, one observation did not provide enough insight as to the usual strategy or protocol for selecting books at L2. Apart from the reading, there was no other type of reading promotion or information shared during the storytime. Though again, it is possible that this might typically occur at another time in the year, or it could be that there is no directive at this library to do any additional reading promotion other than
storytime. There were no props or technical tools used during this storytime. Even though this observational occasion did provide me with some insight into storytime at L2, it made me realise that perhaps a single observation at each library is not sufficient enough to get a fuller picture of the programme, as different circumstances that were unplanned, such as in this case, may drastically influence an event.

At this branch, the librarian stated that the operation does not follow a specific template, but rather “take a flexible approach depending on the age group that attends, and the amount of children.” (L2 Interview). She further explained that she had initially developed a set of guidelines when she first began doing the storytime sessions, but eventually found that with such a variety of children attending - specifically differences in age, sex and attention span - trying to make any one template to work was more an idealised notion of storytime for such young children, than a practical, realistic goal. Instead, the librarian had decided to “treat the time with flexibility.” Though not defined or explicitly named by the respondent, this reasoning reflects a Säljö/Vygotsky ideology, in its consideration of each person’s individuality on their education. According to Säljö, how humans learn cannot be simplified or reduced to any one strategy alone, which is what the educational system looks like today across the globe (Icmen, 2011, p. 7; Säljö, 2005). A sociocultural perspective on learning that is inspired by Vygotsky emphasises the influence that the learner’s sociocultural background may have on their learning development processes. This view calls for a reform that makes it a requirement for policy makers and educational practitioners to consider students’ social, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and individualise learning practices, as well as paying more attention to how to adapt help make the acquisition of different skills more accessible to each learner’s conditions, circumstances, or predisposition (Ibid.). In this regard it could be said that this strategy is progressive.

At the end of the session, the librarian handed out new sets of chunky chalk to everyone and a leaflet to promote the county’s annual Street Feast that weekend, but, similarly to the other libraries, no other information about additional reading promotion practices at or outside of the library was mediated to the participants.

When the respondent at CL3 was asked how the library works with reading promotion, and whether there are local, national and/or international directives and pedagogical perspectives that the library follows, the librarian answered:

“Storytime can be linked to the ‘Spring into Storytime’ programme, which stems from the Right to Read literacy initiative. Right to Read delivers a national literacy and reading programme through a core set of services and resources. This programme is part of the library’s current and past national strategies, ‘Our Public Libraries 2022: Inspiring, Connecting and Empowering’ and ‘Opportunities for All, A Strategy for Public Libraries 2013–2017’ (...) Storytime forges links with the local city-centre community. It aims to foster an awareness and knowledge of books, along with the act of reading, from a very young age.” (CL3 Interview)

The Spring into Storytime programme includes a number of information sheets on topic such as: Tips to Encourage a Child to Read, Stages of Children's Reading Development, Stages of Development: The Pre-Reader, Types of Reading Support, Establishing a Positive Reading Routine, Building Reading Relationships, Engaging Reluctant Readers, Choosing Books for Different Age Groups and Trends in Children's Literature,
Reading Sessions with Younger Children, Supporting the Development of Children's Writing Skills, Games and Activities for Improving Pre-Reading Skills, Benefits of Reading, Creating Positive Reading Environments in the Home, Reading Together, and more (“Children’s Reading: information Sheets”, 2019). The sheets are easy to find and access online and can be distributed easily among the branch libraries either by county libraries or the DRCD, under which the public libraries of Ireland are led. A downside with choosing structured interviews as a data collection approach is that one cannot ask follow-up questions to gain a fuller image of a relevant occurrence that would have been impossible to predict beforehand or when designing the interview guide. It is possible that such information about the workshop and the accompanying spreadsheets had already been distributed to branch libraries, and might still be distributed intermittently.

According to the librarian, Spring into Storytime also offered storytime templates at a workshop earlier this year. However, according to the project, it is recommended that each storyteller should tailor the template and storytelling session to their particular age group and participants' needs (“Establishing a Positive Reading Routine”, 2019). During storytime at CL3, the librarian displayed several storytime methods that I later observed in the Spring into Storytime templates, some of which are also reminiscent of Chambers’ reading circle (Chambers, 2012). From the one observation it was not possible to decipher whether the librarian utilised a template in selecting her books or whether a theme occurred. However, there was an observable common thread in the chosen stories, as well as throughout the layout of the library building and the children’s library: they all spoke of encouragement and inclusion, as did the gentle pedagogical manner of the storytime librarian (also similar to those of the storytime librarians at the other libraries). When asked how the stories are chosen at this library, the librarian emphasised the significant role of the participants - the toddlers - on her selection process:

The stories are chosen to suit the target age group and are chosen in advance. Because the children are quite young, about toddler or preschool age, their focus tends to be on the illustrations. Text is important, too, for the telling of the story, but there’s a specific focus on stories with 3–5 lines of simple text. Illustrations that are large and colourful are preferred. Rhyming, repetitive, onomatopoeic text is great because it allows the storyteller to make accompanying sounds for dramatic and rhetorical effect, which the children love. Special themes include animals - the jungle, the zoo, the farm; insects; travel - trains; wellbeing - feelings, food; counting, numeracy. (CL3 Interview)

L4 envisions storytime as an opportunity to combine learning and playtime in a library environment and simultaneously build up a relationship with the library and local community. The storyteller at this library expresses that this can be of special significance to families with parents who immigrated to Ireland, as “we [the library] are one of few institutions who are here to help people find information that they need, if they don’t know where to go or what is available to them - especially with the educational system may be different than the one that they know, or with social queries, from our experience, sometimes people don’t know where to go, which office deals with which issues - and often people have come to us to ask. But storytime is good for everyone. All children, and parents.” (L4 Interview).
At L4, the reading, which started with a book that the librarian had brought in with her, went on for about 20 minutes with short breaks in between stories during which the librarian struck up conversations with the toddlers and parents. The librarian also encouraged participation with questions about the pictures in the books and asking the toddlers which story they want to read next. The song was not more than two-three minutes long. As far as themes go, all the stories were fiction and about animals, though it was not possible to tell from the one observation whether it was planned, or a coincidence due to animals being popular among toddlers. Apart from the storytelling and encouragement to participate, no other information on reading or literacy promotion at the library was shared at this storytime.

In short, in terms of following specific guidelines or templates, L4 appear to follow a tried-and-proven strategy: reading and singing. However, this was both done and received in a different way than the other libraries. Whereas at the other three libraries began and ended the storytime session with singing nursery rhymes, the librarian started storytime at L4 with reading and engaging the participants with questions relating to the stories that were being read until the toddlers grew restless, at which point the librarian gathered everyone back in a circle in front of her and sang a gaelic lullaby. Regarding whether the library follows a template derived from national public libraries or early literacy guidelines or pedagogical reading/learning models in its storytime operation, the librarian stated that the programme is based on knowledge from personal experiences of reading with their own children at home and through trial and error establishing what seems to work and what does not, “... Myself and the previous librarians who developed storytime, the same sort of strategy if you will, was adapted by us for the children at the library. We do what we have learned to work. It is all very informal and very adaptable to the children and moods, and apart from that our template is picking out books, reading them, talking about the story, characters or colours in them, and singing whenever there is some time.” (L4 Interview) This can be compared to the literate cultures that Säljö mentions, in which the spoken language is higher valued than the written language (Säljö, 2011). In this case, as well as CL1 and L2, the strategy for storytime is based on the storytime leaders’ personal experience (meaning knowledge acquired from spoken language practices), rather than national strategies and pedagogical practices (written language-based knowledge).

### 6.3 Chambers’ reading circle at the chosen libraries

According to Chambers, “every time we read we engage in a sequence of activities.” (2011, p. 15) At home, lines may be blurred as to what is included in the reading routine, as parents’ days often consist of a nonstop stream of planning, revising, preparing or cleaning up after different activities. But the sequence of the reading circle was more apparent at the libraries that I visited.

If all the steps from Chambers reading circle was to be broken up into sequences, these would be:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1 Selection</th>
<th>2 Reading</th>
<th>3 Response</th>
<th>4 Enabling adult</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A) Bookstock</td>
<td>A) Place</td>
<td>A) ‘I want to enjoy it again.’</td>
<td>A) Help with different steps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B) Access and</td>
<td>B) Looking at book</td>
<td>B) Book talk or</td>
<td>B) Nurture curiosity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The above table is a modified version of Chambers’ original Reading Circle, presented earlier in Chapter 4.1.1, adapted to be better compatible with librarians’ storytime programmes for young children, as its original target audience are teachers with school pupils older than this study’s age group. A complete table which illustrates how the above sequences are incorporated in storytime at CL1, L2, CL3 and L4 was created based on my interviews and observations at these libraries and is available in Appendix C. Below the processes of the reading circle will be further explained as reflected in storytime at all four libraries.

The reading circle starts with selection (1). We learn best how to select and become confident by doing it for ourselves, while having a confident and trusted reader who can give advice or help beside us (Ibid., p. 16f). Even though there were no pedagogical theories behind it, at all four libraries, the librarians who lead each session all operated by this concept. All four librarians appeared confident in their roles, and they all also enabled the toddlers to be involved in the selection process by encouraging them to make requests.

According to the respondent at L2, the only times that themes are prepared beforehand for the participants, is around certain holidays, “I often prepare a themed story time, for example at Easter, Halloween and Christmas, where I would encourage participation from all attendees, child and adult alike.” (L2 Interview) On the other hand, the librarian at CL3 states that her stories are chosen in advance and follow specific guidelines (detailed in Chapter 6.2) which focus clearly on the interests and educational needs of the age group.

Similarly to L2 and CL3, the librarians at L4 and CL1 entered the storytime spaces with books in hand, however, the librarian at L4 stated that she doesn’t follow any guidelines for selecting storytime books, but rather chooses a short story unpremeditated on the day of, or “unless there’s a new book that we want to read or think they will enjoy” (L4 Interview). In a similar sentiment, the storyteller at CL1 selects “a handful of books that are very very short, to start off and create the right atmosphere...” (Interview for Master’s thesis, 2019A), with her main prerequisites being that they are short picture books which have not been read by her before. Based on previous answers, I believe the reason for reading new books each session lies in promoting the diversity of the library’s children’s books. Although toddlers often like to read the same books over and over, so it is also possible that apart from an agenda to introduce their children’s collection to the participating children and parents, the books that are read are checked
out after the sessions and are not immediately returned. After reading the book(s) that were brought to storytime, at all libraries the storytellers then encourage the toddlers to choose the next stories. As Chambers (2011) puts it, in guiding and helping someone in their book selection, a confident and trusted reader helps an inexperienced reader or library user to discover what they like to read and how and where to find their genres.

The next process, is the reading (2) itself. Chambers puts the word ‘reading’ in inverted commas, as according to him, reading is not only constricted to mean the act of “passing our eyes over printed words in order to decipher them.” (Ibid., p.17f) The author explains the need for a more encompassing word which covers additional sequences that result in literacy - such as: time spent looking at a book, learning what way to hold it, to turn the page, or asking or finding out about the book or the story/picture within it. The lack of a phrase that engulfs this whole reading process is problematic, as Chambers describes, it results in learning readers believing that they cannot read or are failing because they are not yet able to decipher each word in the book (Chambers, 2011). This can be a discouraging factor at a crucial stage in their development when young children constantly seek parental approval. An example of this is early learners who are insecure about skills - whether it be reading, talking, matching different shapes or building block towers, etc - and to avoid failure, instead they avoid those activities, and stop progressing in these areas. This is the so called Matthew Effect (Duff et al, 2015f; Stanovich, 1986), introduced in Chapters 1.1 and 3.2. This is partly how reluctant readers are born and it can lead to missing out on academic, work and social opportunities from childhood to adulthood. As explained in Chapter 1.1, researchers claim that storytime is an effective way of promoting and nurturing emergent literacy, as it offers early learners and their parents the opportunity and environment to practice those steps and skills that are part of the reading process. Jackie Marsh (Evans, 2004) especially highlights the importance of making reading a fun and playful learning experience, which contributes to stimulating young children’s interest in reading and confidence in the activity and themselves.

Hultgren and Johansson (2018) describe how the three I’s can help nurture young children’s curiosities and become more confident in exploring their interests, skills and surroundings - books and reading being some of them. How the three I’s are incorporated into storytime at the four selected public libraries will be further explored in Chapter 7.3.

According to Chambers, time and place are two of the most important components of the reading process. Regarding time, Chambers (2011) explains that it is important to accept that reading takes time. Adults have to allow the earliest of learners the time to explore the book and its contest, and to discover the “patterns of events, of character, of ideas, of image, of language woven into it.” (Chambers, 2011, p.18) Taking this into consideration and encouraging this, is an important aspect of the enabling adult’s (4) job (Ibid.). Chambers (Ibid., p. 21) claims that “obstacles in the way of learner readers can be overcome if they have the help and example of a trusted, experienced adult reader” who is present and nurturing of their natural curiosity. Regarding place, Chambers reminds of the importance to choose or create a space that helps protect concentration, rather than having other activities or distractions interfere with reading times. At all four storytimes, the librarians allowed for the time it took for the children to choose a new book, explore the images, and answer and/or ask questions about the stories or pictures. At CL1, I found a wonderful example of how storytime encourages early learners and teaches their guardians that reading takes time, but it is also time
spent wisely and can be fun. After initiating storytime with a few of the short picture books which she brought in with her, the librarian at CL1 encouraged the toddlers to pick the other books, asked questions about every page and every picture and listened to what the toddlers wanted to say, and a few times even passed around a book open at a specific picture that she then asked each toddler/family a question about. Similar strategies were exhibited at all four libraries, however at L2, where there was only one tired toddler present, it is more difficult to interpret how much of an impact this activity had on nurturing their reading interest just at that time.

Regarding the place, although the libraries did not have a specific policy nor follow any theoretical frameworks on space, storytime at CL1, CL3 and L4 all took place in designated rooms, whereas at L2 the session took place out in the open library. However, while the sole focus and activity at L4 was the storytime at this time, at CL1 and CL3 there were possible distractions in the form of toys and, at CL3, other visitors to the children’s library.

Literary activities such as reading invoke responses (3) within readers and inevitably affect people in different ways (Chambers, 2011). Whether it is interest, enjoyment, excitement, or boredom, every time humans read, no matter the genre or format, we experience some kind of response (Ibid.). Chambers identifies two responses as the most important ones that lead to children becoming more thoughtful readers: the desire to read or reread a book again after having enjoyed a book, and the desire to talk about what we read and what we experienced what we read. It was evident that the librarians at all four storytimes encourage both experiences - at all four libraries, the storytellers were determently trying to make the session a fun reading experience for all participants, as well as encouraging the young learners to think and talk about the stories they were reading. According to Chambers (2011), these responses and experiences contribute to spiraling the reading circle, and leading us to develop as avid readers. Given such findings from previous researchers, it is reasonable to expect that storytime the chosen libraries and other libraries which offer similar storytimes contribute to nurturing small children’s interest in books and enhance early literacy in those who participate regularly.

### 6.4 Social interaction and the three I’s

According to Vygotsky, humans are social creatures and knowledge is formed through interaction with others, meaning that language and knowledge develops in a social context through communication with others (Smidt, 2009). Libraries’ storytime is equally a social as it is a reading event which promotes two important skills to acquire in early childhood: socialisation and reading. Furthermore, it is the library’s arguably the most important democratic mission to enhance inclusion and involvement in society. When libraries do not prioritise this, their services, buildings and platforms become inaccessible for different population groups. Implementing Hultgren & Johansson’s (2018) three I’s into public library strategies and day-to-day operation (not only storytime) contributes to enabling participation for all citizens in social, learning, and democratic activities at the library. Below I will explore how the librarians at the chosen libraries work with the three I’s in relation to storytime, how they achieve it, and where they fall short.
According to Hultgren & Johansson (2018), *inclusion, inspiration, and involvement* are crucial components of early literacy and reading promotion. Inclusion refers to enabling all children and their families to take part in reading promotion activities by ensuring accessibility to the physical libraries, materials in different formats and choosing stories that are diverse and reflect society, different populations and groups, and different situations. Inspiration pertains to inspiring young children to read by creating a space and activities which are inviting, exciting, creative, challenging and stimulating all at once when designing a children’s library/space. In the context of this thesis, involvement refers to enabling and encouraging children to get involved and take part of or participate in literacy stimulating activities at the library. A part of this mission, is also encouraging and enabling their accompanying adult to participate together with them, as it will further inspire the child’s interest and motivation to participate in the reading, playing, singing and dancing.

These themes were manifested in storytime at the different libraries in very similar ways. All four libraries kept the stories were short, and the librarians (except for at L2) not only read stories, but also enacted them. At CL1 there was a spontaneity to the librarian’s way of storytelling, and she did not strictly stick to the text word for word, but encouraged children and parents to participate and contribute with suggestions of alternative dialogs or slightly altered words/scenes (which had essentially the same outcome). It seemed like the children were not only listening to a story but creating one too. This was also reflected in CL3 and L4. Furthermore, most of the parents participated enthusiastically and encouraged their toddlers to join in on the singing and dancing, rather than staying on the sidelines. Social interaction is another way in which storytime at L2 differed from the other case studies; with only one participating family, this creates a different atmosphere in which the librarian seemed aware of putting too much pressure to participate on a tired toddler.

6.4.1 Inclusion

Inclusion is a prerequisite for participation and is manifested in the convenience and accessibility of services and spaces (Hultgren & Johansson, 2018, p. 6f). At all four libraries, the storytime spaces were easily accessible. The two busiest storytime sessions were those that take place in the morning at CL1 (7-11 participants) and CL3 (20+ participants), while the two quietest sessions happened to be in the afternoon at L2 (1 toddler) and L4 (5 toddlers). It is unclear whether the low amount of participants how any correlation with the designated time. When the librarians were asked whether more could be done to reach their target group, none of the respondents expressed that the time was an issue or a wish to move storytime to a different time or day.

At CL1, although there are no policies for the practical organisation of storytime today, the three I:s are still incorporated into the programme in different measures. The location of the storytime space, mobility inside the space, and accessibility to children’s books thanks to the low children’s shelves, all contribute to improving inclusion in early literature activities at this library. There are no other props nor technical aids used at storytime at this library. Further measures which are highlighted in the national public library strategy to improve inclusion could be implemented - such as utilising and promoting different formats, offering books in more languages, and additional storytime sessions at a different time in the week. However, it remains unclear whether implementing the relevant national public library strategy regarding reading promotion aimed at younger groups and other national early literacy strategies (see Chapters 2.2
and 2.3) would have a significant impact on storytime in this community, or perhaps the current organisation of storytime is shaped by the needs of the local citizens. However, my interview with the librarian suggests that the library’s resources are scarce and does not allow for new additions nor reconsiderations. It is not clear how the government allocates the funding (which is intended to support public libraries and rural regenerations) between Irish public libraries, however, continuous lack of priority, support and investment in rural libraries will lead to poorer performance or ability to cater to their communities, disable some libraries from being able to implement national goals, and impede the further education and training of librarians.

When talking about the target group and participants, the librarian at CL1 mentioned that “years ago, some of the children from the special school attended storytime, but our time changed and it did not suit the special children’s timetable.” (CL1 Interview) The librarian, who is also the local historian at the county library, expressed that she would want to organise storytime for children with special needs, but the library has no strategies regarding this today. When asked what more could be done if the resources were there, the librarian expressed that investment in current staff, more staff and more training would help the library evolve and work more on solutions to accessibility issues, like this one, which with the current budget is not even on the radar today. As it is today, with lack of resources and time, the librarian explained, “Storytime is just a small part of my work, majority of my time is taken up with local history queries, genealogy, research and class visits.” (CL1 Interview)

At L2, the library's marketing strategy, with regard to reaching out to children for storytime sessions, is more and more involving the library’s social media platforms, such as “our own website, Facebook and Twitter. On a smaller scale, in this branch, when children are joining the library for the first time, we will let them know that we have a storytime session weekly, and storytelling and reading incentives during spring and summer - sometimes word-of-mouth can prove to be more successful.” (L2 Interview)

As Chambers (2012) emphasises, selection affects both the reading experience and response or reaction a reader has to a book, or reading in general - i.e. the impression that a book or reading has on a person. At CL3, the stories are chosen to suit the target age group and a selection of stories are chosen in advance.

Selecting texts that reflect the participants’ interests also encourages inclusion, to which the librarian adds that in including accompanying adults and older siblings, the younger children become more interested and motivated to participate in storytime, which truly develops into a reading circle (Chambers, 2012) that the librarian has witnessed during her time as the storytelling librarian at CL3’s children’s library:

“Accompanying adults (and siblings) are encouraged to sing along and perform the hand movements also. At school holidays when older siblings attend, I try to include them as much as possible so that they don’t get bored and distract the younger children. A story aimed at older children might be told while the rhymes and songs still cater to the younger ones. In general, the adults are very supportive and actively engage in the storytelling session. I find that the children are more focused when the adults participate as well. I have seen an interest develop in the books themselves. When parents themselves notice this, they tend to sign up their children for library membership if they haven’t already done so. Other
parents, who have had library membership from day one, progress their children from board books to picture books and tend to arrive a little earlier before the storytelling session commences to browse, and to return and borrow books. A lot of the children at Storytime are interested in physically touching the book that’s read and I think this encourages them to want to take books home and to read their own books.” (CL3 Interview)

Regarding their accessibility strategy for storytime, there is a limited amount of measures that the library can undertake to ensure access and inclusion for all toddlers. Participating at this year’s Spring into Storytime workshop was beneficial to the programme in different ways, and one of the areas covered during the workshop was accessibility, in which an approach was suggested for how to identify accessibility issues and improve access: “we were encouraged to try and speak with parents of children with impairments, who need special language support to find out if they have any special requirements, seating preferences (...) Unfortunately, the resources are not currently available to do more.” (CL3 Interview)

Another effort that the librarian at CL3 would have liked to undertake to improve inclusion and outreach for reading promotion services towards this age group is to collaborate with the education sector and other groups which might entice more parents and their children into the library. The librarian also proposes a similar template for older children and youths in order to reverse the trend of declining literacy among teenagers, reflecting: “This age group tend to get their first smartphone around that age, and from then on there’s a drop in reading, especially among boys. Books and reading, and as a result the library, are competing with the immediacy of the Internet and bite-sized amounts of information.” (CL3 Interview) However, she did not consider that there is a possible correlation between storytime and literacy skills later on.

6.4.2 Inspiration and involvement

As these two concepts often go hand in hand (inspiration tends to lead to involvement and participation), they will be analysed together here.

The observation at CL1 revealed an atmosphere that is both relaxed and exciting, with noise and laughter from start to finish. This does not seem to disturb the adult library visitors outside of the storytime. The librarian encourages the toddlers to follow the story and participate, and asks questions between the scenes and dialogues that she reads, which results in many of the toddlers, those who are not too shy or tired, to participate and answer her questions and listen to her instructions. But they are also free to choose not to participate, to pick a different story, or pick their own books for their parents to read, or otherwise play in the room freely. Though in the case of the latter scenario, a parent may on a couple of occasions remind their child to be mindful of others who are still participating in the reading.

Regarding inspiration, from the moment the children and their accompanying adult(s) enter the doors to CL1 they are enthusiastic and eager to enter the storytime room, to play on the carpet, those who are not shy instantly begin to play with the other children, explore the low bookshelves and the largest of the books and the gaelic books, and display more enthusiasm when the librarian enters the room. The latter is also apparent in the accompanying adults, which brings us to involvement. The librarian’s approach to storytime for the present participants - the ability to read her target group, flexibility in
storytime’s template, and the manner in which she encourages participation - is in my opinion what fosters the children’s and parents participation in the different aspects of storytime. As Boog (2015) points out, children’s expressions and behaviour can indicate whether they are enjoying a book or are becoming uninterested, in which case Boog advises the storyteller to instead more on to a different activity - such as singing and dancing to nursery rhymes. Force reading to a child who is tired or uninterested in a book might result in them associating reading with discontent or unhappiness (Ibid). This consideration to the children’s needs was displayed at all four libraries.

According to Hultgren & Johansson (Ibid., p. 8) *involvement* refers to involving the children in creating an activity or setting up a space. For the sake of this study, I would like to add parents/guardians’ involvement and participation as an important variable which can make young children feel valued, boost their confidence and encourage them to explore the space and find a way or activity in it in which to participate in the event.

Both inspiration and involvement are factors that are also considered by the librarian at L2’s storytime: “Whatever adults accompany any child/children for storytime are encouraged to get involved with the story. The children find this fun, especially if a teacher or grandparent are acting silly or singing a silly song. I tend to use stories that will have the children and adults getting involved, and make it an all round experience (...) Today [day of my observation and participation at the storytime] was not typical of my storytime session. I would rarely have one-to-one telling, but what I did like was that both parents were here and both of you stayed while the story was being told. I'm only used to 1 parent, so it was a nice change.” (L2 Interview)

Even though she does not follow any specific directives, templates, or methods supported by specific research or pedagogy perspectives, but rather has adapted her own child-lead, flexible approach in which the key ingredient is to read her group, she has nevertheless seen that storytime has had an impact on the toddlers literacy skills and development:

“I have seen the development of children from handling board books as a baby on their parent's knee, to listening to different stories, and choosing their own books before they begin school. I also notice that as soon as these children are reading, they are more likely to approach the library staff and order books to their liking. The library [L2] becomes a place where they are comfortable with the staff, and the setting, and their development can continue throughout their lives.” (L2 Interview)

Despite stating that the library does not follow a template when it comes to reading promotion for such a young age, during the session at L4 some of the aspects were reminiscent of several key concepts for reading development according to the sociocultural perspective. The children were included in the selection of the stories and encouraged throughout the session to participate and help shape the storytime themselves. Rather than being influenced by any theoretical perspectives or research, the storyteller explained she is influenced by her own role as a parent, and that the best strategy at this age is to do what we have learned to work (...) our template is picking out books, reading them, talking about the story, characters or colours in them, and singing whenever there is some time.” (L4 Interview). As presented above, this kind of encouragement of involvement is also exhibited at CL1, L2 and CL3.

At the latter, CL3, this was illustrated throughout the session, as toddlers and parents alike were encouraged to participate and contribute in various ways. Toddlers were
asked questions about the pictures in the stories, to pick the next story and which songs they like to sing. As previously described, many parents were participating, interacting and enthusiastic as much as the toddlers throughout the session. When parents participate, they provide a so-called enabling environment for their children, in which they feel support, encouragement and inspired to explore library activities (Johansson & Hultgren, 2018; Johansson & Hultgren, 2015). The role of the accompanying parents or guardians will be further explored below.

6.4.3 Participants and the importance of the accompanying adult

The participants at CL1 consisted of were 7-11 toddlers and their families, rather than a group (for example a visiting creche, parent and toddler group, or preschool group). A majority of the accompanying adults appeared to be the children’s mothers, with about two fathers present, or additional fathers dropping in at the end of the session to collect. Most parents appeared to be young and around 25-39-years of age with toddlers, and of working class (this was conjectured from their appearance and work-like activities during the session). Most parents and children were Irish and caucasian, with 2-4 families of other cultures and/or mixed cultures.

According to the storyteller at CL1, the library’s storytime target group is infants and toddlers between 0-3 years of age with their accompanying adult, which are most often grandparents, au pairs, older siblings, childminders, aunts, mothers and fathers. At the time of the observation, I had assumed that all accompanying women were their children’s mothers, not due to gender and age, but from observing their interactions. Perhaps this was not the case. Whether they were mothers, aunts, au pairs or childminders to the toddlers, most female accompanying adults participated enthusiastically and encouraged the toddlers to join in on the fun and to interact with the storyteller and other toddlers, nonetheless.

DES’ National Strategy to Improve Literacy and Numeracy Among Children and Young People 2011-2020 highlights the importance of enabling parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development (introduced in Chapter 2.2.1), a topic that Staf and Svidén (2018) also identify as a key influence on early reading development, and which is also the focus of Hultgren (2015). Hultgren explains that children’s literacy and reading habits are shaped by having reading role models who not only encourage and support them, but do read themselves. The author describes that a reading role model can be a teacher, librarian, relative, friend, or parent(s) - simply put, anyone who has a vested interest in the child. This raises the question whether all of these potential reading role models have the same level of impact on the child. For example, does a full time childminder have the same impact on a child’s reading development as a parent or a teacher? This is an especially relevant and potentially enlightening question, as due to the Irish current childcare as well as ECCE landscape, many Irish families where both parents or the single parent work, opt for childminders or au pairs.

The librarian at CL1 believes that children benefit from storytime at any age, especially from babies up to early reading stage: “The earlier you place a book in a child’s hand, or introduce stories to them, the better, I believe. Links to reading promotion – once the children (0-5) get to the stage of reading themselves, we tell them and their parents or guardians or grandparents about our reading programmes held during Spring and
Summer - the Spring in Storytime and Summer Stars Reading Adventure.” (CL1 Interview)

The participators at storytime in CL3 are babies and toddlers, and their parents, grandparents or childminders, and that the number of participators in attendance can range from 15–25 from week to week. When asked about the participants, according to the librarian, storytime at CL3 is mainly aimed at children aged 6 months-3 years, because “this is the predominant age group in attendance.” (CL3 Interview) A majority of the accompanying adults appeared to be the children’s parents, and in many cases both parents were present. There was one rare case if not two where the accompanying adult was the father, the majority were however mothers. Most parents appeared to be young, around mid 20s to mid 30s. A slightly higher number of the participating families at that week’s storytime appeared to be Irish and caucasian, the rest being of other cultures and/or mixed cultures. The higher diversity rate also reflects the residents in and around town, perhaps because universities in the city have a tradition of welcoming international students through their popular exchange programmes. There does not appear to be a policy on age requirement for CL3’s storytime, however the Information Sheets distributed by Spring into Storytime provides a great amount of practical and theoretical knowledge and advice on how to improve and support young children’s literacy skills to utilise in their mission to promote reading (Children’s Reading: Information Skills, 2019).

Although my family were the only participants at the session at L2, the librarian expressed fondness of seeing both parents participating with their toddler, as she always aims to get parents involved in the different aspects of her storytime (L2 Interview), after seeing the progress of small children who started visiting the library storytime and who sat on their parents’ knees while listening, to them becoming readers and venturing out on their own in the library in search of books.

According to the storyteller at L4, the day of my observation and interview was a typical storytime session for them. All accompanying adults appeared to be the children’s parent(s), approximately in their late 20s to late 30s. Five families were present, of which three were Irish and two of other and mixed cultures. Three of the toddlers were accompanied by their mothers, and two toddlers were accompanied by both of their parents. Though the atmosphere stayed relatively quiet and relaxed for most part of the session, it was apparent that the gaelic song drew a lot of enthusiasm and appreciation, not the least from the participating parents.

The librarian explains that the branch is close enough to CL3, so “We get a mixture of families here, and a lot of them come back regularly and it’s a good thing to see people coming out [to the library] and integrating.” (L4 Interview). The librarian also expressed enthusiasm in seeing the parents participating, as this “encourages or sometimes soothes a child. Sometimes they leave to browse the shelves on the main area and take out books for themselves and that is great, but when this happens, on a few occasions, a child did not realise that they were ‘on their own’ so to speak, and she was inconsolable, and this affected the storytime, and the child’s experience here.” (L4 Interview) The librarian raises an aspect of storytime that was also highlighted at CL1, L2 and CL3, which is the impact of the accompanying adult’s presence and participation, which “it encourages the children to do the same of course.” (L4 Interview).

One can supposedly assume that the parents who participate in storytime sessions do so not only because they do not work during those times, but because they know the value
of reading and want to encourage their offspring to read. During my observations at CL1, L2, CL3 and L4, I noted that both Irish parents and parents of other nationalities encourage this age group to become readers. I was originally interested in a potential correlation between storytime participants and social and ethnic backgrounds, as Shiel et al reported that parental education, economic, social and cultural status (ESCS), level of interaction with parents, books in the home, number of siblings, language spoken at home and often do have an impact on children's literacy, as they had in the performance results in the 2006 PISA cycle (Shiel et al, 2016). However, after participating in the storytime sessions I decided that if there was a correlation between library storytime participants and ethnic and social family backgrounds, this would require a different study with a research strategy which solely focuses on collecting data relevant to this, and perhaps from a different perspective.

Most of the communication at all four storytime sessions took place between storyteller-toddler, guardian-toddler, or storyteller-guardian, with rare instances during which the children engaged in a game together, or an example from CL1, held hands while singing Ring a Ring o’ Rosie. At all libraries the children mainly played side by side, preoccupied with their own toys. There was little competition over toys, and children who became restless and started acting out caused hardly any interruption to the storytelling or the rest of the group’s participation. The storytime experience at all four libraries was mostly fun and warm (again, L2 stood out as there was only one family present at the event that week), with the children at the centre and heart of it all, which was a reflection of the librarians’ demeanour and outlook on early childhood reading activities in social environments and the role of the library in encouraging young children to read.

6.5 Multimodal reading and digital technologies

It was previously noted that Agebjörn and Nilsson (2013) argue that the word literacy nowadays encompasses a wider collection of skills than previously. However, as made evident in Chapter 3 and by this study’s empirical data, this is still not acknowledged by early reading promotion practices, and so this aspect of literacy is often excluded from library and ECEC programmes and curricula.

During the observation at CL1, I noted that there were no digital technologies at hand and non were utilised during storytime. During the interview, the respondent confirmed that technologies such as iPads are never used in their storytime. The librarian added, however, that the library has embraced modern technologies in other respects of the organisation, which are “3D printing, selfservice [machine], audio books online. Marketing is done via Facebook, Instagram”. For any other implementation of digital technologies use, the respondent expressed criticism toward digital technologies, adding, “Some college students have trouble doing assignments, don’t know their way around or [how to ] use the library materials. Smartphones, computer technology has affected literacy and spelling. [The solution is to] Keep promoting the joy of reading.” (CL1 Interview) This is an attitude toward technology that I have come across before in Ireland with people who work with children. It should be noted, that there is no generalisation implied, but a highlighting of previous occurrences which may imply that there is a pattern.
As far as implementing digital technologies into storytime at L2, it is likely to take time before it is introduced to the programme; the storyteller states, “I don’t like the idea of mixing technology and storytime. There is a place for both in this world certainly, but I think the imagination of a child cannot compare to any aids to interpret a story - I’m speaking as a Mother of a 10-year-old and a 7-year-old, so I too have a little experience.” (L2 Interview) Despite research which highlights all the ways in which digital technologies support literacy, this seems to be a common standpoint on the topic, particularly among early learning practices in western Ireland. This has been conveyed to me on several instances, on both personal and professional levels, and can be interpreted as a further testament to the lack of published research from Irish researchers, and awareness on the educational affordances of new technologies among the public. But rather I am increasingly getting the impression that, in these settings, using digital technologies is a stigma in Ireland.

Korat (Korat & Segal-Drori, 2016; Shamir et al, 2012) argues for the benefits of utilising digital technologies, or multimodal reading, on early literacy. A multimodal format stimulates more senses and in different ways than linear reading: “...animation, music, sound effects, illuminated text, and text read out loud by a narrator, provides synergy where there is a joint and integrated operation of two or more factors that might affect the reader.’ (Korat & Segal-Drori, 2016, p. 1) Incorporating digital storytelling into storytime (if only on a trial basis) may benefit young children at risk for language learning difficulties due to mental, physical or environmental causes if learning activities include the use of several different types of media, rather than one (Ibid.). When it comes to learning, and the educational system - in which many young people to this day still slip through between the cracks, affecting the quality of life they will have throughout their lives as adults - one size, does not fit all (Wai, 2014; Manning, Kinzie & Schuh, 2017; Charles & Boyle, 2014; Wardman, 2004). However, despite research illustrating the benefits of digital technologies and multimodal reading on literacy, as expressed before, I have meet preschool teachers, parents, and libraries not relevant to this study who are still reluctant to incorporate such technologies into reading and learning activities. The storyteller at CL3 provided further insight on this narrative:

“Technology is not used for this particular event. I can see the benefit in using audio technology, perhaps to create certain sounds, e.g. sounds of the jungle, the sea, and so on. [But] I don’t think visual technology, e.g. screens, are appropriate in this case or for this age group, and I believe many parents would not be in support of it, as you witness them trying to encourage their children to have as much human interaction as possible...”
(CL3 Interview)

When asked on her views on using technology or other aids during storytime, the respondent at L4 also stated that only printed books are used, and expressed that there is no incentive from either parents or the toddlers to do so, adding, “and anyway, we wouldn’t have the resources. So we’re not in a hurry to try it yet.” (L4 Interview)

Though the age groups which are the focus of Korat’s (Korat & Segal-Drori, 2016; Shamir et al, 2012) studies are older children, encouraging and supporting literacy - as per Agebjörn and Nilsson’s (2013) definition, which includes media literacy - from a very young age has been proven to lead to a greater literacy skills amongst teenagers (Duff et al, 2015; Stanovich, 1986). This leaves me with the question, why are librarians, teachers, and parents in western Ireland still reluctant to teach the use of technologies - both the opportunities and the risks within them - from an early age? Or
perhaps, why is there no widespread national educational initiative set in place already to spread awareness or tackle “fake news” or “alternative facts” regarding this?

7 Discussion

This study has explored how storytime for babies and toddlers at four libraries in the west of Ireland can be construed as a reading promotion event which boosts early literacy. The selected libraries also offered some insight into how libraries at two different levels and in two different counties in Ireland design their storytime programmes. Chambers’ reading circle, Hultgren’s theories on reading role models and Hultgren and Johansson’s three I’s formed the basis for the theoretical framework and analytical tools for the empirical data collection. With this study I hoped to explore the impact that storytime at the chosen libraries may have on early literacy for the toddlers participating in them. I also hoped to learn how storytime at the selected libraries worked with or reflected different elements such as multimodal reading, inclusion and accessibility. The study is from the perspective of the librarians who organise and act as storytellers at the events, and are most familiar with the work involved.

This study concerns several fields of research, including LIS, learning (pedagogy) perspectives, early literacy development, technologies and ICT, as well as national and international directives on literacy and on the library’s role in improving literacy worldwide.

Today there is very little research on storytime and library reading promotion work in an Irish context, aside from a number of governmental reports which include only sections of relevance to library storytime. And so it is my hope that this study will contribute to increasing knowledge in this topic, or at the very least awaken an interest in conducting further studies on Irish public library reading promotion programmes.

The driving factor for this study was PISA results, which point to a trend of declining literacy among 15-year-old students around the world. The PISA results help shape educational reform within the approximately 90 participating countries and within UNESCO. The literature review showed that starting early is key when it comes to emergent literacy and that a commitment to literacy early on leads to a greater literacy skills among older children. It also shed some light on the library’s role in cultivating literacy.

To better understand how libraries’ storytime for toddlers can be construed as a reading promotion event which boosts early literacy - in terms of what role the processes of reading and learning development, the impact of social events and interactions with others and with technology play in storytime - the following research questions were posed:

- How do the libraries work to meet national and European library strategies related to early literacy?
The first research question examines how national and EU library standards are implemented into the everyday work of libraries and librarians.

- How can storytime be understood as a literacy promotion event?

The second research question pertains to exploring what impact the storytime’s participants’ interaction with reading, books, technology, the other participants, the storytelling leaders, their participating parent or guardian may have on their emergent literacy.

- How do librarians work with multimodality to enhance early literacy among their target group?

The third research question explores what interaction affordances stem from the use of technology, as well as what obstacles and opportunities may arise from storytime’s possible use of digital technology as a literacy tool.

Below, the research questions will be answered in terms of the storytime programmes provided at the chosen libraries. The theoretical framework, previous research, PISA results, and national and international directives will also be tied into the discussion, as well as a reflection over this study’s research method, and suggestions for further studies.

7.1 Reflections on results

- How do the libraries work to meet national and European library strategies related to early literacy?

How the participating libraries work in terms to meet national strategies vary. Libraries CL1, L2, and L4 work on an entirely informal and flexible basis, with no formal template other than the proven one based on experience in which the young children’s comfort and participation are the key value. CL3, which is a county library in a large city work differently, in that they do make use of resources and templates which are promoted by governmental initiatives, such as Spring to Storytime. L2 also promotes the Spring into Storytime campaign as an important national reading promotion event, however for this age group, they do not seem to employ the campaign’s resources for enhancing storytime at public libraries, but rather operate an informal storytime which is adapted to the participants each week.

None of the four participating libraries have an incentive to implement international public library directives.

- How can Storytime be understood as a literacy event?

According to the storyteller at CL1, storytime promotes the importance books and stimulates the joy of reading and a curiosity for the outside world. It also promotes the
library’s collection of books suitable for babies, toddlers and preschoolers, and the opportunities that lie in becoming a library member.

At L2, storytime promotes the benefits of introducing children to books and reading as early as possible, and once they reach the early reading stage, their accompanying adult is informed about and encouraged to take part in national reading promotion programmes which the library facilitates for older children, such as the previously mentioned Spring in Storytime and Summer Stars.

Similarly, storytime at CL3 can be linked to a reading promotion initiative that stemmed from the government’s public library strategy, Spring into Storytime. The initiative offers extensive information on learning development in small children and reading promotion resources for this age group, which CL3 makes use of. The storyteller at CL3 also took part of the Spring into Storytime workshop earlier this year, in which different reading promotion approaches were introduced in effort of reaching and catering for more children.

L4 also promotes Summer Stars for slightly older children. With their storytime, L4 aims to provide fun, inclusive, reading and learning experiences. Their strategy is to contribute to nurturing small children’s interest in books and stories, and this is done by a child-centred, flexible, tried-and-proven strategy in which children are encouraged to participate not only in storytime but also in shaping storytime.

As previously touched upon, there are reports which claim that there may be a connection between the age, ethnic and social backgrounds of young children and older students and their reading habits and proficiency. For this reason, these factors were included in the interview and observation guides. With the exception of L2 (as my family and I were the only participants at that session), the social and ethnic backgrounds of the accompanying adults varied and so based on this, there does not seem to be a polarising difference in reading nurturing between different ethnicities in this context. However, as this is a small scale qualitative study, I do not claim that this finding reflects all contexts, but that perhaps it may be transferable to more social realities outside of the four circumstances studied here.

Though as of today there exists a lack of research on storytime in Ireland, through my interviews and observation I found that some of the studies reviewed in Chapter 3, which are mostly set in a Swedish context, may reflect the Irish storytime landscape to some extent. Hedemark and Lindberg (2018) stated that early reading promotion programmes in Swedish public libraries often does not only consist of reading aloud, but also entail singing nursery rhymes and dancing, and that such processes contribute to stimulating early literacy development and promotes participation and interaction among children as well as their accompanying adult(s). Three out of four storytime sessions that I participated in reflected this sentiment. Most present children and adults participated in the singing, dancing, helping to pick out the next book, and answering the storytellers’ questions about the story plot. As previously disclosed, at L2, no other families turned up for that week’s storytime session.

The storyteller at CL1 is of the opinion that choosing the right book, encouraging the children to contribute in the selection of stories, and the participation of the accompanying adult all contribute to stimulating the participant’s enjoyment of storytelling and books. L2, LC3, and L4 are largely similar in this respect, albeit the storyteller at LC3 bases the selection of the stories on the recommendations by Spring
into Storytime. All four respondents value the concepts that are the focus of both Chambers’ reading cycle and Hultgren and Johansson’s three I’s: the importance of selection, what the reading activity should look like (and its atmosphere), the participating or enabling adult (Hultgren’s reading role model), on the response or impression that the experience will have on the child and how it helps shape their interest in books.

In Hedemark’s ethnographic study of storytime in Swedish public libraries, she found the practice of storytime in Sweden today are bound by previous, old-fashioned literacy practices, and that there is a gap between Swedish library policies and practices (Hedemark, 2017), something which has not been touched upon in other studies. Hedemark also believes that investigating the efficiency of storytime’s practices will reveal the affordances of storytime for the participants as well how they measure up to relevant national and local policies. In their studies, Stooke and McKenzie point out the need for evaluations and keeping up with research in the field. Evaluations lead to identifying possible shortcomings within the offered services, which in turn leads to implementations and improvements (Stooke & McKenzie, 2009). By staying informed on current research and needs of this group (young children and their guardians), children’s librarians can become game changers in this field. They gain new understandings of early childhood literacy and welfare, knowledge on how to optimise their services and realise national standards for ECEC, personal growth, and help raise questions and enkindle progress in this vital aspect in society that critically needs a renaissance of its own (Stooke & McKenzie, 2011). Having observed a similar situation regarding public libraries rural Ireland, I believe that this can be applied to the Irish library landscape. However, this requires an overview of how libraries across Ireland work with digital tools in relation to children’s reading promotion activities. I believe that children, families and entire communities stand to gain a lot if more of the distance between policy and practice at rural Ireland’s libraries was crossed.

- How do librarians work with multimodality to enhance early literacy among their target group?

In the case of storytime at the selected libraries, all four storytellers refrain from using any type of digital technology, their common reasons are summarised below:

At CL1, the storyteller is of the opinion that use of “smartphones, computer technology has affected literacy and spelling. [The solution is to] Keep promoting the joy of reading.” (CL1 Interview) At L2, the storyteller states, “I don’t like the idea of mixing technology and storytime. There is a place for both in this world certainly, but I think the imagination of a child cannot compare to any aids to interpret a story (…)” (L2 Interview). And while the storyteller at CL3 advocates for the benefit of audio technology to add background sounds to the storytelling, she states: “I don’t think visual technology, e.g. screens, are appropriate in this case or for this age group, and I believe many parents would not be in support of it, as you witness them trying to encourage their children to have as much human interaction as possible…” (CL3 Interview).

This kind of attitude is commonly reflected among professionals and parents in western Ireland. As briefly explored in Chapter 6.5, there are two suggested factors that may explain this approach to the use of technology in reading promotion activities for young children: geography (people in big cities tend to have more progressed views on debated topics); and experience, education and profession (people who work with or study
technology are likely to be up-to-date on research in their fields and construct an educated rather than emotion-fueled opinion on the subject).

Hedemark and Lindberg (2018) reported that Swedish public libraries have developed a collaboration with child healthcare services in which the latter institutions inform and encourage new parents and their babies to take part in library programs which support the literacy of families and early literacy. As of now, as far as I know there is no such partnership in Ireland between maternity wards and public libraries, although this study’s literature review has convinced me that this would strongly benefit both libraries and new families in Ireland, too. One fundamental barrier, perhaps, is that it appears as though only the larger public libraries situated in more populated areas in Ireland offer storytime on a regular basis. In western, rural Ireland, regular storytime - even regular library hours - are rarer than in the more populated eastern counties. What is more is that due to the close proximity to the wild Atlantic ocean, Irish weather is often severely wet and windy, with months long storm seasons and weather warnings issued all year round, but particularly in autumn and winter. This often affects some operations in towns and surrounding villages in the west, as citizens choose to refrain from non-essential trips that require them to be on the road during such warnings. These conditions can render many services unreliable in that they are not regular at times, and unfortunately, library services (not including online library services) and their users sometimes suffer. However, modern times bring many modern possibilities, in the form of technological solutions to old problems.

7.1.1 Reflections on PISA results

With this study, I also hope to contribute to research on the link between early literacy and literacy in adolescence and adulthood. According to Shiel et al (2016), in a comparison of literacy among adults aged 26-28-years-old, of which a large proportion is likely to have participated in the 2000 PISA cycle, it was revealed that Irish adults performed less well on the Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) reading literacy evaluation than PISA. It is important to map out and identify such changes, as well as analysing the reasons for the PISA trend of declining literacy skills.

While the PISA results and existing national and international guidelines form the basis of this study as I explore how these have influenced, or may be influenced, by storytime at Irish public libraries of differing levels and sizes, it is not my intention to claim that PISA or similar evaluations of children’s literacies, knowledge and skills are the most truthful or even morally sound ways of trying to determine the vast understanding of things, which children can easily acquire if their natural curiosity was facilitated, rather than restricted, from early childhood. In this regard, I agree with Fast (2009), who warns that solely focusing on PISA performance results, affects society’s, parents’ and children's views of what is expected of the latter group, and diminishes what is really important: the ability to communicate. Although I understand the need for a method to, globally, establish the abilities of 15-year-olds in order to determine how prepared they are for adulthood and entering the workforce, one size does not fit all. If such evaluations are truly essential - their architects must reconsider their methods so that the real skills that the young people of today possess can be determined and their potentials can be fostered. As society is becoming more and more digitalised, it is increasingly important that everyone learns how digital technologies work - the opportunities as well
as threats - in order to exercise their rights as citizens, but also to keep up with the technologies in our everyday lives.

7.1.2 New literacies and the role of libraries in promoting early literacy

Public libraries in rural Ireland all have a common thread: there’s a shortage of public libraries’ resources despite the need for further investments for reading and literacy promotion programmes. Improved investments in libraries lead to enhancement of their collections, services and reach.

Digital literacy is becoming a key competence that is necessary to acquire and teach to citizens of all ages. Although digital technologies afford many negative effects, they have been proven to enhance literacy among young children both with and without learning and concentration afflictions. I also see the difficulty in implementing new technologies in libraries with scarce resources. But developing and establishing a nationwide strategy to this end, can teach children starting from an early age, how to use utilise technologies in their education and life, the impact of digital technologies, online critical thinking, online etiquette and behaviour rules, as well as informed perspective on online trolling, bullying and otherwise predatory behaviours. Glimstedt et al (2015) highlight the two approaches to using digital tools as a form of learning: 1) technology-centred approach, and 2) reading stimulating approach. A technology-centred approach is necessary in those contexts where it is important for children to learn how to use a technological tool in a constructive and educational environment, while a reading stimulating approach is the use of digital technologies to promote reading interest by creating a multimodal reading experience (Ibid.). This could be viewed rather than as ‘giving in’ to a trend, a much needed proactive and educated strategy for online bullying and harassment. Because believing that either A) the internet is nothing more than the opportunity to stay connected, and communicate with family and old friends, or B) it is possible to avoid the internet or keep your children from accessing the internet - is not sustainable. Instead, ensuring that all citizens are informed of all aspects of digital technologies - opportunities, dangers, and of the importance of a balance between digital technology use and participating in real life - is the safer choice.

Katz argues that many libraries are “missing a chance to increase their relevance and attract new resources” (2015, p. 2). According to Lindahl and Folkesson (2012), implementing technologies such as computers in a practice for pre-school-aged children, enables both children and educators - or in this case librarians - to discover different ways to create new meaning and possibilities of learning and development. In their book, which they hoped would provoke interest and reflection in professionals who work with early literacy, after exploring the use of non-traditional means in the process of developing young readers and writers with special interest in multiliteracies and multimodalities, Charles and Boyle (2014) also stress the importance of expanding traditional views on teaching and learning and acknowledging the needs of today’s diverse and technologically-transformed society.

While it was clear from the participating children and accompanying adults’ appreciation of the sessions at the selected storytimes in western Ireland that relying on one's role as parent in operating this program has its advantages - is it a reliable and trustworthy foundation? I believe that if Irish libraries had sufficient resources they
would be able to cater to other groups that were not present or represented at the times that my family and I visited the libraries: the groups which are not catered to, and remain unseen in a library context: children with dyslexia, concentration difficulties, visual impairments and/or who are on the spectrum (and their families). As previously highlighted by Bergström et al (2017) and Holmgard et al (2013), storytime can become inclusive to these groups by implementing multimodality into the programme and utilising interactive children’s e-books. Relying on one’s personal experiences can be both beneficial and limiting at once. In this study, it proved to be beneficial to the storytime participants to have a librarian who is familiar with young children’s nature and is flexible to their needs. But sticking only to what one knows also excluded other children and their families from taking part in such fun learning experiences regularly, and nurturing their love of reading, learning and socialising in an environment that is suited to them. I believe the causes are lack of awareness of the struggles of people who are marginalised by society and resources to negate this fundamental issue.

7.2 Reflections on method choices

A multi-case research design allowed me to focus on each library individually, which led to an insightful understanding of each library’s storytime operation. Observations allowed this study to acquire a firsthand experience of storytime sessions at each library, while the interviews offered knowledge about how the selected libraries specifically work with storytime, which I would not have been able to attain otherwise. However, I feel that choosing semi-structured interviews over structured interviews would have led to getting a more complete picture of the operation at each library. Despite weighing the advantages and disadvantages of semi-structured and structured interviews beforehand, I did not anticipate the instances in which the respondents briefly mentioned a detail about their operation that I had not covered in my interview guide, and was unable to follow-up. Semi-structured interviews allow for more flexibility in those moments, and prevent new knowledge from falling through the cracks that were missed in the interview guide; whereas, it is my opinion that choosing structured interviews may have affected the results and excluded further relevant information and knowledge that could have been gained from this study.

I also realise that constructing the observation in this particular order, after participating in each library’s storytime may be unconventional. I made the decision to carry out the empirical data collection in this way due to time limitations and logistical convenience, but do believe that I enclosed everything of relevance to each of the observation points from what I had observed earlier during the sessions. In regards to initiating contact, a possibly unconventional decision was made to first participate in storytime, before introducing my purpose for participating, for the same reasons. The respondents thankfully chose to participate and do so on the same day at their earliest convenience. As previously mentioned, I chose this approach over a more traditional one due to having previous experience of trying to establish contact with libraries in Ireland over the phone or email unsuccessfully. I do believe that this approach worked for the study, the respondents, and myself. However, after the storytime at L2, I realised, even though I did gain some insight from the one observational occasion, that perhaps at least two observations should have been planned at each library in order to acquire a fuller picture
of their storytime sessions, as unforeseen circumstances may, as was the case at L2, drastically influence an event.

As previously touched upon in Chapter 5.4.1, Merriam (1994) highlights that the presence of the researcher will always have an effect on the observational occasion. Wildemuth (2017) further explains that conducting participant observation may include the risk of influencing the librarian and the setting which will impact the study’s result in that they may not reflect the library’s regular storytime sessions. Ultimately, the researcher’s effect and potential underlying power relationships may impact the trustworthiness and credibility of the collected data and the ensuing analysis. This was most apparently problematic at L2, as my family and I were the only participants in that week’s storytime session for this age group. This case stands out from the other cases, as it is plausible to conclude that that particular storytime session was predominantly influenced by my and my family’s participation. Incidentally, in the interview after the storytime session the storytime librarian responded positively toward the fact that a toddler had both parents accompanying her and participating. Furthermore, Wildemuth (Ibid.) maintains that transparency and exhibiting empathic neutrality can help with the concerns of participant observations, in particular by conveying to the storytime librarian that the researcher does not hold an undisclosed agenda to prove a predisposed criticism of their storytime events nor to manipulate the setting (Wildemuth, 2017). Having a clear understanding of the importance of neutrality and objectivity, I believe, has helped me maintain empathetic neutrality. Though a logistical decision, this method has allowed me to equally participate and observe, as a “shadow” without the danger of the researcher’s effect influencing the storyteller or event (Czarniawska, 2007). However, the choice of data collection method will always influence the outcome and results of research to a certain extent (Wildemuth, 2017).

The implementation of a thematic analysis in the data analysis has worked well with the study’s topic, research questions, and theoretical framework. A sociocultural perspective provided a theoretical standpoint from which to better understand children’s learning and reading processes, and has been an invaluable tool during this time. Exploring storytime from the storytellers’ perspective rather than the children and parents’ or executive librarians at the selected libraries, offers an overall view of the operation from start to finish, i.e. how the storytime is developed (in terms of strategy, templates, implementation of reading promotion directives, research, or pedagogical perspectives etc.), its vision and goals, and the impact as a reading promotion activity on the participating toddlers’ literacy and/or interest in books as observed by the storytellers. Chambers’ reading circle concept helped me put my experiences at the chosen storytime into context and identify themes that are important in emergent literacy. Hultgren concept of reading role models also helped me identify the meaning and importance of the accompanying adult or librarian as a facilitator of reading. Hultgren and Johansson’s three I’s provided me with an effective and insightful tool through which to understand and analyse these important aspects of any library event. However, had I the possibility, I would have also explored Dolatkhah’s concept of the four M:s (Meaning making, Materiality, Modality, and power relationships (Maktrelationer in Swedish) through which library reading promotion events can be analysed.

Molin (2009) also introduced to me Joseph A. Appleyard’s theories on the processes of becoming a reader from childhood into adulthood - which would also be useful in gaining deeper knowledge on the role of literature at a young age such as this and the
impact it may have into adulthood. However, I felt that this model would be better compatible for a study from a children’s perspective, rather than the librarian’s and their implementation of storytime.

Taking this into account, I would like to offer suggestions for further studies in this area in the future which can benefit from including the features of the study that have worked, and implementing the lessons that I have learned, while taking further risks with regards to geographical range and the number of observational occasions. I believe that my study has a contributory significance to LIS, as a model for investigating storytime in Ireland where this is an unexplored topic. Furthermore, it unexpectedly explores the attitudes toward and use (or lack thereof) of multimodal technologies within early literacy practices in western Ireland. As this is a personal interest of mine, my objective will be to further expand my knowledge and understanding of multimodality in storytime in an Irish context while expanding on this model.

7.3 Further research suggestions

Being mindful of and encouraging multilingualism is also one way to incorporate the three I’s into storytime. In Barnet, platsen, tiden: teorier och forskning i barnbibliotekets omvärld, Monica Axelsson conducted a qualitative case study at four Swedish preschools in predominantly bi- och multilingual areas in Sweden (Axelsson, 2010). During the course of her study and observations at the preschools, the author experienced very few occasions during which the young children’s first languages were in any way integrated into the preschool hours or curriculum. At political level, Sweden has laws which support multiculturalism and multiliteracies in preschool and school settings which encourage that children are enabled to develop their cultural identity and communication skills in Swedish as well as their first language (Ibid.). Growing up in Sweden, because of such laws in Sweden, my own mother had support from the schools that her children attended in helping us sustain our first language while learning a new language in a manner that would allow us to catch up to our Swedish peers. Throughout our school years, not only did we learn the Swedish language, culture and history, or that of our first homeland, but we also learned of those from other cultures and upbringings. Aistear’s National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education and the Síolta User Manual currently includes standards and strategies to encourage multi nationalities, multicultures and bi- or multilingualism in ECEC settings in Ireland. The framework also promotes avoiding bias and the depiction of stereotypical gender, culture, religion, family structure, socio-economic, age and ability statuses within activities. However, I did not see this reflected in the storytime sessions that I visited in western Ireland. As of now, there is a lack of studies which explore the implementation of such national early childhood curriculum frameworks in practice. This topic would make for enlightening research that is connected to the topics of early literacy and collaboration between libraries and preschools that aim to enhance early literacy. Studies specifically on reading promotion activities at preschool settings can also provide insight into how storytime may be organised in other contexts than the library.

Perhaps libraries in the east of the country, which has a more ethnically diverse population, offer early literacy promotion activities aimed at young children who are bilingual. This topic interests me on both personal and professional levels, and I would like to see this area researched further, both in Sweden and in Ireland. Further
investigations into this area may lead to new knowledge on how storytime can better cater to or reach all young children, and perhaps aid refugees and newcomers in Ireland in nurturing their children’s native language, as well as become acquainted with English.

In *Lost in the iPad: Narrative engagement on paper and tablet*, Mangen and Kuiken (2014) remind us of something that many children’s librarians and early childhood educators may not realise, that we are walking on unfamiliar territory in which old-fashioned conventions or literacy practices no longer are in tune with the needs of today’s and tomorrow’s citizens: the children of this generation are “digital natives”, the first generation to grow up not knowing a time before the Internet (Mangen & Kuiken, 2014, p. 171). According to Clasen and Jensen de López (2017), who conducted a Danish study led by Vygotsky’s socio-cultural theories involving qualitative pre and post interviews, it is critical for a successful implementation of an Early Literary Programme (ELP) that the implementation strategy includes an agent/practitioner perspective in which the agents who are given the responsibility to apply early literacy practices successfully are afforded professional development. This could and should include development with regard to up-to-date lectures which feature workshops on digital technologies and their possibilities. However, Clasen and Jensen de López did identify concerns regarding “staffing concerns and time pressure” as being potential barriers to consistency in quality of providing ELP (Clasen & Jensen de López, 2017, p. 276f). The issue of resources and time was also identified in this study (CL1, CL3 and L4) as a hindrance to any changes to current library reading promotion programmes. Still, Clasen and Jensen de López (Ibid.) maintain that the professionals should be included in the decision-making and allocated the resources to provide them with educated knowledge on ELP and its benefits.

By studying how literacy has been acquired historically, one can learn how linguistic practices, people’s skills and the mediating tools at hand have evolved interdependently (Agebjörn & Nilsson, 2013). Because our mediating tools are still evolving, if not at a more rapid pace today, it is important to keep up with the changes and the opportunities that they offer in terms of literacy (Agebjörn & Nilsson, 2013; Säljö, 2005).

Holmstedt (2019) conducted a survey of how public libraries in the Stockholm region in Sweden implement digital technologies into their library programmes for young children and young adults. The survey resulted in an overview of the libraries’ digital activities, services and marketing toward children, of which the author was able to identify areas which are unattended within the library organisations, called “development areas”, as well as, as well as solutions for overcoming the barriers that they cause (Holmstedt, 2019). In the two counties counties of the selected libraries, there is an unmistakable need to perform a similar survey.

Researching and improving library services and their early literacy reading promotion programmes to keep up with all of today’s citizens’ needs should be perceived as a sisyphean task which contributes to a continuously evolving democratic society - a society in which all people are *enabled* to participate and contribute toward a more progressed, inclusive, and educated world.
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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview guide

Mariana O’Driscoll
March 27, 2019

To whom it may concern,

Hello!
My name is Mariana and I am a student at the Swedish School of Library and Information Science (SSLIS). I am writing a master's thesis on public library reading promoting strategies for young children (toddlers of ca 0-3yrs) and families to enhance early literacy. I am interested in how public libraries work with Storytime for this group, their views on reading promotion events and their role in enhancing literacy. I am hoping to ask you some questions on how your library works with this to learn more about the practice of Storytime in an Irish context. This topic is of special interest to me as I have a toddler myself, and so this is also a personal learning experience for me. I hope that you are interested in participating.

Thanks in advance. Sincerely,
Mariana O’Driscoll
1. Does Storytime take place in its own storyroom/space? Why/why not? What functions does the story room have at a storytelling session?

2. How does the library hope that the children will benefit from Storytime? Can it be linked to reading promotion work at the library?

3. Is there a template for how you host Storytime? Or are there specific goals formulated for it? How much flexibility and personal freedom does the individual storytelling leader have?

4. (If applicable:) How has a template been prepared? Is it based on national public libraries guidelines? On national early literacy guidelines? Pedagogical perspectives?

5. How are the stories chosen? Are they prepared in advance? If so, what are the thoughts behind choosing a story - Age of the target group? Special themes? Any other factors?

6. What are your views on using technology during storytelling? Or other aids?

7. Who comes to Storytime? (Individual children/families, preschool groups and so on?) Do you have any special measures to reach children/families who are missing out, or those who need special language support, those with any impairments?

8. Who is the target group, and approximately how many children/families show up on a weekly basis?

9. What does the library’s marketing strategy look like? What measures are taken to reach the target group? Can more be done/are there resources to do more?

10. What role do the accompanying adults play? And siblings? Are they actively participating during the storytelling session?

11. Have you been able to see any change (in literacy skills or otherwise) among the toddlers who attend Storytime regularly during your time here? What would you credit such changes to?

12. Was this a typical storytelling session? Why / why not?

PISA LITERACY RESULTS (The latest PISA results, published in 2015, revealed that Irish youths are among the most literate in that age group in the world. However it also revealed an overall decrease in literacy from the previous PISA cycle among youths in Ireland, and globally):

13. How do you view the debate on literacy that is going on right now in EU? What do you think should be done regarding the drop in literacy among our young? What is the library’s role?

14. Is there anything else you would like to add? Views on reading promotion toward this target group or others? At a local, national, international level? On public libraries’ role in boosting early literacy?
Appendix B: Observation guide

Space:
How/where is the storyroom placed in the library room?
How do you access the room? (How does the entrance look?)
Is there any contact with the outside world (for example, windows?)
What does the room look like?
What is in the room?
What kind of atmosphere is created in the room?
How is it organised?
Are there fixed seats?
Where/what are the seating facing?
Is there a fixed seat for the storytelling leader?
Are there opportunities for technical aids/tools?
Are props such as toys/puppets used?
How is the lighting utilised in the room?
Are children encouraged to move around or to be at one fixed point?

Participants and attending parent(s):
Who is there and how many?
What do the accompanying adults/families look like? (Only mothers/fathers? Childminder? Age? Middle-class?)

Interaction between the storytelling leader and the children/families:
Who is acting? Who is encouraged to act and how?
What does the storytelling leader do? Does a dialogue exist and how?
What kind of reading is it?
How do the children react to the storytelling? To songs?
Are there other attending adults? How do they participate? Do they interact with the storyteller?
Do the parents/minders participate/sing more enthusiastically than the children?

Interaction between the children:
Is it groups or individual children/families who visit the storytime session?
Is there communication between the children?
How does it seem to affect them?
What do the children do after the storytelling? Do they stay in the library?
Are they or their parents looking up books, asking questions, doing something else in the library?
Do they talk to each other about what they have been through?

Organisationally:
What is being read? What type of stories/themes/genres are told? Modern or classic literature, or both?
How long are the sessions?
Is there any active reading promotion (for example, information)?
Appendix C: Results - Chambers’ Reading Circle at CL1, L2, CL3 and L4

Below, a table which illustrates to what degree the librarians at CL1, L2, CL3 and L4 incorporate the different sequences of Chambers’ reading circle. These results are further explained in Chapter 7.2.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>L2</th>
<th>CL3</th>
<th>L4</th>
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Figure 3, Table of the libraries’ implementations of Chambers’ reading circle components.