## Librarians Telling Tales Podcast Transcript- Episode 20

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#### Transcript:

**Musical Intro:** "Uplifting 2463" by Twisterium from pixabay.com (Description) Upbeat, piano and percussion. Music fades and plays under.

**Amy:** Hey, bookworms! Welcome to Librarians Telling Tales, where we introduce you to all the things we love about libraries: books, people, and making connections. I'm Amy. **Blair:** I'm Blair. **Jennifer:** I'm Jennifer.

#### (0:23) Music fades out.

**Blair:** In today's episode, we are chatting with a special guest, Dr. Tara O'Neill, about early literacy, favorite picture books, and ways to keep kids engaged in reading. Tara is a faculty member at Yavapai College and she is serving as the College's Education and Early Childhood Education Program Director.

**Music Transition:** "Ascending-marimba-notification" by Alexander from Orangefreesounds.com

(Description) Bright marimba scale.

### (0:43) Guest Interview Pt. 1- Background & Early Childhood Literacy

Blair: Welcome, Tara, and thanks so much for joining us today.

Tara: Thank you for having me.

Jennifer: So Dr. O'Neill, Tara <laugh>, I feel like you are in good company because you love children's books just as much as we do. So we're anxious to hear about you and I thought, why don't we start off with how you chose your career path, why you're in this particular field, a little bit about yourself. Tara: Okay. Well I always knew I wanted to be a teacher. Even when I was very young, I was reading to my stuffed animals and my dolls and I was teaching everyone how to write in cursive even before I didn't know how to write in cursive. So it was a given when I graduated high school that I would go into the teaching field. And somewhere along the line, I fell in love with early childhood. I think it was probably from experiences watching kids and volunteering in Sunday school. So I ended up teaching first grade first thing after I graduated and I noticed that teaching kids to read is not always an easy task. So I went back and got my master's degree in Early Childhood Education and got a reading endorsement along the way and was trained in a lot of different ways to teach reading, whether it be a whole reading model or a phonics-based model. I had a lot of tools in my toolbox.

So that's where my reading background came from. Then I started teaching at the college and have been lucky enough to teach classes like Intro to Early Childhood Education, Family and Community Partnerships, all of which tie into early literacy in some way. I got my PhD in Psychology, which doesn't really relate, but it does because I teach a lot of developmental psychology classes. So that's how I kind of ended up where I am. And I also volunteer with the Dolly Parton Imagination Library, which has been a really great way to reach out to the community and communicate the importance of early literacy and give kids and families a way to promote that through the Dolly Parton Imagination Library because it's free to participants zero to five. It's not financial, income-based, anything like that. Anyone who wants to in Yavapai County can sign up.

**Blair:** And fair warning everyone-I am also involved with the Imagination Library program. I'm on the board as well with Tara, and it is really something that the library has helped to foster along with some really awesome local sponsors, like the Rotary Clubs and the Friends of the Prescott Public Library, getting everything started. So we're all in on that one. We love it.

**Amy:** It is amazing. I did want to ask a little bit, we were also educators and then transferred into a different role, librarianship. What prompted you to leave the classroom and become like an educator of the up and coming teachers?

**Tara:** To be honest, it was a hard decision 'cause I had only been in the classroom for about six years at that point. I had taught in three different districts, four different grade levels. I taught English Language learners at one point. And then I had my daughter and there wasn't many options for part-time work in districts.

## Amy: Ah.

**Tara:** So I started adjunct teaching with the full intention of going back into the classroom at one point and then I just kind of fell into a full-time position and have really enjoyed it. But, honestly, a part of me does miss being in the classroom and I have volunteered as much as I could with my children as they were growing up, doing reading groups or whatever I can. And someday I think maybe when I retire from college teaching I will maybe go back in some capacity. **Jennifer:** So what have you enjoyed most about your college role? Because you are now teaching future teachers.

**Tara:** To be honest, when I first started teaching at the college level, I did not like it at all because I was very young and I had a lot of teachers that had been in the classroom for 20 plus years in my class and it was hard to teach them as a relatively new teacher. Some of them were my teachers when I was in high school.

# Amy: Oh wow.

**Tara:** But it was also very fun because I got to learn so much from them and then that kind of evolved into, hey, do you want to teach this Introduction to Education class? And that was just amazing to feel the energy of pre-service teachers, people interested in education. I got to share my experience. I got to rally guest speakers. So that just kind of evolved into teaching a lot of different things, which is my favorite part about teaching at Yavapai [College]. One semester I teach Family and Community Partnerships. The next semester it's Health, Safety and Nutrition. And so it is fun to bring that classroom element into adult learner lives as well as try to be a model of good teaching as well as inspire people to become teachers because we all know that there's a teacher shortage and a shortage of great teachers. So those are the things I enjoy—just interacting with students.

**Jennifer:** I would be really interested in knowing with your background and your knowledge, what would you say to a parent who wants to know how to get their child started, introducing books and reading to their young children? Because we get that question here at the library.

Tara: How young are the children?

Jennifer: We get parents who have three and four year olds who are very interested and don't know where to start.

**Tara:** Well, they've already started. From the time that they were pregnant, they've started talking to their babies. Babies come out hearing really well. By the time we're six or seven months old, our brains are hardwired to learn the language we hear. So if babies hear more than one language, they'll be able to speak that language without an accent. But just talking to babies is building pre-reading skills. They're listening all the time to all the people around them, whether it's the TV, the radio, they're picking up all of those things. And those are all pre-reading. writing, listening, and speaking skills that we're teaching kids without even knowing it. Just reading to kids, pick up an age-appropriate book. Books provide 50% more vocabulary than day-to-day interactions do. So coming to the library is a really great first step and it's likely that those parents are already doing all of the things that they should be to promote pre-reading skills.

So, we're not talking about getting kids reading early, we're just talking about laying the foundation for language overall, which impacts brain development, literacy development, future school success. All of those things are done before kids ever enter school. Talking to kids; that serve and return, asking kids open-ended questions. All of those things are building those pre-reading skills. Surround them with people who talk to them and sing to them. I remember taking my kids to my grandma 'cause she taught them all kinds of different new songs and nursery rhymes that I didn't think to. So bring them to storytime at the library. Sign up for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library.

Jennifer: Can you share why you think nursery rhymes are so important?

**Tara:** There's so many reasons, but vocabulary. Rhyming helps kids learn to read. They're catchy, they stick in kids' heads, they'll say them over and over again. There's so many things that we take for granted that we naturally do with kids through motherese and other forms of communication that the brain is hardwired to react to and rhymes are one of those.

**Music Transition:** "Ascending-marimba-notification" by Alexander from Orangefreesounds.com

(Description) Bright marimba scale.

#### (7:08) Guest Interview Pt. 2- Setting Kids up for Reading Success

**Blair:** So I've had a few interesting conversations with parents and grandparents who are worried that their kid is already behind. So like they're not even in school yet, "But they can't read yet!" And I try and reassure them that it is setting up foundations and building blocks. What would you say to reassure parents or grandparents who think that that child is already behind?

Tara: Oh, I remember the stresses of having young children and wanting them to be ahead. And by the time my third kid was in preschool, that's when I kind of realized pushing it isn't always the best. And so many of those things are being built and you can't see them. So I would say third grade, you know around the time kids are eight, if they're having some major reading problems, then that's when interventionists start to get involved. Up to that point, kids are learning at their own pace and they're learning so many things you can't even see. In Finland, one of the most renowned education systems in the world, kids don't even go to school 'til they're six or seven. There's zero pressure for them to be academically performing, and they test better than our kids by leaps and bounds because of the way their system is set up. Nurturing, they have teachers for multiple years in a row. It's all relationship based, it's non-pressure. And there's a lot of other variables that go into that. But I think that we do a lot more harm than good when we try to push kids outside of their zone of proximal development or the zone that they're best able to learn at. And we kind of make them disinterested, which is the biggest mistake when we push too hard. Like my son wasn't writing for the longest time, he showed zero interest in coloring. One day around four or five, he comes out drawing pictures of people that have their nose, their eyes. They're very detailed and I'm like, where did this come from? <laugh>. But I couldn't have sat down with him and made him do those things. When he was ready, he was gonna do 'em. So if there are concerns, those will come out eventually, but it's not before they're much older and they're gonna be in school.

**Jennifer:** That is so fascinating to me. I think anyone who's listening who's worried about that should just be completely relieved. So we should just be enjoying books, just introducing books and language for the pure pleasure of it.

Tara: Yeah. I mean, I hope it's a relief. It was for me, and I was a teacher—I knew these things, but yet I still wanted my kids to be overachievers and I was always worrying. But with language learners, they have a stage called the silent period where they're soaking up language and no matter what their age, it depends on their personalities, but they won't talk for a pretty long amount of time. You'll have maybe like a second grader and you know they speak Spanish or German or whatever their home language is, but they just choose not to speak English, and you're worried. They comprehend so much more than they're able to communicate and sometimes they're shy about saying it unless they know for sure they can say it right. So you won't hear this kid talk for six months and then they'll come out with full sentences, high-level thinking and you're like, that's been in there this whole time <laugh>. And that'll be the same with young children, right? When they start talking more around two or three, you're like, "That's your personality, that's who you've been this whole time? You're really funny, you're smart." There's always more going on that we can't see and that's okay. That's how it's supposed to be. Amy: I think, too, a lot of parents though with like the pandemic having shifted how education was happening for a year and a half, they are concerned about their kids' progress. Not just their socialemotional development and being around their peers, but just online ed for kindergartners and first graders who in the classroom setting might be getting some more direct instruction in letter-sounds and things like that.

**Tara:** Yeah, well, once they've started school, the pandemic definitely was difficult for everybody. And I think if you have those concerns once your kids are in school, then just have those conversations with teachers. Because teachers are the ones who see kids that same age all day, every day. And they'll be able to tell you if your expectations are within range because it's hard to know when you're in your silo

with your own kid. You don't remember what you were doing when you were three or five, you know? Or what kids today are doing because the world today is very different and there are very wide ranges of what's accepted as developmentally appropriate. You can never look at a list that says if your kid isn't reading by the time they're five, they're behind 'cause we know that that's not the case. They've done a lot of research on college kids who have a C average, and they tend to be the more productive citizens in the world. So, I mean, academic performance is not the end all, be all. There's so much more: creativity, critical thinking, awareness, social sensitivities, all those things.

I know that's not related to your question, but online learning definitely did cause some deficits, but in other ways kids were able to bond with their parents more. I mean, my kids were in middle and high school; I got to spend some real quality time with them. We realized we like doing puzzles. We didn't know that before. My son learned how to play chess. There are pros and cons for sure, but we were all in that same boat together is the bottom line.

Jennifer: How many children do you have?

Tara: Three. 18, 16, and 14.

Jennifer: Oh wow.

**Tara:** And I have to say, I am a lover of reading. My husband is not. Only one of my children loves reading. They all can read. And I hope that at some point they become readers because of the enjoyment I have found in it. But everybody has their interest. You have to love your kids for who they are and they aren't all gonna be like you.

**Jennifer:** I'm a big believer they'll come back to books because my son is turning 22 and he's coming back to books. And we read nonstop as well and he read all the way up to probably sixth, seventh grade and then he just had other interests.

Tara: Yeah.

Jennifer: But I am seeing now that he's coming back to books.

**Tara:** And sometimes they're just tired 'cause they read so much academic material throughout the day, that it's not fun. And then when their brain has a break from the academic reading, they can pick up something and enjoy it more.

**Jennifer:** So what about all those books that you read to your kiddos when they were little? What were some of those books that you enjoyed so much that you have memories of?

**Tara:** A lot of 'em were books I read when I was a child, like the *If You Give a Mouse a Cookie* (Laura Numeroff) and those books were so fun. This one was from my childhood: *The Little Mouse, the Red Ripe Strawberry, and the Big Hungry Bear* (Don Wood).

Blair: Oh, still a favorite.

**Tara:** Yes. I had a big book of that from when I was a teacher and we would lay it out in the living room and the kids would point to the words. And, oh, what was the one—where the little boy's naughty? **Amy:** *No, David*! (David Shannon)

Tara: No, David!

Amy: "No, David!"

**Tara:** They thought that was hilarious. As they got older, we read things like *Wayside School* (Louis Sachar) that series, and *Hatchet* (Gary Paulsen), both of those were from when I was a kid. *Harry Potter* (J.K. Rowling) that was getting popular when I first started teaching. And I had first graders who were reading *Harry Potter* books and that's what got them interested in reading with *Harry Potter*. Anything with rhyming, when they were really little. Anything sensory. So anything they could feel or any little doors they could open with their little fingers, fine motor skills. Those were some of our favorites. *Edward the Emu* (Sheena Knowles)... "Was sick of the zoo. There was nowhere to go. There's nothing to do." I had that one memorized.

Jennifer: I don't know that one.

Tara: There's a couple of those.

Amy: Is that Bill Peet?

Tara: Sheena Knowles.

Amy: Oh.

**Tara:** They find their identity as emus <laugh>. They aren't happy, they wanna be a snake and they wanna be a bear and they wanna be all these other things. And finally in the end, he realizes that he's who he's supposed to be. He's an emu.

Jennifer: Sounds like a great book to introduce what an emu is.

Tara: I know, right?

Jennifer: Yeah.

**Tara:** Yeah. I think I didn't know what an emu was before I read that. <laugh> Anything by [author] Mercer Mayer.

Blair: Oh my gosh, yes.

**Tara:** *It's a Book* by Lane Smith. That one's really fun. *The Flea's Sneeze* (Lynn Downey). That's a good rhyming book. Fred Gwynne from the Munsters, he has some good books. If you get *A Chocolate Moose for Dinner*, he makes fun of language. Oh, that's fun. *William's Doll* (Charlotte Zolotow). That's one from the seventies. That was really controversial because it was the first book about a boy who wanted a doll and his grandma gave him one and his dad was not happy <laugh>. But in the end it was all good 'cause William was learning how to take care of his doll 'cause someday he'd be a dad. *Stephanie's Ponytail* (Robert Munsch). I don't know why, but my kids loved that book and it was long.

Jennifer: Robert Munsch.

Tara: Yeah.

Jennifer: Classic, yes.

**Tara:** You know when you have to read that book a million times <laugh>, you're trying to find ways to shorten it and they know. Like, "That's not what it says, Mom."

Blair: In my house, the Munsch book was Paper Bag Princess.

Tara: Mmm.

Jennifer: What did you think about his Love You Forever book?

**Tara:** Ah, who wouldn't love that book?

Jennifer: I met people who don't like that book, but I always cry, always with that book.

Tara: Oh.

**Blair:** Only because it makes them cry and emotional. That's the reason, is because they don't wanna admit the emotions that are brought out in that book. That book is so heartwarming and lovely. **Tara:** It's almost an adult book more than a kid book. Like, kids get it but adults are like 'cause we have

aging parents, I guess.

Blair: Yeah.

**Tara:** *The Name Jar* (Yangsook Choi). But I like to read that one not necessarily to my kids, but to my language learners. It's helping find identity through your name. So, those are a few.

Music Transition: "Ascending-marimba-notification" by Alexander from

Orangefreesounds.com

(Description) Bright marimba scale.

## (15:48) Guest Interview Pt. 3- Tips for Parents and Teachers

**Blair:** Is there any book that you are like "you need this in your classroom" to every new teacher? **Tara:** It depends on the grade level, but the early grades. What is the one with the alphabet tree? **Jennifer:** *Chicka Chicka Boom Boom* (Bill Martin Jr. and John Archambault)

Blair: Chicka Chicka Boom Boom.

**Tara:** That one, for sure, if you're a K, 1, 2 teacher. I would just encourage teachers to read what kids are reading at any given time so that you can talk to them about it. When I picked up Harry Potter for the first time, I kind of rolled my eyes and was like, really? Am I gonna read this? And then I loved it, of course. But I could have conversations with my first and second graders about it. And anything you can find to have in common with kids and get down to their level and try to understand what it is do they like about this. And then you can build curriculum around their interests. And there's literature for everything. Another thing I tell teachers is talking about abuse, neglect, divorce, any life circumstance that your students might be going through, there's books for that and that will open up the door for conversation. Third grade and up, I know, that gets a little trickier, but don't you remember having a teacher who read after lunch out loud for thirty minutes and that was your favorite part of the day? I encourage teachers to do that still.

**Jennifer:** My first grade teacher brought books to life for me. We were reading *The Boxcar Children* (Gertrude Chandler Warner) out loud and then she gave everyone an assignment to bring, uh, I think I had to bring carrots and we made a stew just like the kids...

Tara: How fun.

Jennifer: ... did in the story. I'm old now, but that is so real and alive in my mind, still.

Tara: Yeah.

Jennifer: And I just loved her so much for doing that.

Tara: Yeah.

**Blair:** And I know I've told the story before about my second grade teacher, she read aloud *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Roald Dahl) and then we got to watch the movie afterwards. If we kept our chocolate bar alive during the reading of the book, she gave us another one when we watched the movie <laugh>, so...

Tara: That's like the marshmallow experiment.

Blair: <laugh>. Little bit. Little bit. But it was still, I remember that very vividly.

**Tara:** Yeah, literature can be the center of your curriculum if that's what you choose to do and then you can plan around it and then it makes it so much more meaningful.

**Jennifer:** Speaking of reading aloud, I was interested to know if you have any ideas on why reading aloud is so important. We get lots of parents that wanna come to the library and they ask us a good read aloud book for their children. So any... and then recommendations, perhaps.

**Tara:** Well, first of all, you comprehend more and you remember more if you hear it and you see it. It just hits more learning styles if you read aloud, especially before kids can read themselves. I think you can read anything aloud. I mean, there's certainly books that are designed more for reading aloud. I mean it should be age appropriate. Things with picture support are always fun. Having kids finish sentences for you. Books with movement, anything you can do to encourage multiple senses is gonna make it more fun and more meaningful. I listen to books all the time. I like to do both because sometimes you get tired of reading, sometimes you wanna just relax and listen. We've gone to great lengths to have those so accessible, which is great for kids with dyslexia and other reading problems, that can be super helpful.

Amy: Along the lines for parents, if there was one literacy tip you could share, just one...

**Tara:** Talking to kids and having books available for them, even if you don't read to them, even if you're a parent that's not literate yourself and there's no shame in that. Kids can listen to books. There's story times, there's lots of options. But just having books and seeing that they're in the home and that they're important to you. Them seeing you read the newspaper, them seeing you read a book, all of those modeling things are gonna be huge. And tying literacy into every content area. And you can read about math. And there's those really fun M&M books (*M&M's Brand* math books by Barbara Barbieri

McGrath). You can say, "Hey, I don't know the answer to that question. Let's do some research and find out and let's read about it." If you can read, you can do anything.

**Amy:** And when she says M&M math books, she means the candy, not the rapper [Eminem]. <laugh> **Jennifer:** Alright. <laugh>. There's a Cheerios one, too. (*The Cheerios Counting Book* by Will McGrath and Barbara McGrath)

Tara: Oh, yes, yes.

Jennifer: So if you're not a sugar fan you can always do the Cheerios.

Tara: Lots of math books out there.

**Blair:** So then my next question is about how screen time plays into this because there is also a significant portion of parents who are concerned about screen time. And if you think that screen time is like the antithesis of literacy or if it's a tool.

**Tara:** I think it's a tool. It's not going away, and kids are asked to complete standardized testing on computers now, so they have to have some technology awareness. So if used appropriately and using age appropriate apps and limits on screen time, I think it's not a bad thing. Nothing's black and white. **Amy:** A class I took through Library Juice Academy said one of the most important things about screen time and engaging is that it's a co-engagement so that the adult is present to talk about things that you're seeing and doing and help sort of scaffold that learning as it's happening and or being able to stop and talk about something. How important that aspect of being together and engaging in tech together was.

**Tara:** Ideally, yeah. But I'm not gonna lie, if I had an iPad when my kids were little and I needed 30 minutes to take a shower, I would've plugged them in. <laugh>

All: <laugh>

**Tara:** But yeah, I think that is the thing that maybe parents don't realize is the importance of seeing exactly what their kids are doing. They're learning stuff, no matter what. Whether you give them a tablet or give them nothing or leave them alone, put them with friends, their brains are growing. It's just what you want them to have access to and how much you wanna encourage that. It is worth saying that we tend to be more aware of what our kids have access to when they're young and at some point it's kind of a free-for-all like, I don't know, maybe around middle school. I'm guilty of that myself, so there's no judgment. But yeah, it's hard to keep that under control because there's just so much out there. I don't know, I'd like to think if I were a parent of young children today, I would just try not to have any technology honestly. Because I know as soon as they step into a classroom, they're gonna have plenty. It's kind of like feeding kids sugar first thing. If you give 'em the thing that their brain can become addicted to so easily first thing, it's gonna be nothing but uphill after that. Just don't hand 'em the phone. Hand 'em a book.

Blair: And board books aren't that expensive. It's okay if they break it.

**Tara:** And Dolly Parton Imagination Library will send you one every month for free... <laugh> **Blair:** ...until they turn five. <laugh>

Amy: Way to go, ladies!

Tara: 60 books...

Jennifer: Way to plug it.

**Tara:** ...60 books by the age of five, all age appropriate and with guides for parents to help you do activities with your children while reading the book.

Music Transition: "Ascending-marimba-notification" by Alexander from

Orangefreesounds.com

(Description) Bright marimba scale.

# (22:08) Guest Interview Pt. 4- The Power of Graphic Novels

**Jennifer:** So how about, maybe you can share with us any final thoughts or comments, things that we've overlooked or things that you feel really passionate about that we haven't asked you about.

**Tara:** One of the questions on our initial list was what to do when kids only wanna read graphic novels or they only wanna read the same book over and over. And I think I alluded to this earlier, but just do it. Follow their lead, whatever they wanna do. You can nudge them into different directions a little bit, but if it's not their idea, it's not gonna be a good one. So there is no shame in reading the same—I mean, I've read the same book over and over again. And go along with their interests, even if it's not your interest. Be excited about it anyway 'cause that's how you're gonna connect with your kid on all different kinds of levels, whether it be reading or otherwise. And yeah, I guess that's my biggest advice 'cause their horizons will expand just like their food horizons and all kinds of other things. You just have to meet 'em where they're at.

Blair: Comics and graphic novels are not bad because they are engaging.

Tara: Yeah.

**Blair:** That's something that I try and nicely say to parents who are like, "You need to pick something besides a graphic novel!" It's like, but they're reading.

Tara: Yeah.

Blair: That's the important part. They're enjoying it.

**Tara:** I read *People* [magazine] and that is not high quality literature <laugh>, but I love it. **Blair:** Yes.

Tara: Mostly for the outfits, but...

**Jennifer:** You spoke about modalities. So when you talk about graphic novels, what modalities is that reaching?

**Tara:** With graphic novels and comics and things, you have more visual input. I mean 'cause once books go to chapter books and there's not usually pictures that go with them, kids are seeing these things in their head. But if they have an idea on paper, then maybe that's helping them follow the storyline a little bit better. Or imagine things more, you know?

**Blair:** And we are always accepting visual input every day. We are examining situations, people, placements and we are constantly filtering that information. So it is still training for everyday life and the things that you're gonna experience.

**Tara:** I think it's easy to forget that kids don't have the prior knowledge and understanding and schema that we do as people in this world for 20, 30, 40 years, like we can picture that in our head. But they may not have had that experience, you know, like a scene on a train. If they've never been on a train or never seen more than the outside of a train, they can't visualize that like we can. Yeah, any kind of support related to literacy isn't a bad thing.

Jennifer: I think you've shared some wonderful comments, really foundational that will resonate with our listeners.

Tara: Thank you.

**Amy:** We hope this episode inspires you to share books and make memories around books and engage with your children and, and just let that development happen.

Music Transition: "Ascending-marimba-notification" by Alexander from

Orangefreesounds.com

(Description) Bright marimba scale.

**Blair:** Thank you for joining us today on Librarians Telling Tales. For a full list of the books shared in this episode, check out the link in our podcast bio.

**Jennifer:** Don't forget to subscribe to catch our next episode where we chat about books that celebrate community and friendship.

(24:58) Musical Outro: "Uplifting 2463" by Twisterium from pixabay.com (Description) Upbeat, piano and percussion. Music fades in and plays under.

**Amy:** We'd like to thank our listeners for supporting this podcast. We would also like to thank the City of Prescott, Friends of the Prescott Public Library, and all of our fabulous coworkers at Prescott Public Library... and Dr. Tara O'Neill for joining us today.

**Blair:** Be sure to like and subscribe to Librarians Telling Tales. And until next time, we'll see you in the library.

Total Runtime (25:24)