

Tell a Different Story: Some reflections on the 11th Kilbrandon Lecture and its relevance to residential child care

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Abstract

Stories are a part of every culture, helping people to understand their history, their hopes and their fears. However, it is only in recent times that the importance of storytelling in residential childcare has begun to be explored.

Keywords

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Introduction

Stories are a part of every culture, helping people to understand their history, their hopes and their fears. However, it is only in recent times that the importance of storytelling in residential childcare has begun to be explored. Kirkpatrick and McNicol stated that 'stories help even the youngest child learn what to expect in life and how to explore life's experiences' (Kirkpatrick and McNicol, 2006, p.2). In an evaluation of a story-telling project in residential care, Stevens et al. (2008) found that it helped children and young people to develop their literacy skills and enhanced relationships with staff who were the storytellers. It also demonstrated that the process of storytelling had a calming effect on a residential unit, creating an environment where residents and staff could feel closer to each other. Stories, whether written or spoken, can therefore provide the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of one's experiences and oneself in a residential child care context.

Neuroscience is beginning to look at why stories are so important. It is known that the language regions of the brain are involved in how the brain interprets written and spoken words. However, in recent times, researchers have focused on the fact that stories not only activate the language areas but also other parts of the brain as well. For example, Gonzales et al (2006) asked participants to read words with strong odour associations, along with neutral words, while their brains were being scanned by a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) machine. When subjects looked at the word 'cinnamon' their primary olfactory cortex lit up as well as the language areas; when they saw the word 'chair', this region remained dark. The importance of metaphors has also been studied and

demonstrates the way the brain responds to imagined scenarios. For example, Lacey et al. (2012) reported that when participants read a metaphor involving texture, the sensory cortex (responsible for perceiving texture through touch) also became active. Metaphors like 'the singer had a velvet voice' roused the sensory cortex, while phrases matched for meaning, like 'the singer had a pleasing voice' did not elicit any reaction.

Oakley (2010) argues that stories are a psychologically important way of allowing readers to explore and experience, and understand emotions in a safe way. He also argues that reading and listening to fiction helps to fill gaps in experience, allowing people to create different personal narratives and build alternative pictures of what their future may be like. This is particularly important in residential care, where children tend to be from highly deprived backgrounds and impoverished family life situations. As Morning (2008) commented 'Carefully chosen stories can speak to [children's] souls and help them to imagine what they could become' (p. 48).

In addition, stories can become a powerful therapeutic tool for looked after children and young people. Rowshan (1997) discussed how stories have two levels of structure: surface content and deep structure. The deep structure [meaning] of the story is recovered through an unconscious process called *transderivational search*. When a young person listens to or reads a story, they continuously associate this with their own memories. This explains why reading or listening to stories can be such a powerful tool to use with looked after children who have experienced loss and trauma. The story allows the young person to reconnect with their past, but in a way in which they can be held and supported through the experience.

With these thoughts in mind, the relevance of the 11th Kilbrandon Lecture to residential child care becomes clear. For those who are unfamiliar with the Kilbrandon Lecture series, it was inaugurated in 1999 by the University of Glasgow's Centre for the Child in Society and it is now hosted by the University of Strathclyde and supported by the Scottish Government. As well as discussing the evolution and working of the Children's Hearings System, the lectures have examined themes around children's lives in general and have 'offered critical insights into how adults and children together can shape the future' (Hill and Taylor, 2010). The 11th Kilbrandon Lecture was given by Professor Frank Cottrell Boyce, scriptwriter, children's author and patron of *The Reader Organisation**. His lecture took as its theme the power of story to change lives, build resilience and give pleasure. For the remainder of this paper, a very much abridged version of the lecture is presented. It is hoped that the content of the lecture and the passion with which it is presented may encourage further reflection on the importance of stories for children and young people in residential child care.

The lecture

'I would like to begin with an epigraph and this is a quotation that I love. It's from a man who was born in a trailer park in the Midwest [USA] and grew up there. He had a lot of psychological problems; he was sectioned and taken to a psychiatric hospital where he was operated upon. When he left the institution he was homeless for a while, he got into drugs, got into drink, into self-harming; self-

harming in such a spectacular way that it became a form of entertainment. His name was James Osterberg: he is also known as Iggy Pop. Iggy Pop, talking about music, said: 'Music exploded me out of the life for which I was destined'. I love that line. It's a sentiment that a lot of people have expressed, people who have become....great athletes, or dancers, or painters... They come across this new discipline and it changes everything for them. There are reasons for me choosing Iggy's quotation. He's talking specifically about happiness, because the life for which he was destined was a life in an institution and a life on drugs, or a rock and roll death. How do we become happy? How does this connect with pleasure? I'm going to talk about reading for pleasure and the stories by which we define ourselves, how we communicate with the world. They're the frequency on which we transmit ourselves the world over. I love this illustration.



This is a totem pole from British Columbia. It was made by a king called Anetlas at the end of the 19th Century. It was made because he'd adopted a little girl. It celebrated the *potlatch* ceremony, a gift-giving ceremony performed when the little girl became part of his people. The totem pole starts with folklore and fairy stories at the bottom. At the top it has him, a little marker for each of the *potlatch* ceremonies he has held, and the little girl. So her whole story is in this totem pole. Like this we are stories, and stories can 'explode' us out of the person that we're destined to be, or they can do.

Our personal stories give us our sense of who we are, but the stories we read help to supplement and add to our experiences. As a teenager, I read a lot of Raymond Chandler. I can still remember these fantastic phrases: 'She was the kind of blonde who would make an archbishop kick in a stained glass window'. And that was where I got my education

about women. One Saturday morning, I was waiting for the bus and *the* girl, the epitome of female beauty, the girl that we'd all fantasised about was also standing at the bus stop - unbelievable. Even more unbelievable, she spoke to me. I can remember exactly what she said. She said [monotone]: 'Do you know what time the 79's due?' And I have no idea, still, how I connected the St Helen's Burgh bus timetable with hard-boiled private detectives from Los Angeles. But somehow I did and all this Raymond Chandler chat came out of me. She sat next to me on the bus, the bus arrived in St Helen's and she was with me all afternoon and it was just this magical, magical thing.

So that was how I discovered the potency of words....that power of words and stories to fill the gap.

Stories can carry people through times of great adversity. Eric Lomax, a prisoner of war in Changi who wrote *The Railway Man*, was put into solitary confinement. There was a prisoner whose identity he never discovered. They surreptitiously helped each other by sharing their tiny rations and figuring out from the guard's footsteps these tiny, tiny (moments) when they could speak to each other. What they did was recite poetry to each other that they'd learned in school. The other guy was Australian and Eric used to recite him *The Lady of Shalott*. Think of that picture: a kind of Arthurian British mystical landscape coming through the bars of a bamboo cage in Burma. Having that background of reading is what helped to sustain Eric, I think. I met Eric and he spoke with these beautiful, considered sentences. I would work for hours to write as beautifully as he spoke. But because he had those inner resources, because a lot of it he'd learned off by heart, he could change the story that was happening to him. A prisoner of a great empire, he should have had no hope, but he was able to change the story and that's what brought him through.

There are endless stories like that. We know that literacy and reading gives you these strengths, but it is the power and pleasure of the story which is the key aspect. As a children's writer, you're forced to bag that up. I do endless school visits and I find them incredibly exciting. I love that idea that there's a whole bunch of children waiting to listen to what I've got to say. It's a fantastic feeling, a kind of Homeric, magical, primal feeling. However, some teachers focus on the technical aspects of literacy at the expense of the story and the pleasure it can bring, in and of itself. The story for the story's sake is part of a wondrous transaction that brings pleasure to both the child and the storyteller.

I think we're losing the possibility of pleasure. I think we don't defend pleasure because we think of pleasure as something trivial. I think we confuse pleasure with fun or with distraction. With pleasure, in fact, there's something altogether different. I think pleasure is the most profound, slow-moving but powerful form of attention. Pleasure is something that anchors a thing in your mind and lets it stay there for a very long time. It will come under the scrutiny of your logic and your reason, but also of other things, like emotion and association and nostalgia. So, when Eric Lomax was reciting *The Lady of Shalott* in that cage, yes, he was cleverly remembering a bit of Tennyson and that's great, but he was also being transported back to his classroom at the Royal High School in Edinburgh, to his father's parlour; he was channelling all those things as well. That's what pleasure does: pleasure keeps something in your mind, so it creates all these fantastic connections. I

want to just read one more thing to you about how pleasure works, because this is from Eric as well. Eric was talking about books when he was a child. He says:

*One of the most intense events of my childhood was finding the secret chart of the great discoveries hidden behind the decorative dust jacket of *The Story of Mankind* by H W Van Loon. And I was convinced that there were hundreds of thousands of readers of this book who had never looked inside the dust jacket and at this wonderful branching tree of human ingenuity and was alone for me and I was its discoverer. (Lomax, 1996)*

Eric created his own story and drew strength from that. However, sometimes we get stuck in the wrong story. And what do we do when that happens? When I say stuck in the wrong story, the first thing that comes into my mind is Hillsborough, because I'm from Liverpool and one of the most vivid memories for me is of the day of the Hillsborough disaster and this line of fit, young police officers standing across the middle of the pitch, utterly incapable of physically seeing the disaster that was unfolding in front of their faces. They were so locked in to a narrative about football hooliganism that they literally could not see the innocent people being killed in front of their faces. That's what happens if we get stuck in the wrong story.

I'm going to talk to you about a much more important example of this. We're talking about bad stories created by twisted good intentions. A few years ago, I made a film called *Work with Sarajevo* which was about the war in the Balkans. Part of the story was about an orphanage that was in the direct line of fire. The UN were able to negotiate a very brief truce during which the children from the orphanage were evacuated from the city. A few dozen miles from the city, the convoy was stopped by some very frightening Serb irregulars. They wanted to take all the Serb children off the coach, because they thought that Serb children should stay in Serbia. So they abducted these children. This is a dysfunctional, twisted story that repeats itself throughout history. You probably know about the stories of Australian Aboriginal children who were taken away from their parents and brought up in institutions on the grounds that this would give them a better chance of being good upstanding Australians. This is the power of a story from which people cannot free themselves and from which they cannot see a different story. They are saying: 'You will be better in our story if we take you away from your parents'.

I met an amazing woman called Mariella Mehr who had been abducted as an infant and had this unbelievably disrupted life. She had been in, I think, 13 different orphanages, three approved schools and prison. When I met her she was a very distinguished Swiss writer and campaigner on nomadic issues and also incredibly affable, full of laughter, and full of joy. I said to Mariella: 'Look, you grew up in these institutions and you're very rebellious because you knew that there was something more, you knew that you deserved more, you didn't settle for what they were giving you as a child. Where did you find that out? How did you know that there was something more?' She said: 'I read *Heidi* and from that day on I've known that there's nothing more subversive that an artist can do than to create a picture of happiness and say that this is what you deserve, that's the power of a great story.' She was able to identify herself with someone in a different story and to use that to change her own story.

I've made that point several times tonight and my fear is that we will lose that if we don't attach that story to pleasure. Think about Eric finding for himself that little thing in the back of the book. Think about Mariella stealing that precious moment, getting that book. Nobody asking for anything in return, or assessing technical literacy prowess. It's a gift, because we are very complex and we don't know, when you take something into yourself as pleasure, where it will come out. It might come out in a concentration camp in Burma, it might come out in school, it might come out when you're teaching, it might come out when your parents are dying, or at times of great difficulty.

I feel very passionately about this, so passionately that I want to just give you one completely practical 'take-away' thing, which is that I think people are scared of giving this pleasure. You can't teach pleasure - you can only share pleasure - so how do you do that? I would like to say that reading out loud, reading out loud to your own children, to kids, in any setting, sharing, finding a space to read something just for fun and let it sit there, that's a really important thing. People are shy of it, but you don't need to be. Everybody gets huge pleasure from being read to.

I learnt that lesson about three or four summers ago. I went to a school in Glasgow. It was a big school and the boys in it were very big; they were much bigger than I was. I read them from my book *Cosmic*. I stopped at an exciting moment and said: 'Now we'll do a question and answer session, anyone got any questions?' This big boy put his hand up and said: 'What happens next?' I said: 'Well, you know, sadly we're running out of time. I'm here to encourage you to read yourself. This book's in the library, so get the teacher to read it to your class. I'm really glad you want to know what happens next, because that means I'm doing my job properly'. For the next question, a kid put his hand up and went: 'Can you read a bit more?' I said: 'Well it's great that you want to do that, we're running out of time, the book's in the library, the teacher will read it, just get it out and read it with your friend, it'll be great.' Then this very big lad, he was like a postal district with arms, put his hand up and he went: 'Would you just read, wee man!'

So with that in mind I'm going to read you two things to finish off. I'm involved with an organisation called The Reader organisation, which has reading groups, but not like reading groups where you have cake and discuss whether it's a good book or not. It's reading groups where you just get together and someone reads to you. The Reader organisation does this with a range of groups, including children in care. I'm going to read you one testimony, which is from a guy called Philip Conway. It's a little bit longer than I'd like, but he really struggled to write this, so you should listen to it.

My name is Philip Conway and I've been attending a shared reading group at Brompton Library run by The Reader organisation for five years. In two hours a week my life has been changed utterly. I have a history of mental illness for three decades and receive a lot of psychiatric treatment over this time. When I first came to the group five years ago I thought my experience or my intelligence was rubbish. I thought I would be outclassed intellectually.

I discovered when I read in the group that the interest I found in the poems and stories turned the negative thoughts into positive by dwelling on the characters

and issues in the literature rather than on myself. I remember vividly reading Henry V and Falstaff, when Henry had sowed his wild oats, but Henry rejected Falstaff when he became king with the words: 'Do I know thee old man?' I don't feel judgemental towards my old friends, but I had to reject their ways, I am not the same man who walked into the book group, I had low self-esteem, no sense of identity and thought the worst of myself. Through all the rich experiences of those two hours a week in the group I have a clearer, more honest and stable sense of who and what I am. What's important about that group is that no-one is asking for anything back, you can read if you want to or you can talk if you want to, but if you don't want to you can just sit and listen to a story.

Finally I thought I'd just maybe spark off a tradition that we should always end [the Kilbrandon Lecture] with: a little bit of Jimmy Reid's speech [accepting the position of Rector at Glasgow University], because it is such an amazing speech.

*...I am convinced that the great mass of people go through life without even a glimmer of what they could've contributed to their fellow human beings, that's a personal tragedy, that is a social tragedy, that is a crime. The flowering of each person's individual personality and talents is the precondition for our whole development.***

Thank you Jimmy and thank you all.

Discussion

The lecture highlighted the different ways that stories have power. In residential child care, stories are relevant to children and young people in a variety of ways. In terms of the life space, special moments can be created through shared reading, as described by Phillip Conway's experience of the shared reading group. The seeking out of reading material can provide opportunities for positive feedback and learning, for staff and children.

Reading out loud is a powerful way of expressing feelings. These reading experiences provide a level of safety because the material may belong to someone else, while providing an outlet for emotions that may otherwise be difficult to articulate. Themes of loss, separation, danger and redemption are present in many well-known fairy stories (for example Cinderella, Hansel and Gretel, The Little Mermaid, etc.). The use of reading aloud to explore some of these themes can be helpful for all of those who share the life space of a typical residential unit.

Private personal reading of texts is also a way in which stories can be used. Staff can encourage children and young people to develop their personal reading preferences, and also direct them to stories which can help them understand some of the issues they have experienced. They can also use their own private personal reading to escape into an alternative world, exploring different futures for themselves.

Life story work is also a way in which stories can be used therapeutically. Many children and young people in residential care have experienced chaotic early lives. Myths and mistruths can develop in such circumstances, and children and young people may accept these as fact, unless they are given the opportunity to unpick them. The best life story work is a co-creation, taking place within a safe and well-bounded setting. It draws on the relationship between the co-creators and in turn it can strengthen that bond. Life story work provides a valuable opportunity for the child or young person to make sense of their own story and to understand that there can be many alternative outcomes (Rose and Philpott, 2004; Ryan and Walker, 2007).

Every residential unit has its own stories. They form part of its culture. Stories are dynamic. The power of positive stories was illustrated by Frank in the lecture. The narratives provided by others can be positive in their effects by providing, for example, insights into aspects of life, comfort in difficult times, or a realisation that you are not alone. He also shows the potential for harm as when stories are imposed and/or misleading. This highlights the importance for children and young people in residential care (and their staff) to question explanatory accounts (for example, of reasons for separation and other aspects of care history) and to realise there may be alternatives.

In conclusion, the 11th Kilbrandon lecture has lessons for every residential child care worker. As staff we can help children and young people understand their stories. As co-creators, we can learn from our residents. As story-tellers and culture carriers, we can develop new and positive narratives, not only for ourselves and our young people but for residential child care as a practice.

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*For more information about the Reader Organisation, go to www.thereader.org.uk/who-we-are.aspx

**For the full text of Jimmy Reid's Rectorial Address at Glasgow University in 1972, go to www.scottishleftreview.org/li/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=336