

Improving literacy through storytelling in residential care

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Introduction

The *Learning with Care* report (HM Inspectors of Schools and the Social Work Services Inspectorate, 2001) highlighted the poor attainment of looked-after children in Scotland. As a result of the report, funding was made available to local authorities to help raise their educational attainment. South Lanarkshire Council used part of this funding to develop a storytelling project. This paper will outline the evaluation of the project, and highlight some of the factors which emerged and which could have wider applications in developing literacy for children and young people in residential child care.

Storytelling in context

South Lanarkshire Council wished to use storytelling because they felt that it could encourage literacy and that it had resonance for all people, children and adults. Research demonstrates that storytelling can support literacy (Egan, 1998; Macintyre, 2003; Lamwaca, 2004; McNicol and Kirkpatrick, 2005). Stories have spiritual, cultural, educational and moral elements as well as rich imagery which all motivate the children to listen, imagine and concentrate. 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:

Bed-time stories offer the possibility of giving young people positive and ennobling images to take with them into sleep. Carefully chosen stories can speak to their souls and help them to imagine what they could become (Morning, 2008, p. 48).

Furthermore, research shows that children looked after away from home do not do well in education, and efforts should be made to redress this balance (Maclean and Connolly, 2005).

South Lanarkshire Council appointed a residential child care worker in each of its units as a literacy coordinator. It was the task of the literacy coordinator to ensure that opportunities were made available to encourage literacy. They also liaised with teachers to ensure that collaboration took place between the residential units and the schools.

In order to promote the literacy theme, South Lanarkshire commissioned the Children 1st *Storyworks* initiative to deliver a storytelling project to its residential child care units. The aim of the storytelling project was to encourage 'reading for pleasure'. It was hoped that this activity would increase children's confidence, improve their literacy and have a positive impact upon their educational resilience. Ruth Kirkpatrick and Claire McNicol from *Storyworks* devised a series of sessions to promote storytelling in the South Lanarkshire units. Each unit had five types of input from the storytellers:

1. A taster session
2. A staff training session
3. A session where the staff were mentored by the storytellers
4. A workshop
5. A 'Celebration of story' final event

Each unit was asked to designate the literacy coordinator and one additional member of staff to take part in the project. There were no selection criteria for additional staff who took part. Some had no experience of storytelling at all, while others had a mix of experience due to previous work or personal experience.

Methodology

Four of the eight children's houses in South Lanarkshire took part in the evaluation. These were the first four units to be involved with the storytellers, between April and June 2006. The three main strategies used to gather data were questionnaires, interviews and observation. The use of questionnaires was agreed in order to generate the data around the specific areas in relation to the process of storytelling and its impact, as well as on the extent to which storytelling had been continued in the units. Questionnaires were distributed to each of the residential staff involved as literacy coordinators, other members of residential staff who were on duty during the input from the storytellers, and also to the unit managers. Returns were received from five out of the seven residential staff and one out of the four unit managers.

Eleven young people who had taken part in the storytelling project were

interviewed, as were the storytellers and one of the external residential managers. One of the senior education managers gave us her views by email.

The other method used for the evaluation was observation. The method used was that of 'observer as participant.' The questionnaires, interview notes and field notes from the observations yielded the evaluation data. Ethical approval for the evaluation was granted by university of Strathclyde Ethics Committee.

The material was analysed through data reduction, data display, conclusion drawing and verifying (Miles and Huberman, 1994). In terms of reporting, certain conventions have been adopted to protect the confidentiality of the respondents, as verbatim quotes will be used to illustrate the findings. Young people are identified by initials and numbers (indicating gender and age) and other participants are identified by job role.

The findings of the evaluation will be divided into two sections. The first section will look at the process of storytelling and how it engaged young people. The second section will be a commentary on how the project affected literacy.

Section One

The taster sessions

Keep things simple. Create the space and concentrate on process, not outcome. When you are telling a story you are taking care and holding your listeners (Storyteller).

The taster sessions served three primary purposes:

1. To introduce storytelling and the professional storytellers to the units
2. To encourage interest from residents
3. To provide a model of how a storytelling session might proceed

The taster sessions were successful in introducing storytelling and the professional storytellers to the units. Two of the units had staff who already told stories, so these units already had a culture of storytelling. The activities of the storytellers had a positive impact upon staff and young people.

I remember Ruth and Claire. ... I mind they got the staff one day...they got the staff to make props and that (JM, 16).

Ruth and Claire were great...they made it look easy, and funny (Residential worker).

The taster sessions created an interest in storytelling from the young people. A number of young people reported that they thought that storytelling would not be interesting when they heard about it.

I thought we'd just get told stories, but it was better than that (DF, 13).

However, after the taster sessions the children and young people were unanimously positive in their comments and all reported that they would come again. This was confirmed as the numbers attending the mentored sessions were greater than those of the taster sessions.

The taster provided a short demonstration of how a storytelling session might be run. All staff reported that this was extremely positive. The taster acted as a motivator for the staff. In particular, some staff expressed surprise and delight that the storytelling came from the oral tradition, and did not involve reading from a book.

I was thrilled that storytelling involved different methods and that it didn't involve reading from a book (Residential worker).

There were loads of other activities for young people to take part in (Residential worker).

To this extent the taster sessions acted as an effective model for how a session might proceed.

The training sessions

I expected to learn what storytelling is about; but I didn't expect to feel so inspired to tell a story (Residential worker).

Two training sessions were organised over two days to give staff a chance to learn more about storytelling. The storytellers were keen to encourage the idea that storytelling was not just about reading from a book. They felt that, where literacy is an issue, the oral storytelling tradition is a helpful stepping stone to enable young people to overcome their anxieties about reading difficulties. They wished to pass on skills which would enable staff to instil a love of story which would, in turn, act as an inspiration to read.

The course was universally evaluated as being positive. All participants reported the course worked well and left them feeling prepared to tell stories in the units. The main points of learning for all staff were skills in storytelling, the creation of the storytelling environment and learning about the emotional power of stories.

The mentored sessions

I think everyone can be a good storyteller, but mentoring helps. You need to respect the story and take care of who you are telling it to and give a bit of yourself (Storyteller).

The mentored sessions were designed to support staff, with mentoring being provided by the storytellers. The staff who had prepared a story during the first day of the training event told a story in these mentored sessions and this helped to give a message to the young people that storytelling is something everyone can do. All staff reported that the mentored sessions were positive.

Having Ruth and Claire there that time, it really helped because you knew you wouldn't fall flat on your face or anything (Residential worker).

In these mentored sessions the storytellers continued to create space for the young people to contribute. A number of young people told stories from their own experience in these sessions. In one unit, two sisters had created their own story before the session and told it with one sitting on the other's knee. In another unit, the two key staff simultaneously spoke to the young people about storytelling, whilst also sharing their own fears about telling a story. In that way, they enlisted the support of the young people. At the mentored sessions there appeared to be a much greater interaction between the staff and the children. This could have been indicative of growing confidence on the part of the staff. It was also a demonstration of how the storytelling sessions created a different context for relationship-building.

The attendance of children and young people at the mentored sessions was higher than at the taster sessions. The reasons for this were discussed with two young persons (KF 14 and EF 14). When asked why they had decided to come to storytelling sessions, the two young people reported that they had heard about it from other residents:

I came because I heard about the riddles... everybody (the young people) was talking about it, so I says Ok I'll go (KF,14).

When asked why they had not attended the first session, the two young people reported that they thought it would be boring. After the session the young people were both very enthusiastic about it, and reported that they would continue to be involved.

The workshops

I appreciated time outside the unit, learning to tell a story from objects you found like leaves, feathers and stones (Residential worker).

The workshops were designed to demonstrate how storytelling can be an active and interactive process. The storytellers saw the workshops as an important part of the process as they provided extra opportunities to put all of the above theories into practice. As one of them said:

Creating with your hands is fundamental...busy hands make a clear mind
(Storyteller).

The content of the workshops varied between units. The young people heard or told stories with the staff and then made an object which reflected the story. These were simple objects made of plasticine or felt. In the unit where it was mostly older children, the storytellers devised a much more free-flowing workshop based around making pizzas. There was also a visit to Bothwell Castle, where the staff, children and young people had a picnic and were encouraged to gather materials to enhance stories. They were also told stories in the environment of the castle, and were encouraged to share their own stories and feelings in this environment. Discussion with young people, staff and the storytellers indicate that the workshops were a significant part of the storytelling process:

I liked going to Bothwell Castle...it was dead interesting. We sat in this wee dark bit and they told us stories...great! (NF, 14)

One of the most striking moments in this work was sitting in the woods beside the Clyde last week...whilst MW sang them 'We shall overcome'...they were visibly moved (Storyteller).

This aspect of the sessions also left children and young people with new sets of skills in terms of making things from simple objects, and learning about nature.

The final event: A celebration of story

Yeh I went to the big event. I told a story to everybody. I was pure nervous but it was OK...I was like, 'I did it!'.... (NF, 14)

All participants involved thought that the final event was a good idea because it gave the project a focal point and it helped to maintain the momentum provided by the input from the storytellers. Young people and staff from each of the four units gave a presentation. After the performances, young people from the audience were invited to contribute and several told jokes. The event finished with songs and stories from the storytellers. Immediate feedback indicated that the evening had been enjoyed by everyone who attended. The storytellers were impressed with the success of the final event. As one of them put it:

The final event totally exceeded my expectations in terms of the confidence the young people demonstrated sharing stories in front of a large audience most of whom they did not know. Also the fun, laughter and spontaneity which was so much a part of the night (Storyteller).

The opportunity for staff and young people to build confidence and self-esteem was an added bonus which appeared to come out of the final event.

Section two: Storytelling and literacy

The idea of an 'educationally rich environment' changed from the notional library, computers in every room and, of course, a study, to candles, atmosphere, singing, storytelling and role modelling (Senior Education Manager).

It was hoped that the storytelling project would have some impact on the literacy of the children and young people who took part. Views were sought from residential staff, managers, the storytellers and children and young people about the impact of the project. The participants were asked what their expectations were for the project before it started. The following summarises the responses from different stakeholders.

Senior Managers (residential and educational)

- Additional skills for staff
- Development of a useful intervention for children
- Encourage reading for pleasure to improve educational attainment and motivation

Unit manager

- Expectations at the beginning were limited in that it was unclear what the precise outcomes might be. This changed as the project progressed.

Residential staff

- Read stories to young people
- Tell stories to children
- Learn skills of storytelling

Children

- Get told stories

Storytellers

- Demonstrate that storytelling is a tool that can be used with all ages
- Train staff in storytelling
- Provide young people with an enjoyable introduction to storytelling
- Encourage children and young people to tell stories for themselves

There were some similarities between the aims of the senior managers and the storytellers. Additionally there was some similarity between the children and the residential staff. When talking to senior managers and the storytellers, the concept of literacy came up often. When talking to staff, the concept of literacy was also mentioned. Every respondent made positive comments about the impact of the project. The responses are outlined below:

Senior managers (residential and educational)

Young people remained motivated and actively participated in the programme.

It was clear that they appreciated the stories and revelled in the storytelling environment created within the unit.

The storytellers had a great impact on staff...they (the staff) were filled with enthusiasm.

Unit manager

The project has had a considerable, lasting and positive change.

The two staff members continue to employ the techniques learnt in further events i.e. storytelling Hallowe'en night.

Staff

The children become involved in storytelling and most young people actively participate, often retelling the story to other young people and unit staff.

I think they (the children) really enjoyed taking part and it has encouraged them to make up their own stories.

I was surprised at how well the children engaged especially the older ones. It really connected with them on a deep level.

I feel I can use storytelling as a great tool to communicate on a deeper level with children.

Children

I read a lot more now....I like Harry Potter, I just finished 'The Goblet of Fire' (RM, 10).

I think it does (make me want to read more)...I think it would be better if they encouraged us to write stories on our own, especially the older ones (NF, 14).

I enjoy reading now. I'm reading 'The Amber Spyglass'. I like it if I see a film and then read the book....like 'A Series of Unfortunate Events.' You know that was four books in one film? (JM, 16)

I read different books now and I got a library card. I like to write. I write different things now, personal things, you know (CF, 16).

Storytellers

The response of the young people to stories and songs, we were struck by the resonances the stories seem to have with the life experiences of the young people

The enthusiasm of the staff for the process and examples of staff devoting their own time to developing and honing their skills and to integrating what they were learning into the daily residential setting

Specific impact on the children and young people was noted in two distinct areas. One was in the area of relationships and the other was in the area of literacy-related activities. The theme of relationships was reported on a variety of different occasions by different people:

Getting told stories got everyone involved. It's great just getting everyone sitting down, getting people to sit down and settle down. It relaxes tensions, sharing stories (JM, 16).

I think they've created more fulfilling relationships with young people....you give staff another tool to build relationships (Storyteller).

Routines have settled and I think that's a big factor...the quality of relationships is evident. You could see it at the big event (External residential manager).

Similarly, the theme of literacy-related activities was noted at all levels:

The following activities and initiatives have been a direct result from the

storytelling project ...'Book a book' campaign; A3-a magazine/newsletter for young people developed by young people with stories, articles, jokes et, which is distributed monthly; monthly subscriptions in each unit to personally selected magazines (Senior educational manager).

At night I'll get up and write now...I write wee poems (NF, 14).

I'm aware of some young people taking up drama (External residential manager).

A rise in the level of confidence in children and young people was reported:

I think there has been a general rise in confidence especially at school (External residential manager).

Some have definitely got more confidence (Residential staff).

A number of the young people took part and confidence has been a major change (Unit manager).

I think it gave me a lot of confidence. I wouldn't be scared to do it again (NF,14 talking about her participation in the 'Celebration of Storytelling').

In all of the sessions, there was a clear difference in the behaviour and demeanour of the young people before a session and after a session. Often, before the sessions, young people would be fairly boisterous and there could be small arguments, shouting, and people talking over the top of each other. During the sessions, the children and young people visibly calmed down. Their body language suggested that they were comfortable and felt safe (for example, curling up on couches, sitting close to their staff members). On more than one occasion, it was noted that young people would change in some aspect of their body language. For example, one young man was sitting upright and holding himself stiffly. He had a hooded top on and the hood was up. As the storytelling session progressed, he took the hood down, unzipped the top, stretched out and totally relaxed. On another occasion, a story was told about a child who is stolen from his parents and is replaced by a fairy child. This fairy child cried constantly and the mother became so frustrated that she angrily told her husband to take the child away from her. This was the point of resonance for three young women sitting on the sofa opposite the storyteller, as they suddenly sat up and exchanged glances. It was clear that something in the angry tone of a mother at the 'end of her tether' was familiar to them. The facial expressions of the children and young people who took part in the storytelling sessions were delightful to watch, as they painted a picture of being totally absorbed in the story and carried away in the moment.

During workshops and storytelling, there were numerous examples of children and young people taking turns, creating space for each other and working cooperatively. Children and young people from a wide age range took part in the sessions. There may have been an assumption that storytelling was only for younger children but the evidence of these sessions would indicate that all of the participants enjoyed them, and this included older teenagers of 16 or 17 years old. The storytellers were able to change their approach depending on the make-up of the group.

The staff involved in the storytelling were also affected by the process as it was happening. In terms of their facial expressions, they were also absorbed when stories were being told and when they themselves were telling stories, they were enthusiastic and animated. They participated with enthusiasm during the process, which allowed children and young people to see a different side to them.

There was a message that the success of a project such as this hinges on the experience and understanding of storytellers. In this case, the two storytellers were from a social work background. As such, they had a good insight into the issues faced by children who are looked after away from home. It is believed that the positive comments made about the storytellers reflected this level of experience and understanding.

Finally, it was clear that the existence of the project steering group was important. The members of the steering group appeared to have an excellent working relationship with each other. Both the senior educational manager and one of the external residential managers spoke about the benefits of working on joint projects as providing a practical path to collaboration as well as an opportunity to explore difference in approaches and perception. The project itself was an excellent example of collaboration in action.

Discussion

The evaluation set out to look at the process of storytelling, how it engaged children and young people and how it has an impact on literacy. Findings from the observations, interviews and questionnaires demonstrated that the storytelling project was successful in a number of respects. It helped children and young people to develop new interests, enhanced various skills associated with literacy, and encouraged the development of a different kind of relationship with the staff involved. It also appeared to have a positive impact on the confidence of the young people who took part. The project also helped staff to develop new skills, which in turn were seen as a tool for future interventions. The evaluation also indicated that the actual process of storytelling can have a calming effect on a unit and creates a space for residents to feel closer to each other.

Rowshan (1997) explains that metaphors have two layers: (1) the surface structure, and (2) a deep structure. The surface structure is what a child hears when a story is told - the sentences, sounds and sequences of phrases which occupy the conscious mind. The deep structure and meaning of the story is recovered through an unconscious process called *transderivational search*. When a young person listens to a story, they continuously associate what they hear with their own memories. They search to connect their present experience of the story to events from the past.

This process helps to explain why storytelling 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. Much of this reconnection takes place in the unconscious so the therapeutic effect of the story is gentle and private to the young person. In the context of a piece of therapeutic group work, these connections can be made more conscious in a variety of ways including the use of visual expression around the story and discussion. As it was hoped that educational resilience might be enhanced by this storytelling project, connections which the young people made to stories was critical.

Using storytelling creates more confidence in understanding and using language. It also assists with an internalisation of story structure which leads to an interest in seeking out other stories, and thereby enhances reading for pleasure. It was clear through observation and discussion that the children and young people who took part in the project were affected in a positive manner by the experience. The staff involved also benefited from learning new skills and developing new ways of working. From the viewpoint of collaborative practice, the project demonstrated what can be achieved for looked-after children when departments work together in a child-centred way. As one tool for work, storytelling adds to the repertoire available to staff and organisations which allows children and young people to make sense of their world. In the words of Shelly, contained in the training pack used for this project:

Stories help even the youngest child learn what to expect in life and how to explore life's experiences (Kirkpatrick and McNicol, 2006, pg.2).

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