University of Southampton

Doctoral Programme in Educational Psychology

Title: Therapeutic Story-writing

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Case background

Referral question

This case study considers the use of Therapeutic Storywriting (TS) as a method of resolving emotional issues in a 'safe space' for young individuals with behavioural and emotional issues. Brian (not his real name) was referred to the Educational Psychology service due to concerns about emotional well-being and disruptive behaviour. He is in foster care and subject to a full care order due to allegations of physical abuse from his step-father. At time of referral Brian was in a nurturing foster environment, but this was a short term placement and he was aware he would soon be moving although no long term place had been found. This lack of stability was causing Brian to become angry and occasionally damage school property. Another trigger for Brian's behaviour was when his biological father cancelled their weekly supervised contact; on these occasions Brian would disengage, call out in class and become aggressive towards peers.

Through this initial contact my role was negotiated to clarify how best to support Brian's emotional stability and engagement with learning.

Enquiry method

A meeting with the social worker and class teacher highlighted that Brian finds it difficult to accept praise, share or take others' perspective. His foster carer was not at the consultation therefore was contacted by telephone. She reported that Brian had poor emotional vocabulary, lacked empathy, and worried about getting in trouble, e.g. he vomited one night in bed but did not tell anyone.

Brian had received from the Princes Trust six weekly group sessions to develop emotional awareness and build relationships. The psychotherapist running

the group reported Brian had appeared to benefit from the sessions, but she felt he would require more long term therapeutic work to deal with his emotional issues

My classroom observation was co-incidentally on a day when his father had cancelled that evening's contact. Brian was reluctant to engage in the set task even though his teacher adapted it to allow him to use the 'iPad'. An assessment using the Cognitive Modifiability Battery (Tzuriel, 1995) to explore his response to task guidance revealed that for tasks with which he was confident he was positive and engaged. On tasks he found more challenging, he benefitted from prompts to think about previous successful strategies (such as pausing to consider choices before enacting them) and to adapt these as relevant.

Outcome

Experiencing abuse as Brian did can lead to poor emotion regulation (McAuley & Davis, 2009) therefore Brian's disruptive behaviour may be a coping strategy for his inability to regulate emotions and independently consider behaviour choices before enactment. Based on information gathered, I recommended TS as it allows children to reflect on emotional issues and work in a 'safe space' to resolve them.

Permissions were obtained for Brian and three other pupils to take part in a TS group run by me for an hour once a week over a 10 week period. Currently five sessions have been completed. Brian's story in the first week was about an alien with no parents who had found someone to look after him. During the next week, Brian was found a permanent foster home, so in the next session he finished his story with the alien finding his real mother and brother and going home. The logic of the second part of the story was difficult to follow, and appeared less thought out than the initial part, suggesting he had not fully made sense of feelings associated with moving foster

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home. The following week he produced a story that did not seem to contain any significant projections. The following two weeks Brian did not engage, actually leaving the room in session four, potentially because the school week had been unstructured due to school tests and a school trip; and Brian's contact with his father had been reduced to once a month (remedial actions are considered in the appraisal and future practice sections). There is evidence to suggest however that TS is having some impact, as the Strengths and Difficulty Questionnaires (Goodman, 1997) completed at the start and mid-point (five weeks) of the intervention, showed that total difficulties remained the same despite these negative events and his impact score actually decreased.

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Account of literature relevant to case

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Theoretical background to Therapeutic Story-writing

The use of metaphor in psychotherapy is an established practice that promotes reflection on a problem thus encouraging the unconscious mind to consider a resolution (Barker, 1996). Much of the previous work in this area has focused on therapeutic story*telling* (e.g. Brett, 1992), rather than story*writing*. The key difference is that storytelling provides a model for unconscious problem solving (Gersie & King, 1990), whereas creative activities such as story-writing provide a 'space' between the child's internal world and external reality to utilise creativity and actively 'make sense of' emotional issues (Waters, 2004a; Winnicot, 1971). Therapeutic Story-writing (TS) where stories are co-created by an adult and a child have been used in casework by Educational Psychologists (EPs) (e.g. Pomerantz, 2007); this differs from Waters (2004a) TS approach in which children independently create stories of their own. The benefit of independent story-writing is that through a child's creativity they may discover something for themselves which they accept more willingly than if an adult

had highlighted it (Winnicot, 1971).   This critique will evaluate the TS model devised by Waters (2004a) as this was the specific intervention used in the reviewed case.

Therapeutic Story-writing is a school based, weekly, hour long intervention that runs for a minimum of 10 weeks with four to six children (Waters, 2004a). It utilises metaphor both within children's own stories and those written by a teacher to address issues that may otherwise be emotionally overwhelming (Waters, 2004a). A TS session has six components; 1. feelings check-in; 2. review of previous week's stories; 3. suggestion of story theme; 4. children/teacher writing stories; 5. sharing stories; 6.story game (Waters, 2004a). This approach has three main underpinning theories (the first two have their roots in psychodynamic theory): theory of thinking (Bion, 1984); sub-personality theory (Assagioli, 1975) and emotional intelligence theory (Goleman, 1996). These theories will be outlined briefly and links to TS explored, before ascertaining the support for TS from the more established therapeutic story*telling* literature.

Emotional intelligence (EI) is the ability to recognise, understand and appropriately express emotions (Petrides, Fredrickson & Furnham, 2004). The development of emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1996) underpins the first stage of TS – 'feelings check-in' - as it helps children understand emotions by reflecting on what they and others are experiencing.

The development of EI is only possible if the child feels safe to explore emotions, which is made possible in TS through 'containment of anxiety', a process underpinned by Bion's (1984) theory of thinking. This theory proposes that an infant projects emotions onto their mother who 'contains' this so it is no longer overwhelming and then translates it into a form the child can understand/cope with (Bion, 1984). This experience is then stored in their unconscious mind, freeing

conscious capacity (Bion, 1994). If containment of emotions does not occur, the child stores experiences as 'undigested facts' which are incoherent and consequently a child can never learn from these situations (Bion, 1984). Waters (2004a) proposes that 'containment of emotions' is made possible through the creation of a 'safe space', promoted by consistency of location and timing of sessions, coupled with an accepting response to children's stories.

Within the 'safe space' created through emotional containment, the child is also able to explore negative sub-personalities. Sub-personalities are the different roles people assume (e.g. friend, pupil) and between which they subconsciously 'shift' with only a thin memory trace linking them (Assagioli, 1975). If these roles are not linked and co-ordinated by a person's core sense of self, they can become separate entities which can lead to sub-personalities being ignored as they are not centrally recognised (Assagioli, 1975). If a sub-personality is repressed eventually it 'pushes' itself into consciousness, and as it is not subject to centralised control it can appear at inappropriate times (Waters, 2004a). Characters in a story may be projections of sub-personalities, and by describing them and reflecting on future actions, sub-personalities can be recognised, identified and integrated (Waters, 2004a). Subsequently a dis-identification with the story based sub-personality allows the child to 'let go of it' as a separate identity (Waters, 2004a).

Although not always explicitly referenced, TS draws elements from the therapeutic story*telling* literature to support the teacher's story. This section is effectively therapeutic storytelling as the teacher writes and then tells a story about a child's dilemma set in reality or fantasy, which raises awareness of negative feelings and mobilises unconscious resources to deal with them (Rosen, 1982). Stories set in external reality resolve everyday issues, using a central character whose personality

and problems closely mirror the focus child (Brett, 1992), whilst fairy-tales acknowledge basic drives of the lower unconscious and provide ways in which the higher unconscious (concerned with well-being) can transform or overcome them (Bettelheim, 1979).

Studies using TS in schools

Waters (2004b) conducted semi structured group and individual interviews in schools with 21 children (aged 8 - 11 years) and their teachers who had taken part in a 10 week TS programme. Interviews with pupils revealed that 86% of them had enjoyed writing stories because it cleared their mind of worries by implicitly discussing feelings, and 61% of children rated their listening skills as having improved.

Although Waters (2004b) corroborated individual pupil interviews with group and teacher interviews, information gathered may still not be accurate as some interview questions were closed and may be interpreted as leading. For example, 'Did your stories help you to think about your feelings?' implies that stories should have made them think about their feelings and encourages a yes or no response. A review of interviewing techniques indicated that if asked leading questions and/or closed questions children were more likely to give a false response (Krähenbühl & Blades, 2006), therefore this interview data must be interpreted with caution.

A further problem with research on TS is that it lacks evidence of the theoretical processes through which it effects change. Waters (2004a) asserts that TS improves EI, and while examples of improved EI have been provided, such as increased empathy (Waters, 2004b), the process by which this occurred was not clear. Additionally, as no objective measure of EI was taken, despite the existence of instruments for this (Bar-On, 1997), the research outcomes are subject to

interpretation. An inadequate understanding of the process which effects change is common in therapeutic interventions based on psychodynamic theory (such as TS) as the focus is normally on outcomes (reduction of symptoms) (Kazdin, 2003). If suspected processes which effected change were more tightly defined a more testable hypothesis could be developed (Kazdin, 2003).

Waters attempted to define the theoretical processes which effected change, but failed to test them and instead only illustrated their existence. For example, anxiety containment (Bion, 1984) is shown in the case study of Anya (Waters, 2002). Waters (2002) interprets that her acceptance of Anya (allowing her presence even though she did not write), allowed projection of anxiety about witnessed domestic violence onto a story about a gingerbread man in pain from being eaten slowly. However, no other evidence is presented that an accepting environment led to anxiety containment, therefore the outcome could have been due to a number of factors, such as a change in home situation.

The process of integrating sub-personalities (Assagioli, 1975) is more clearly tested, as Waters (2004a) outlines how her actions led a child through the stages on sub-personality integration. For example, the case study of Ben detailed the recognition stage of integrating sub-personalities where he identified story characters as representing aspects of himself - the 'Holy Terror' and 'Angel Baby', (Waters, 2004a). Waters (2004a) moved this to the identification stage through a joint activity listing character traits. To achieve integration Waters asked Ben to amalgamate the characters, so he made 'Angdev'. After a three month gap Ben finished the story to achieve dis-identification, where 'Angdev' had the 'demon' (Holy Terror) removed. It is unclear however if the actions of the teacher always led the child to the next stage of sub-personality integration. For example, the dis-identification stage was reached

after a three month gap, therefore this progress may have been related to other factors, for example his karate which he undertook to control anger (Waters, 2004a).

The research presented by Waters is limited to three publications (2002, 2004a & 2004b), therefore other studies will be considered which use TS. Pomerantz (2007) used TS with pupils as part of her role as an EP. She reports on three case studies, with outcomes including the re-integration of previously excluded children and an acknowledgment by a child that their behaviour was problematic. In the final case study the child did not resolve his issues through the story (as in the Waters, 2004a approach) instead highlighting problematic aspects of his environment (bullying). Following this, his behaviour worsened and only improved when he was moved to a different class. Therefore although TS has positive effects, it can also evoke negative behaviour and supervision is necessary to ensure pertinent issues are not missed (Pomerantz, 2007) – something which Waters (2004a) fails to highlight.

Pennebaker and Seagal (1999) used a form of TS with University students, where a control group wrote about a non-emotional topic for 15 minutes and an experimental group about a traumatic experience. The measured outcome was visits to the doctor, which significantly reduced for the experimental compared to the control group from pre to post study. Although this does not exactly follow the structure of the TS model by Waters (2004a), it does highlight the value of writing about emotional issues.

Research on TS is limited and although it suggests positive outcomes, methodology is not robust. The effect of TS is not measured in a consistent way between studies so results cannot be objectively compared and only one study uses a control group to ascertain whether change is a result of a Hawthorne effect. The only study to use a control group (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999) looked at a more direct

version of TS, so the key element of projection through metaphor remains only subjectively investigated.

Appraisal of the usefulness of literature to the case process

The literature in this area is not directly comparable to the focus case, as effects from TS (Waters 2002; 2004a) have taken a longer period of time than my intervention has been running. For example the integration of Ben's sub-personalities (Waters, 2004a) happened over two terms, and the projection of Anya's angst (Waters, 2002) took a year.

It has however been useful to look at published case studies (Waters 2002, 2004a & 2004b) for guidance. For example, in week four of the intervention, Brian refused to write a story which I interpreted as 'pushing boundaries'. In order to reinforce the boundaries to provide a 'safe', 'anxiety containing' space, I set the expectation that he would attempt a story and offered him support, which he refused. Shortly after this he left the session. To make sense of this I looked at TS literature and noted that in Waters (2002) she had let Anya stay in the session for five weeks without completing any writing, and that it was acceptance, rather than reinforcement of boundaries that had contained her anxiety. The following week there was no expectation to write and Brian stayed in the session for longer and listened to other children's stories which had not happened the previous week.

The theory of thinking (Bion, 1984) has also been helpful in my conceptualisation of Brian's disengagement. Bion (1984) states that if experiences are emotionally overwhelming they cannot be understood and used as models for future actions to meet needs. Brian may have been emotionally overwhelmed by recent events and therefore unable to decide how best to meet his needs for stability and attention, leading to a maladaptive method of behaving disruptively to attract

attention and gain control. Through understanding this I was able to be accepting and reflect on his feelings to communicate them back to him in an understandable way (Bion, 1984). Adults in the classroom could also reflect back to him how he or someone else might be feeling, without coupling this with judgement or direction so as to develop EI and create a 'safe space' to explore emotions (Waters, 2004a).

Implications for future practice

In future TS sessions I will introduce fairy-tales as stimuli for story-writing as they demonstrate that meeting difficulties is inevitable but that confronting them leads to a resolution (Bettelheim, 1979). As Brian is struggling to resolve his problems a more abstract metaphor may be effective where more direct forms have failed (Barker, 1996), and the fairy-tale structure may create a 'safe space' to express emotions (Bettleheim, 1979). Hansel & Gretel may be used as it explores fears of parental abandonment and the need for peer support (as Hansel and Gretel relied on each other) (Bettelheim, 1979). As Brian may feel unable to rely on adults, this story may prompt him to use peer support.

This case has encouraged me to reflect on and modify my practice to improve my consultation skills (Meyers, 2002). As I have previously encountered resistance when suggesting non-directive interventions (e.g. reflecting a child's feelings without directly giving a strategy to resolve that emotion) I plan when relevant to use the underpinning theory and emerging empirical base of TS to develop a shared problem understanding from which to build solutions (Beaver, 2011).

In future practice I will generally emphasise theoretical underpinnings of an approach. As I facilitated the TS group I was able to use my knowledge of the theory to make sense of what I was experiencing and use this to guide practice. As psychological theory is one of the distinctive contributions of an EP (Cameron, 2006),

in my future work with staff and parents I will revisit relevant theory to help

contextualise what may be happening for a child and use this to guide discussion.

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