Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care
August/September 2005 – Vol.04, No.2

The good goodbye: helping children through transitions using storytelling

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Abstract

Storytelling is an age-old tradition in Scotland and indeed throughout the world. Macintyre's (2003) work on Mull, for example, documents how storytelling grew and developed more strongly as the traditional communities declined. A growing interest in storytelling as a possible technique to help children deal with many life situations has been emerging in Scotland, and indeed in other countries, over the past few years.

Keywords

Storytelling, children, transitions

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Introduction

Storytelling is an age-old tradition in Scotland and indeed throughout the world. Macintyre's (2003) work on Mull, for example, documents how storytelling grew and developed more strongly as the traditional communities declined. A growing interest in storytelling as a possible technique to help children deal with many life situations has been emerging in Scotland, and indeed in other countries, over the past few years. Books to facilitate storytelling such as Keding's (2004) excellent *Stories of Hope and Spirit* are appearing in bookshops, heralding an upsurge of interest in this skill. So it appears that even today, in a society obsessed with high-tech communication, storytelling can perform a valuable function. It is so valuable that it is being used to help vulnerable children increase their self-esteem and confidence, improve their educational attainment and build resilience in those who have suffered childhood sexual, physical and emotional abuse or family breakdown. Lamwaca's (2004) paper given at the 29th International Congress on Books for Young People outlined the healing power of storytelling from children traumatised by war in Uganda. The universal themes and rich metaphors in traditional stories resonate powerfully for children and adults in their own lives.

This paper outlines a piece of transition work with a Primary Seven class from a school in Edinburgh. The work was carried out by the authors, who have worked on the national storytelling development project *Storyworks*, run by Children 1st for three years. This project aims to promote storytelling as a tool to connect with, inspire and facilitate

change. The overall aim was to use storytelling (and related arts) as an enabling tool to help children find a voice to talk about loss and change. At a minimum, the stories would raise pertinent issues in their last term at primary school, which would help the children in their transition to high school.

Although this work was set in the classroom, we hope to demonstrate that the basic elements could be applied to a residential setting. These elements would include tools to enhance communication, methods of marking life events, ways to build group identity and building upon the strengths of each child in a holistic way.

Into the Woods

The authors began work with the Primary 7 group and had three sessions with them over a period of one month. This was an intense way of working. We were keen to implement a programme that would address different learning modes and give a multiple sensory experience. Williams (1997) outlines the benefits of this approach when describing the theory of multiple intelligences developed by psychologist Howard Gardner. He argues that each person has seven domains of intelligence. They range from mathematical/logical and linguistic to musical, spatial and bodily/kinaesthetic. If a person is to contribute to the best of his ability, each of these intelligences must be given a chance to develop; (Williams, 1997, p. 2).

The first and last sessions lasted for one hour and the middle session lasted for a full day.

The aims of the sessions were:

1. to encourage positive relations within the class group where a number of children have behavioural difficulties.
2. to raise issues of loss and change and help provide some resources to deal with these.
3. to provide a vehicle for self-expression through oral storytelling and felt making.
4. to promote literacy skills through practice of listening and talking and encouraging a love of words.
5. to build self-esteem by engaging in creative activities and cultivating a positive environment where ‘anything is possible’ rather than ‘right or wrong’.
6. to pass on skills to the class teacher.
7. to give the teacher a chance to connect with some children in the class who demand less of her attention.

The aims outlined in points 1-5 above have clear links with residential child care, where staff are often working with children and young people on developing relationships, skills and self-esteem.

Stories and a message about gender

There were more boys than girls in the class. To provide a positive male role model we used stories containing heroes such as Finn McCool (Sutcliffe, 2001) and Robin Hood (Hayes and Benson, 1989) and used a general ‘hero’ theme. Both these characters use brain more than brawn which provides an alternative blueprint for masculinity. For a strong female role model we told the story of Tam Lin which also gives a powerful metaphor for change and loss.

The authors were struck by the resonance which these ancient stories have for young people today, particularly boys. This is the case in spite of the fact that the stories are about people from a very different time and culture. We felt that these stories also reflect some of the issues in residential child care, where there is a relatively low ratio of male to female staff. This coupled with the fact that boys in residential care have often grown up in a home without a father figure leaves boys and young men without a role model for the development of their identity. Erikson (1977) outlines how ego identity in children is developed through identifying with ‘socially meaningful models’(p. 214). If boys lack such male role models, this development is likely to be inhibited and ‘in the social jungle of human existence, there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of ego identity’ (p. 214). Biddulph (1997) in his book on working with boys, also points out the different approaches which need to be taken with boys, and their need for positive male role models. We adapted the original traditional story, taken from Sutcliffe (2001) to include women in heroic roles. The story we revised was called *Finn and the Hero’s Children*.

Using a story to help transitions

For the purpose of the paper, it may be helpful to outline the story of Finn McCool, so that we can then describe how we used different aspects of it to work with the children. In the story Finn is put under a ‘geise’, an oath to come to the aid of a young man whose first two sons were stolen on the night of their birth by a giant. His wife is about to give birth to a third child and he asks for Finn’s protection. A group of men and women with different talents assist Finn in the task: a listener, a climber, a tracker and an archer. They fail to prevent the giant stealing the third baby but as they journey, each person plays a vital role in the rescue of the three children from the giant. In the end the giant is destroyed due to Finn’s ability to divine his one weak spot and the archer’s keen aim.

From the Finn story we asked the children what they would see as their main strength if Finn asked them to take part in this adventure. Many of the children highlighted football as their greatest skill and we drew them out on which aspects of football they excelled in so we had roles like ‘the scorer’ and ‘the defender’. Some children struggled to think what skill they had, so we then asked their peers to make suggestions. Following this, in the final session, we made up blessings for the future of each child based upon these strengths. For example, one boy whose strength was football was moving to a different high school from his classmates and so his blessing was, *May you always be surrounded by good team mates and may you achieve all your goals*. One particularly vulnerable girl said she would be a builder. Her blessing was, ‘May you have the wisdom to build your house upon rock and not sand and if any big bad wolves come your way, may you outwit them

just like the third little pig'. The tradition of sending young people on the journey of life with a blessing is central to traditional stories. Examples of this exist in *The Story Of Mully Whuppie* (in Garner, 1984) and *The Story of the King of Lochlin's Daughters* (in Montgomerie, 1956). In our sessions, these blessings were read out during a ritual where a candle was lit for each child and the blessing was written on a card, which each child could keep. This easy intervention could give residential workers a tool for managing transitions either within or between units.

Not all of the children were present at the final session but the group were insistent that every child's blessing should be read, a strong indication of the strength of connection which was fostered by story. In his article *The Core of Care*, Maier (1979) wrote of the importance of ritual. He said that rituals have special cultural and emotional significance, especially at times of transition. This was apparent in this group.

For many children and young people in residential care, transitions are not managed well. For example, Dixon and Stein (2005) in their research on young people leaving care in Scotland found that half of them had no planned throughcare programme. Techniques such as storytelling, while not providing all the answers, can help residential workers to engage with young people about these issues and perhaps leave them with a positive experience as part of this process.

Using stories to learn

We also wanted the children to be introduced to a new view of their local surroundings so we used a local wood for some storytelling and physical 'hero' tasks. The wood was directly behind the school yet many of the children said they never went there. We wonder if there is a similar experience for children and young people in residential care. In the glen, we told three stories, one of which will be briefly outlined.

We used the story of Robin Hood, taken from Hayes & Benson (1989) as there was a strong local connection with these tales. Robin Hood plays were traditionally performed all over Britain on May Day, and parts of Edinburgh kept this tradition alive until comparatively recently. We found that telling stories, which have a local significance, can contribute powerfully to a child's sense of identity. One child told us '*I never knew that G was such an exciting place'*. In the Robin Hood story, Robin comes upon the Friar beside a river and commands that the Friar carry him across. The Friar obliges but then insists that Robin carry him back. Robin insists that the Friar returns him to the opposite bank and the Friar wades half way across the river and then dumps Robin into the water. The two protagonists end up fighting with staffs but the story concludes with Friar Tuck and Robin resolving their differences by talking and becoming firm friends. The actual setting brought the story to life, as well as teaching the children how to generate friendship out of adversity.

These stories proved very powerful in the woodland setting and the children seemed totally absorbed. One girl commented 'I really really really liked the wood and I haven't been there before'.

The use of these stories in a natural woodland setting taught the children something of their local surroundings and inspired an interest in these areas in a way that had not been stimulated before. Once again, we believe that residential workers could inspire an interest in local settings by using them as settings for storytelling activities.

Hands On: from words to action

As a craft activity, we made felt and then the children put all the pieces together to create a class cloak. This followed on from the story called *The Goodbye Cloak* by Campbell (1990). This story relates very powerfully to children making the transition to high school. It tells of a primary school teacher who is retiring after many years and she wishes to say goodbye to her class and give them a story as a farewell gift.

We explained to the children that the ancient art of feltmaking was probably something that Robin Hood and Finn McCool would have done. Making felt provided the children with a multi-sensory experience which they all really enjoyed. This activity drew on the bodily kinaesthetic and spatial intelligences of the children and as Kyriacou (1998) highlights 'if pupils are taught more often in their preferred learning style, more learning will take place' (p. 41). From our observations, several children seemed to relate strongly in these areas of intelligence. They began with very soft, yet strong colourful fleece, and after laying it out they used hot soapy bubbles to wash it and cause it to shrink. The loose fibres then all knit together like magic. It seems impossible for the final product to look bad. The enjoyment of the children was reflected in their feedback. One boy reported '*The feltmaking was great fun*'. The children hung this cloak in the final assembly of their term. Making a similar item to mark transitions in residential child care could also be an effective way of helping children and young people to express themselves at these times.

The power of story in residential child care

All of our stories are told to the children without the use of books. We make this explicit since many people struggle to understand that we *don't read* stories to the children. Bettleheim (1975) highlights the difference between parents telling their children stories rather than reading from a book:

> we can give them the most important reassurance of all: that we approve of their playing with the idea of getting the better of these giants. Here reading is not the same as being told the story, because while reading alone the child may think that only some stranger - the person who wrote the story or arranged the book - approves of outwitting and cutting down the giant. But when the parents tell him the story, the child can be sure that they approve of his retaliating in fantasy for the threat which adult dominance entails; (Bettleheim, 1975, p. 28).

Furthermore, Egan (1998) tells us that:

> The great power of story is that it engages us affectively as well as requiring our cognitive attention: we learn the content of the story while we are emotionally engaged by its characters or events; (Egan, 1998, p. 11).

These stories have spiritual, cultural, educational, emotional and moral elements as well as humour, excitement and 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. Furthermore, research such as that reported by Maclean and Gunion (2003) shows that children in residential care do not do well in education, and efforts should be made to redress this imbalance. Storytelling is one way to engage such a group of children.

In a fairy tale such as Finn McCool or Robin Hood, the child can project on to the clear characters and sample how it feels to be those different characters. It can also provide an emotional map for the child to see how a difficult situation is resolved. Again, Bettleheim (1975) notes the value of this:

> In a fairy tale, the internal processes are externalised and become comprehensible as represented by the figures of the story and its event. From what a particular tale implied about man's despair, hopes, and methods of overcoming tribulations, the patient could discover not only a way out of his distress, but also a way to find himself, as the hero did; (Bettleheim, 1975, p. 25).

Children in residential care may have faced difficult situations in relation to issues such as abuse, as reported by researchers such as Kendrick (1998). They may also continue to face difficult situations while in care, and the use of stories and storytelling can help to give children a language to express their emotions and fears, as well as their joys.

Bettelheim (1975) goes on to underline the importance of culture and meaning to a child's development. He believes that stories are second to parents and carers as carriers of culture for children. Many children's stories are written primarily with the aim of entertaining or developing literacy, so he recommends the use of traditional fairy stories to develop the emotional life of the child. Given the emotional difficulties which may face children and young people in residential care, who often have disrupted attachments, the use of storytelling as a tool could be used in a restorative way with them.

Are you sitting comfortably?

As storytelling workers, we found that setting the scene for the process was important. Therefore, at the beginning of each session we decorated the room in a certain way to create what Mellon (1992) calls a 'Story Space'. To do this we used coloured nets, a candle which was lit to indicate the start of the session and fabric to cover two chairs which we then sat on and referred to as the 'Storytellers' Chairs'. This ritual provided a non-verbal cue to the children that they needed to prepare to enter the world of story, and this could be easily adapted within the residential child care unit. As Mellon said,

We have a place of warmth and light within us. Around this centring place words and images gather. As we hold ourselves steadily to this inner flame, all that moves toward its healing light, whether experienced as friend or foe, will be warmed and illuminated; (Mellon, 1992, p. 8).

We arranged the children into a horseshoe or circle. At a point in the session we asked the children if any of them would like to tell a joke, riddle, song or story to the group.

We found that singing was very much enjoyed by the children and they requested songs to be repeated from one week to the next. Gardner (1993) has noted how song predates the acquisition of language in children. We have found that singing promotes cohesion and calm in a group of children, and once again we would argue that this is adaptable to the residential situation.

We encouraged a concept of 'ceilidh' where everyone was welcome to contribute but good listeners were as essential as good storytellers. If a child wanted to contribute they were invited to come up and sit in the storyteller's chair. After contributing they were rewarded with applause from the group. One boy in the group seemed sparked by a riddle, which we told to the group. He then followed this with several riddles and brainteasers that he had been told by his granddad. This boy was not popular in the group, perhaps due to his erratic behaviour, which had recently been diagnosed as ADHD. He obviously shone as he took a lead role in the group and received positive attention and applause. In our experience it is common for a child with a particular difficulty such as ADHD or autism to exhibit a real strength in linguistic intelligence. Gardner (1993) writes of similar anomalies in this area and with regard to the other intelligences.

Evaluation

At the end of this piece of intervention we felt very satisfied that we had managed to reach each child in the group by engaging with them on a range of different intelligences. Our experience accords with the findings of Brand and Donato (2000) when they indicate that 'storytelling and its related activities integrate the various multiple intelligences and approach the child through his or her preferred learning profile' (p. 17).

The class teacher felt very positive about the work despite the brevity of the intervention. A highlight for the class was the ending ritual. All the children sat in a reverent fashion while listening to the blessings being read out and then carefully extinguishing their own candle. We continually find that children are hungry for this type of 'rite of passage' ritual. We believe that this is due to the fact that our developed society lacks clear ways of marking such rites of passage whereas in less developed societies these rituals are core to the experience of becoming an adult.

Rasband (1996) states that most rites of passage fall into three main phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. The move from primary school to high school provides an opportunity to create a meaningful rite of passage to mark leaving childhood and becoming an adolescent.

In the separation phase of traditional rites of passage, the participant is taken away from his/her familiar environment and former role and enters a very different and sometimes foreign routine to which they are forced to adjust and become familiar. The programme we have developed allows the children to separate from primary school by reflecting on this experience and telling stories about it as part of the process of saying goodbye. This separation is further developed by a programme of visits to high school during primary

seven, where the children are removed from the familiar and safe environment of primary school to the foreign and sometimes frightening environment of high school.

The second phase of a traditional rite of passage is the transition phase, the time when the participant learns the appropriate behaviour for the new stage they are entering. This begins whilst the children are still in primary, through visits to the high school and continues once the children have started high school.

The third phase is incorporation, when the participant is formally admitted into his/her new role. Since undertaking the piece of work described, we have created a ceremony which addresses this concept of incorporation. This ceremony takes place at the receiving high school, with the children and their parents. The children tell the story of the Goodbye Cloak and present their class cloak to the high school where it is accepted by their new head teacher.

We reflected that a joint approach on the blessings would have been even more effective to give the blessings further depth. The class teacher agreed and said that this method of capturing the essence of each child would be helpful to her in future when thinking of yearbook comments.

The class teacher reported that the stories raised issues of loss and change effectively and allowed her a springboard to follow up in discussion during class time. She said it was hard to plot real change in the class but was impressed by the good recall of stories which showed good listening. The impact upon listening skills was confirmed by the children. One boy reported ‘I listened more because I liked the stories it made me want to listen’. This positive impact upon listening concurs with the findings of Cohen (1968) in a year-long study in Harlem. Cohen reported that:

Continued and regular listening to story books chosen for their emotional appeal and the ease of conceptualisation seems to aid facility in listening, attention span, narrative sense, recall of stretches of verbalisation, and the recognition of newly learned words as they appear in other contexts; (Cohen, p.45).

We discussed one boy in particular who seemed to act as if he wasn’t listening, but actually could answer questions and recall details which showed that his outward behaviour belied his listening ability. This effect has real implications for residential child care, where issues of loss and change are always present, but often not well addressed. The use of storytelling could give staff in residential units another tool with which to explore these often painful and uncomfortable areas in a non-threatening way.

We were all concerned about the more passive girls in the class, but noted how several of them sprang to life when doing the ‘Robin Hood’ challenges outside, perhaps another indicator of the importance of providing children with such bodily kinaesthetic learning experiences. Several children indicated that the intervention had made them feel better equipped for the move to high school. As one child reported, ‘*I thought I wouldn’t make new friends (at high school) but now I have more confidence*’. The head teacher said, ‘This was a very successful piece of work enjoyed by everyone with far-reaching effects’.

It is our contention that the 'far-reaching effects' alluded to by this head teacher could be transferred to a residential setting.

There was a feeling that we could have benefited from spending more time with this class but we were unanimous in our feeling that this programme had been extremely effective in meeting our aims of developing self-esteem and a sense of cohesion in the class.

Transferring the experience to residential child care

As we previously stated, we believe that the techniques used in storytelling are transferable to residential care and that they would provide a useful tool for workers who are helping children and young people to explore parts of their life which might not otherwise be accessible. However, we also believe that workers themselves need some preparation to provide this for the young people in their care. In order to do this, staff would benefit from training to boost their own confidence, learn about sources and build skills around choice of story. Our project can offer tailor-made training and offers follow-up mentoring opportunities to consolidate learning. The Scottish Storytelling Centre can also provide information about adult storytelling clubs and festivals in Scotland* and staff would benefit from the opportunity of listening to stories in such contexts as this is one of the most useful ways to grow a repertoire of stories.

It is understood that many of the young people in residential care are adolescents, and some questions might be raised about how this particular group might engage with storytelling. Research such as Berridge and Brodie (1998), however, tells us that this group of young people have had impoverished early life experiences. As such, they may be more than willing to engage in the process as long as workers are confident in their ability to tell stories, and do not patronise the young people.

Embracing a culture of storytelling in a residential setting can contribute to the creation of a more familial environment, through the building of relationships and the creation of intimacy. We believe that storytelling also has a contribution to make to the lives of children who had interrupted early attachment experiences. Main and Goldwyn, as reported in Gerhardt (2004) found that when adults talked about their emotional lives and their important relationships in growing up, it didn't matter whether they had a 'happy childhood' (p.53) or not. Their current emotional security depended more upon their having an internally consistent and coherent narrative than on the story they had to tell. Immersing young people in stories allows them to internalise a narrative structure and creates a foundation upon which they can begin to organise and order and make sense of their own experiences.

*or the Society for Storytelling in England and Wales

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