

## Beware of the Big Bad Storyteller? An exploration of the therapeutic potential of bedtime reading from the perspective of young people and residential workers

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### Abstract

Research evidence shows that for looked after and accommodated children, bedtime can be a traumatic and challenging time (Bettelheim, 1950; Conlon, 2005). Additionally, research has identified that storytelling is a therapeutic activity for young people (Lamwaca, 2004; Morning, 2008; Stevens, Kirkpatrick and McNicol, 2008). The study discussed in this article examines the therapeutic potential of bedtime reading for young people in residential child care by exploring the related experiences of young people and children's workers in one large residential child care establishment. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with eight participants: three young people, four children's workers and one residential child care consultant. The findings from the research identified that all staff viewed bedtime reading as a therapeutic tool that enhanced their relationship with young people and supported the child's development. Young people stated that it was an enjoyable activity that helped them to feel safe, relaxed and closer to staff.

**Key words:** residential childcare; storytelling; bedtime reading; therapy

Many years ago, there lived a king who did not allow his subjects to learn. So, he posted signs all over the kingdom that stated, 'Beware of the Big Bad Storyteller'. The king knew storytellers gave people ideas. These ideas lead to people thinking, and then people might have ideas of their own and soon would want to learn to read and write or even put their ideas into action for themselves. The king was so fearful he built a fortress to keep out the storytellers. That is, until one day a mighty good and curious storyteller arrived. He was warned by the king to leave. 'Well then', said the storyteller, 'I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in. Then I'll tell a tale and when I'm through, good-bye to you.' So he stood at the gates and he huffed and puffed a glorious tale that filled the town's people with wonderful ideas and excited their imagination. When he finished the tale the fortress tumbled down. Terrified, the king fled from the land. The town's people found the storyteller to be a kind man who told wonderful stories. The people enjoyed them so much they passed them on to their children and their children's children. And this, my friend, is why we are just as wise as we are today (Story adapted from Zipes, 1995).

Much like the people in the story, young people in care may not have been afforded the opportunity to have experiences such as storytelling. Unfortunately research indicates that many children's homes are not literacy-rich environments where books are readily available to young people and that staff are not knowledgeable about books (Poulton, 2012; Scottish Government, 2008). This limits opportunities for young

people to benefit from being read or told stories, despite research showing its therapeutic value (Lamwaca, 2004; Morning, 2008; Stevens, Kirkpatrick and McNicol, 2008).

This paper discusses a small-scale study, undertaken for the purposes of an undergraduate dissertation that examined the therapeutic potential of bedtime reading for children and young people in care. To achieve this, it explored the children's workers' views and experiences of using bedtime reading to create a nurturing, caring and educationally rich environment. Additionally, the study sought the children's views and experiences of being read to by their workers. The findings of study are underpinned by theoretical and research literature. Whilst it is noted that storytelling, reading and reading to young people at bedtime are not identical, they are not dissimilar and as a result this study explores the use of storytelling and reading, and their related benefits. This literature will be discussed first.

## **The Review of Literature**

Storytelling is an ancient tradition worldwide. It evolved from the aspirations and dreams of 'common people' who, through the creation of stories, challenged their perceived social class and dissatisfaction with societal norms (Zipes, 1979). Historically, storytelling has been utilised as a tool to enhance human development. Bettelheim (1991), a prominent author in the field of storytelling, advocated the use of fairy tales as a psychoanalytical tool to support child development. Bettelheim asserted that fairy tales provided children with emotional and symbolic messages that enabled them to gain meaning and purpose. Much like Freud's analysis of dreams, Bettelheim argued that if a child is deprived of stories it could inhibit their development (Dundes, 1991). Zipes (1995) criticised Bettelheim's theories for lacking scientific validity as he argued there was no evidence base to substantiate his theory. However, a research base has emerged since the time of Zipes' writing that contributes to the claims that storytelling has therapeutic potential for looked after and accommodated children. This research, much like Bettelheim's theory, emphasises the value of the story contributing to a child's emotional development.

Research has identified that reading and storytelling schemes have shifted young people's and residential workers' approaches to reading and enhanced young people's literacy, expression and language skills (Lamwaca, 2004; Linnane, 2008; McNicol & Kirkpatrick, 2005; Poulton, 2012; Stevens, Kirkpatrick and McNicol, 2008). Stevens et al. (2008) conducted a qualitative analysis of the impact a storytelling project had on the educational attainment of young people in residential child care in South Lanarkshire. 'Storyworks' trained staff and developed storytelling workshops to support children and staff to tell and listen to stories. The findings indicated that storytelling increased young people's levels of confidence at school and they began to read for pleasure. This, in turn, nurtured their speech, imagination and comprehension skills. Additionally the research identified that storytelling enhanced the children's relationships with staff, had a calming effect on the children's unit, and provided a sense of community spirit where the children appeared to feel safe and relaxed. Edinburgh's Reading Champion Project (City of Edinburgh Council, 2010) identified similar outcomes where storytelling supported looked after and accommodated children to develop healthy attachments and resilience factors.

Lamwaca's (2004) study of orphaned Ugandan child soldiers identified that storytelling helped children who were victims of violence recover from flashbacks, panic attacks and isolation. It stimulated their imagination and emotional intelligence, and enabled them to share their experiences in a safe and non-threatening way. Additionally, listening to other people's stories gave them solace. A comparative analysis of the country's cultures and the needs of the young people suggest that while the Ugandan context is considerably different, the vulnerabilities and high levels of need are not completely dissimilar. Uganda has a strong cultural history of storytelling and this is akin to Scotland, which is steeped in traditional travellers' tales and folk tales. Additionally it could be argued that the Ugandan children's experience is not completely unlike that of looked after and accommodated children in Scotland, as both have experienced trauma, loss and abuse (Kendrick, 1998). The development of theory and research on storytelling provides the foundation for the aforementioned small-scale study that is the focus of this article. Next, the study's methods and methodology are discussed.

## Method

This study used a qualitative approach through the use of semi-structured interviews to gain an understanding of the participants' experiences. This enabled an exploration of practice that focused 'on the meaning of experiences by exploring how people define, describe and metaphorically make sense of these experiences' (Vanderstoep and Jonston, 2009, p.165). This research was granted ethical approval from the University of Strathclyde as it complied with their *Code of Practice on Investigations on Human Beings*. Tables 1 and 2 represent the background information of each participant.

*Table 1: Qualifications and experience of residential staff*

| Participants                      | Qualifications level              | Years working in Residential Child Care |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Residential Child Care consultant | Undergraduate degree and masters. | 0-5                                     |
| Children's worker 1               | In-house training.                | 0-5                                     |
| Children's worker 2               | Undergraduate degree.             | 5-10                                    |
| Children's worker 3               | Undergraduate degree and masters. | 5-10                                    |
| Children's worker 4               | Undergraduate degree.             | 15+                                     |

*Table 2: Age of children and years living in residential care*

| Participants | Age | Years lived in Residential Child Care. |
|--------------|-----|--|
| 'Alex'       | 14  | 0-3                                    |
| 'Mary'       | 16  | 3-6                                    |
| 'Jamie'      | 17  | 6-9                                    |

With the exception of the residential child care consultant, all children's workers worked at the same residential school. The residential child care consultant had been employed to develop therapeutic practice in a children's home. All of young people

interviewed had a learning difficulty. One of the children was unable to comprehend open questions and required the use of closed questions; however, closed questions posed the risk of influencing the child's answer. To mitigate this risk any information gained from questions that could be deemed leading was not included in the analysis. All young people's names have been changed to ensure their anonymity.

## **Findings**

An analysis of participant responses identified four key themes. Three of the themes were selected because they were most frequently discussed throughout the interviews. They are: rhythms, rituals and routines, the role of the children's worker and the relationship. However, it was also important to include findings that were not as frequent in discussion but were significant because of their relevance to related difficulties and potential to inform practice. They comprise the final theme, which is about barriers and challenges of bedtime reading. Many of these challenges had been explored in research and therefore provided a valuable contribution to this paper. Theory has been integrated into each theme to strengthen the paper's evidence base.

### **Rhythms, Rituals and Routines**

When entering a children's home, one gains a sense of the environment; for children, this will influence their sense of feeling valued and cared for (Smith, 2009). To a guest and student researcher, the homes felt welcoming; they had a containing milieu that appeared educationally rich due to the children's easy access to music, books and poetry. A residential milieu refers to the 'feel' of the residential environment (Smith, 2009, p. 87). This concept evolved from a holistic understanding of how everyday events affect a child's development (Bettelheim, 1950). The workers appeared to place significant value on the principles of creating a residential milieu rich in rhythms, routines and rituals, much like Steiner's (1996) concept of creating school timetables around the rhythms of the day. Workers identified that children have a natural rhythm of learning that is strengthened through routines:

A rhythmic day is best for our young people, to know what's going to happen...a kind of rhythmic holding...a child knows, 'I'm going to have a bath, get into clean pyjamas and someone will read me a story.' That's something they can count on in that part of the day. It's calming, comforting, soothing (Residential child care Consultant).

Workers viewed bedtime as fundamental time during each child's day where they were often restless, anxious, hyperactive or could exhibit challenging behaviour: The nervous system of these children may have been traumatised or maltreated. Their nervous system can get aroused, especially at night time (Residential child care Consultant).

The workers advocated the need to recognise not only the challenges bedtime presents but the therapeutic potential through using bedtime reading as a versatile and engaging approach to supporting their young people in the evening:

There is no doubt a good night sleep is essential and if a pupil is not sleeping well then we experience the repercussions the next day... helping them have a good night sleep is essential and reading stories is part of that (Children's Worker 2).

Rhythms provide children and their carers with a sense of togetherness; attuning their internal rhythms with their environment influences their quality of relationships and attachments (Maier, 1987). Reading is rich in rhythm; workers identified that the rhythms of storytelling helped young people to feel calm and safe through enabling their internal rhythmic energy to relax and slow down in preparation for sleep:

The voice, the movements and breathing, it is one of our basic rhythms that we all have and need and I think it's creating a calm peaceful rhythm by reading. It probably influences the child...one can see it and hear it, movements are getting slower, the rhythm slows down the child in a way (Children's Worker 3).

Young people identified what might be considered the rhythmic quality of bedtime reading as well:

When you can listen to what they're saying, their voice is nice. I like when they change voices and stuff (Mary).

Workers discussed in great depth the importance of routines; routines that differed from the kind of institutional routines intended to maintain social control and meet the needs of the service provider. Alternatively their approach reflected Maier's (1987) belief that routines provide young people with a sense of safety, as they know how their day will end:

When I know they are going to read me a story, then I know it's going to be relaxing (Alex).

Them knowing the routine of a story coming, it helped...to know you're coming in with a story...that's a trusting relationship, a bond...if they know it's coming the next day at a similar time then there's comfort in that (Children's Worker 1).

Rituals are the 'social counterpart to psychological rhythmicity' and are symbolic of culture and togetherness (Maier, 1987, p.115). Within residential child care, rituals can hold great significance as they grow to represent a sense of community (Smith, 2009). All workers referred to various bedtime rituals that included praying together, playing a lyre and lighting a candle:

One lit candle, turned down the lights, kids came like a moth to a flame...they gathered around, it was beautiful, a reverential space, their attention, presence and care, something slowed down a rhythm, they came with such curiosity and not a destructive or disturbing energy (Residential Child Care Consultant).

This description appears to encapsulate the combined use of rhythms, rituals and routines supporting young people to co-regulate. Co-regulation is a term that describes a process through which young people are supported by staff to manage emotional arousal such that they gradually learn to anticipate soothing support with the long-term aim of helping them to self-manage their emotions, behaviour or energy

(Bath, 2008). This approach embraces the environment of the children's home to provide a containing space for young people to settle in the evening.

### **The role of the Residential Worker**

The children's workers appeared to view their role as educators through using everyday activities, directly and indirectly, to enhance the development of the whole child. This was evident when they discussed purposefully selecting a book that has educational or developmental value for a child:

What kind of stories have you read with the children? (Interviewer)

At about the age they're studying the Romans they begin to explore the society the Romans had and explore democracy so often in the classroom they'll make class rules...so we'll read stories about the Romans...the stories can mirror what needs to be happening developmentally within the child and how we can support that to happen in a very indirect way (Children's Worker 2).

Additionally, the workers identified that a significant part of the children's workers' role was to provide young people with support to enable them to overcome challenges and adversity. This view was reflected in their approach to bedtime reading:

There is a social aspect [to bedtime reading] it's about tolerance, it helps [young people] see things that they may not see in life...in a gentler form perhaps. So something can be approached in a story that maybe they find difficult during the day (Children's Worker 4).

Kids will ask to hear the same story time and time again because there's a message that has resonated with them...it might be about losing a parent, going on an adventure where they find their own identity, developing morality (Children's Worker 2).

Tolkien (cited in Bettelheim, 1991, p.143) identifies that stories often have four parts: fantasy, recovery, escape and consolation. The residential child care consultant discussed how these stories can provide looked after and accommodated children with a heroic role model where a central character overcomes trials and tribulations and gains heroic status:

The stories and fairy tales are an antidote, they provide pictures of a human being that struggles to become good and can become good, triumph over cruelty...A story of a young person tossed from home, much like children in care's experiences, sent through trials and tribulations before they return with their nobility acknowledged (Residential Child Care Consultant).

These stories could offer temporary or permanent solutions that contribute to the formation of a young person's identity, enabling them to view themselves not as a victim or villain but a hero on a quest to find their sense of self (Bettelheim, 1991; Morning, 2008). Phelan (2000) asserts that it is the role of children's workers to support young people to have experiences free from labels, barriers and disability. He asserts that a young person's poor childhood care experience can affect their view of future relationships. This is referred to in attachment literature as a young person's internal working model (Daniel, Wassell, and Gilligan, 2010). These poor childhood

experiences can result in children experiencing current relationships through the lens of those that they experienced in their childhood. Phelan argues that this affects their ability to fully experience the present moment with a care giver; he refers to this impact as the 'twin pincers of past defeat and future hopelessness' (2000, p.13). For example, 'Alex' had moved from a different country to this children's home. His experience resonates with stories of heroes who go on a journey and face trials and tribulations:

What do you need in stories to make them good? (Interviewer)

Friendship, funny, adventure yeah that's the biggest one, facing lots of gods, beasts and stuff...when I go on an adventure and when Bilbo [from *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954)] goes on an adventure it's really fun! (Alex)

Alex would consistently refer back to *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 1954) throughout our conversation focusing on Bilbo's heroism and adventure. It could be suggested Alex's worker may have created an experience that enabled Alex to hear stories that were akin to his own journey, that challenged his view of himself and the world, and that could help him to develop a more positive self-image; however, there are ongoing debates regarding the extent to which internal working models can be changed (Daniel, Wassell and Gilligan, 2010).

Bettelheim (1991) argues that children are attracted to stories that relate to their emotional, psychological, physical and relational development. This view was reflected by those workers who had the highest educational attainment; they identified the value of the story as potentially holding metaphorical meaning for the children. This suggests that the children's workers' role is to understand the developmental needs of the young people and have the skills and knowledge to purposefully select stories that have development value for children. In order to do this, a working knowledge of developmental theory is necessary.

## **The Relationship**

The young people all expressed feelings of enjoyment and closeness to their worker:

When they read me a story it's funny and I get closer to them like best friends (Alex).

[Bedtime reading] can make me feel closer to them (Mary).

I like when [Children's Worker] reads me stories (Jamie).

These feelings of closeness were also shared by all workers who viewed bedtime reading as an intimate time when the children feel a sense of belonging and safety, the most basic of human needs (Maslow, 1971). These shared activities could contribute towards the potential for the workers to become a secure base for their young person. All participants spoke about how a story enables them to share an experience and adventure together:

We can interact through the story. It means he can lie down and listen to my voice and it is about the story that we can share and both enjoy and he can just get a bit of my emotion through how I read the story...you've got this pure trusting space...it's so

exciting and we both can't stop being excited about it together...I love it. It's storytelling and it's just great (Children's Worker 1).

It is noteworthy that this worker discusses sharing his emotions and uses the word 'love' to describe his commitment to the activity. This suggests a level of closeness which may enable a young person to have a healing connection with the worker. The worker's enthusiasm and passion for bedtime reading was evident throughout both the workers' and the young people's descriptions. This suggests that the value of bedtime reading is not based solely on the activity itself but on the genuine commitment and care that workers (and arguably young people) bring to the practice. This is significant as it demonstrates that shared activities are not necessarily therapeutic; it is the worker's thinking and approach that enhance its potential to enrich the therapeutic relationship and nurture the child's wellbeing.

Workers identified that bedtime reading provided them with time to wind down from the events of the day. It gave them space to reconnect with young people:

You experience this kind of intimacy where you forget that the person you are reading to is maybe very challenging throughout the day or that you yourself may not have been at your best and that can all sort of fall away at the hand of the story that you're reading together...you feel this sense of security and relax. It's just this eye-to-eye meeting without kind of judgements or disability clouding the whole encounter (Children's Worker 2).

Many young people enter care with considerable pain-based behaviours stemming from feelings of abandonment or previous experiences of abuse, and they can project these onto the worker (Anglin, 2002). Children's Worker 1 identified that understanding the child's needs and his own needs encouraged them to reunite through their bedtime reading routine and consolidate their differences:

We had a discussion and he said, 'You don't care for me and you don't like me,' and in the end it was the story. I told him I would love to read him a story and how important it is for us...this positive ending to the day. It's great (Children's Worker 1).

Bedtime reading appeared to have ameliorative value for the workers and not just the young people. Workers said it provided them with time to relax and to experience a journey together with the young person. This experience enabled them to reconnect and rebuild their relationship through a bedtime story. The benefits that workers receive through the residential milieu are rarely explored in literature. However, the workers' insight enables consideration of the benefits, for both workers and young people, of choosing to relax with children after conflicts rather than away from the children; this is an area that may benefit from further research.

### **Barriers and Challenges of Bedtime Reading**

Children's Workers 2, 3 and 4 likened their experiences of reading to young people to their own personal experience:



When I think about my own experiences of parents reading to me it was very nice, that warm sort of embrace. Someone taking time to care for you where you have that intimate cuddly moment. We don't necessarily do this with our pupils but the gestures are still the same (Children's Worker 2).

Their reflections demonstrated the value they placed on giving other children the positive caregiving experiences they themselves had as a child or have had with their own children. Alternatively, the residential child care consultant identified that some workers had their own adverse life experiences, had no personal experiences of being read to and potentially as a result did not value bedtime reading. Additionally, a lack of training and literary skills, along with employers who do not promote educationally rich environments, can inhibit their practice of bedtime reading in the sector more widely. An overview of the reading schemes in children's homes in Scotland identified that a significant barrier was children's workers inadequate knowledge of literature, poor literacy skills, lack of confidence and negative attitudes towards reading (Poulton, 2012; Scottish Government, 2008). Additionally, books were not easy to access or available in children's homes (Scottish Government, 2008b). Whilst the residential child care consultant identified that the workers were not encouraged to enhance their own educational attainment in the field of child care generally, in contract, the children's workers in the study placed significant value on their education influencing their practice:

Getting to do the BA and having some theoretical input... changed my attitude and how I looked at my role! I'm the one who's supposed to help [the young person]. His day can stand and fall with my attitude and inner values...unless I'm going to learn develop and grow there's no way I can help him develop and grow (Children's Worker 3).

The children's workers in this study have worked in an environment that promotes education in its widest sense; however, research has identified that there still remains significant concern that many workers are not adequately supported by their employers. Electing appropriate books requires an understanding of the benefits of reading: diversion, inspiration, escape and role modelling. This, therefore, requires employers to provide their staff with training on children's literature, child development and storytelling to help develop their knowledge, improve their confidence and ultimately improve the experiences of looked after and accommodated children.

Care experiences can instigate residual distress for some young people in care; this can have an impact on their behaviour, mood and sense of safety at bedtime when they feel more vulnerable (Conlon, 2005). Workers identified that for some young people, bedtime can be challenging. However, only one worker identified that for some young people bedtime reading could be upsetting:

Yes it's challenging when [bedtime reading] stirs up something difficult for the child. It didn't happen often; you think you're having story time and it turns into something quite serious that can be a bit of a throwback (Children's worker 4).

This worker identified that for some children bedtime reading could instigate traumatic memories. Bessel van der Kolk (2005) describes trauma as 'the experience of multiple, chronic and prolonged, developmentally adverse traumatic events, most

often of an interpersonal nature...and early life onset' (p. 402). Bedtime for looked after and accommodated children can trigger hyperarousal, hypervigilance or avoidant behaviours; behaviours that are similar to symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Conlon's (2005) research provided evidence of the importance of creating an environment that supports children physically and emotionally for bedtime. Conlon identified that maximum emotional support occurred when staff shared activities with young people. As identified by the children's worker, the use of bedtime reading does not remove the chance that night time may instigate traumatic memories for young people; however, the themes discussed above - rhythms, rituals, routines, the relationship and the children's workers' role - may minimise this risk and potentially nurture a young person's sense of safety, identity and belonging, thus enhancing their emotional and physical wellbeing.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This research brought to life the bedtime reading experiences of children's workers and the children who live in residential child care. It provided initial evidence to enhance our understanding of the therapeutic potential of bedtime reading. However, the fundamental purpose of this research is to positively influence individual and organisational residential child care practice. Research has identified that many children's homes do not have books readily available for young people and children's workers do not have the confidence, experience or literacy skills to implement storytelling. The children's workers' and residential child care consultant's descriptions demonstrated inspiring residential practice. Fundamental to this, however, was their understanding of child development, the residential milieu and their approach to using activities to enhance children's emotional wellbeing. Many workers associated this knowledge with their educational attainment in child care. This suggests that to enable our young people to grow and develop in an educationally rich environment we must give our children's workers the same opportunity. Much like the story of the king who banished all the storytellers from his kingdom so his people could not learn, if we allow our children in care to be brought up in a world free from stories and books, we reduce the likelihood that they will develop into strong, confident and knowledgeable adults.

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