

Therapeutic Story Writing Groups (Forces)

Brief Summary of Gosport Project 2013

In 2012, fifteen schools in Gosport made use of forces funding to commission Hampshire Educational Psychology to give training in how to run Therapeutic Story Writing (TSW) groups for the benefit of forces children. Eighteen members of staff (facilitators for the groups) were given three days' training and four supervision sessions by two educational psychologists. They were also given a copy of "Therapeutic Storywriting" by Trisha Waters, on which the training was based. The aim was to enhance the emotional wellbeing of the young people and increase their academic motivation and attainments through attending to their emotional needs.

Method

Participants

103 Pupils were selected to take part in the project by their class teachers, who also included a reason for their referral. These referral reasons mainly incorporated children in service families, although there were also some who had been referred because they were struggling with writing. It was important to have a mix of young people, according to gender, achievement level and reason for inclusion in the group.

Pupils attended one of the 15 schools participating in the project, and the number of pupils taking part per school ranged from two to twenty three (average = seven). Of these, seven were infant schools, six were junior schools and two were primary schools.

Procedure

Each group of pupils received one therapeutic story session, lasting between 45-60 minutes, per week, for a ten-week period. Once a group had started the members of that group and their facilitators remained the same for each session thereafter, ensuring consistency and allowing pupils to build trust and relationships with others in the group.

Each session followed the same procedure:

- 1. Feelings check in**
- 2. Review of previous week's stories**
- 3. Introduction of new story theme**
- 4. Silent writing of stories**
- 5. Sharing the stories**
- 6. Mime/game to support children's attention and listening skills**

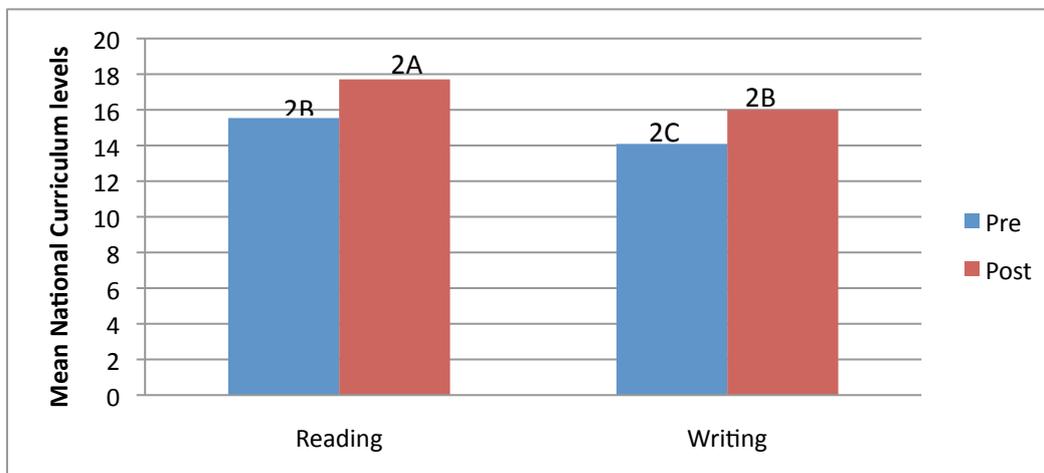
Results

To reduce unnecessary pressure on school staff, facilitators of the groups were only asked to note the National Curriculum levels and give the young people an emotional well being questionnaire pre and post the interventions. The facilitators were, however, supplied with a range of evaluation tools (two for teachers and two for pupils) should they find these helpful in their work and as can be seen from the results below, many facilitators submitted data from the teacher questionnaires as well as those for the pupils. To get a richer picture of the impact of the intervention, the facilitators were also given a questionnaire at the end of running their first group.

Academic Outcomes

National curriculum levels in reading and writing were gathered pre and post intervention. Pupils significantly improved in terms of their national curriculum levels in both reading and writing during the intervention period, (see table 1), with the average pupil making gains of one sub-level. One pupil made a 3 sublevel gain.

Table 1. Changes in National Curriculum Levels (for 56 pupils)

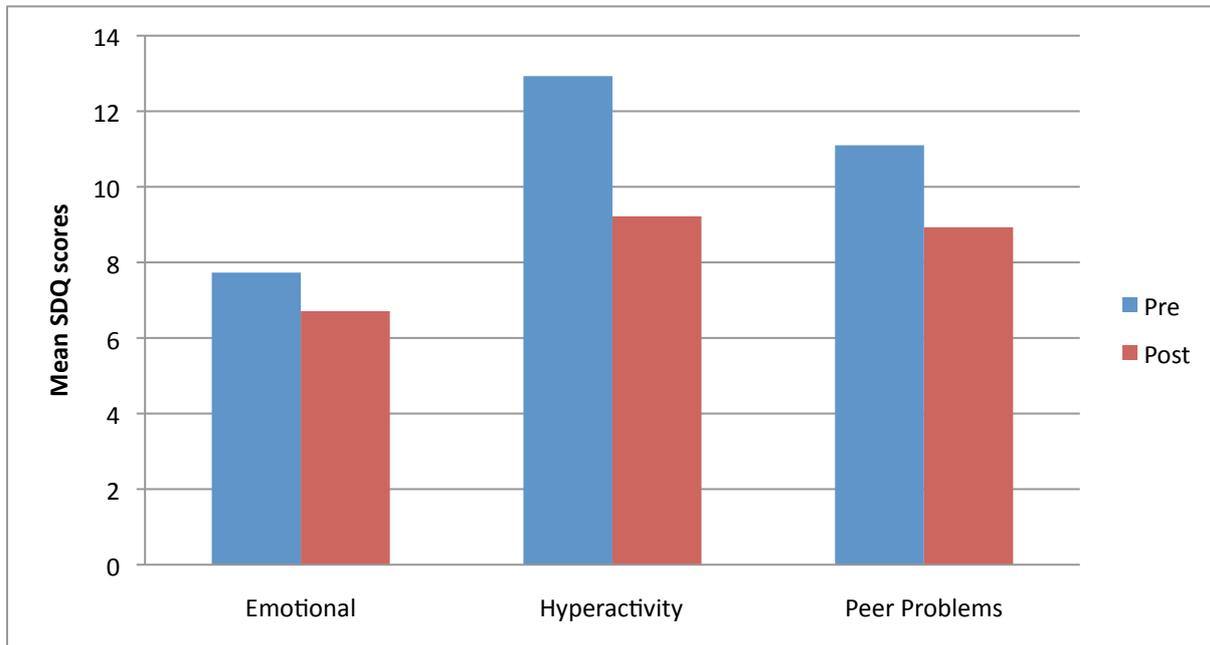


Emotional Outcomes

Forty-one members of school staff completed the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ, Goodman, 2005) before and after the TSW intervention. The SDQ is a brief behavioural screening questionnaire. The results showed that pupils

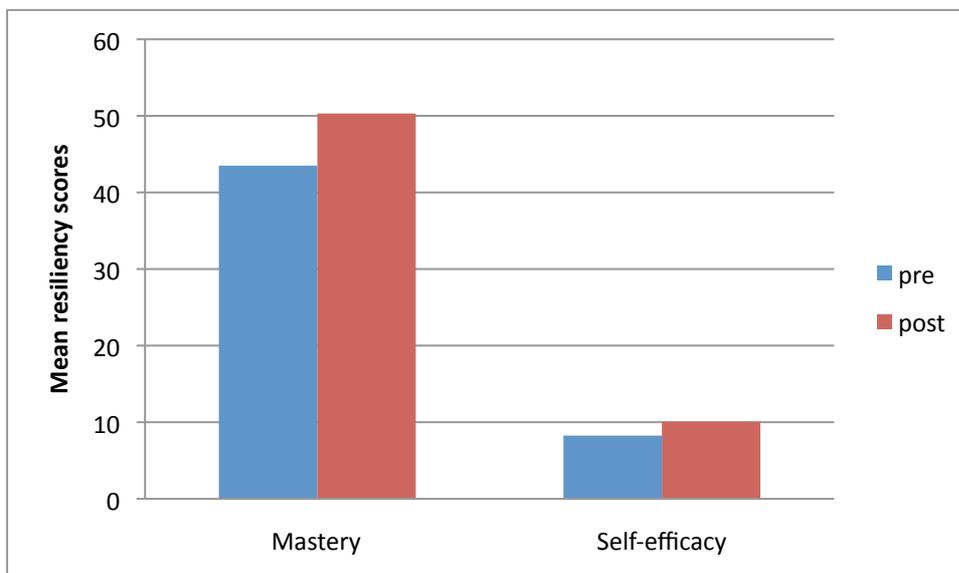
significantly improved in terms of hyperactivity, peer problems and total scores. There was also some improvement in their emotional scores (see table 2).

Table 2. Mean SDQ scores (for 41 pupils)



Sixteen members of school staff completed the Resiliency Scales (PsychCorp, 2007) before and after the TSW intervention. The Resiliency Scales measure areas of perceived strength and/or vulnerability related to psychological resilience. The results showed that the pupils demonstrated some improvement in terms of their mastery (the extent to which pupils demonstrate a positive attitude about the world/life in general and about their own life specifically) and their self-efficacy (approach to obstacles or problems) (see table 3).

Table 3. Mean resiliency scores (for 16 pupils aged 9 or above)



Changes in referred behaviour

Teachers were asked whether they had seen any changes in the behaviours that pupils were originally referred to the intervention for. Teachers outlined a number of areas in which changes had been observed.

Pupils' Confidence

"[Pupil] is much more confident and will write much more. He has become proud of his work and is willing to show it to others"

"[Pupil] now reads his work to the class. He is more content to approach activities and discuss them."

Improvements in written work

There were also improvements noticed in pupil's written work and concentration. Teachers reported that many children were more willing to work independently and that the quality of their written work had improved. This was in comparison to pupils having previously refused to write at all.

"[Pupil] has always worried about his writing and this was heightened when Dad was away - now he is happy to write"

"Yes, more able to concentrate, take on instruction and advice"

Most teachers noticed a specific change in pupils' writing, and all changes were positive and promising in nature. Improvements were observed in motivation, attitudes to writing, length of time spent on writing tasks, quantity of writing produced, punctuation, sentence and vocabulary variety, imagination, social skills and independence.

Enjoyment of the TSW group

Four teachers commented that their pupils had really enjoyed the groups and were enthusiastic to attend.

"This has been a positive experience for[pupil], she has articulated this to me on numerous occasions"

"[Pupil] has responded well to this intervention, he speaks fondly of his involvement with the group"

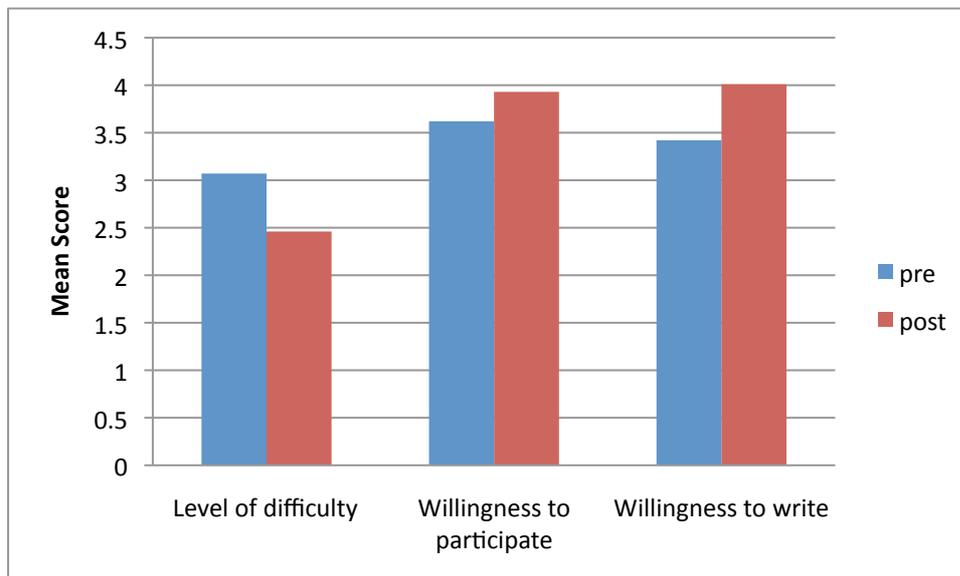
Other changes noted included improved self-esteem, pupils being more relaxed and less anxious and being able to use writing to communicate experiences.

Changes in levels of difficulty, willingness to participate and willingness to write

Teachers were asked to rate each pupils' level of difficulty, level of participation in class, and level of their willingness to write in class before and after the intervention.

The results indicate the teachers felt the pupils were less difficult in class and felt that they were more willing to participate and write in class after the intervention (see table 4).

Table 4. Teacher ratings of changes in pupil’s behaviour (for 36 pupils)



Brief summary of facilitators’ evaluation after running first group – April 2013

Impact upon pupils

1. What impact, if any, did you notice the group had on the children in general?

- Shared feelings/ideas/understanding emotions 13
- Increase in confidence 8
- Enjoyment 8
- Motivation 6
- Concentration 3
- Happier/feeling included/special 3
- Literacy skills improved/ writing more 2
- Better listening skills 2
- Improved behaviour 1
- Wanted to keep adults’ stories 1
- Mixed with different peers 1

“The children all enjoyed the group and looked forward to it each week. One boy went from refusing to write to asking when he could start and writing for the whole

15 minutes. The feelings check high-lighted some 'worries' the two girls had, although this was never reflected in their stories."

"Socially, I have noticed that two of the children who had friendship problems have become much happier, voiced that they have friends and feel more confident and included. Another child I have seen far less in my lunchtime nurture group, which means she is not absent from play time."

"One pupil with behaviour problems (not service) really took note of stories I wrote and has reacted positively."

2. What impact, if any, did you notice the group had on the children from Forces families in particular?

- Realisation others in similar situation when parent goes away 8
- Confidence/trust/social impact 5
- Enjoyment 3
- Motivation 3
- Improved behaviour and co-operation 3
- Class work improved 2
- Empathy – understanding how Dad might be feeling 1
- Feel listened to and included 1
- Open about moving schools 1

"Children began to talk about parents being away at the last two sessions, so it did give them a chance to verbalise what was going on for them and realise they weren't alone in their situations. It helped us see that it does have an impact on them, even though these children were chosen because they didn't have particular problems in school."

Practical matters

3. What, if anything, helped running the group?

- Consistency: same room each week, same day and time 7
- 2 adults running the group 4
- Structure/time plan/programme 4
- Training and supervision/good preparation with ways into stories 4
- Support/interest from class teachers 2
- Quiet room with no interruptions 1
- Being emotionally aware 1
- Allowing self time to prepare 1
- Children being ready to collect 1
- No comment

"having a 'set' program so when 'changes' were tried to be made, we could say 'no' and why."

Impact on people running groups

Running the groups has influenced people's practice and understanding of Forces children:

- *Considering how free writing can be used to motivate reluctant writers. Accepting that the process itself is therapeutic and not trying to push to 'fix' things.*
- *In a positive way, it has given me the opportunity to understand how forces families feel and can link this with their progress in class, i.e. dad going away in 2 days/upset periods in class.*

All said they would run another group. Comments included:

"We could see the difference in the children and feedback from teachers showed that it was also happening in class."

"I have seen huge changes in the junior children's attitude to school. In the infants, the children have shown enthusiasm and the boys have been particularly keen to share their stories."

"The emotional use of running a group is huge, the impact it has on children's expression of emotions and self esteem is also huge!"

Conclusion

The young people from forces families and non-forces families enjoyed attending the groups and felt emotionally supported, increasing their confidence and sense of belonging, as well as their motivation to write and participate in class. They showed academic as well as emotional gains. Those adults trained to run the groups also enjoyed the intervention and noted the positive benefits for the young people involved. Those who were sceptical about the possible benefits of TSW for young children, or even the particular needs of young people from forces families, found they were convinced by the efficacy and value of the approach. The majority of those trained ran more than one group and intend to continue doing so.

Jacqueline Batchelor, Jemma Murray, Amy Warhurst and George Maclean

Hampshire Educational Psychology

20.09.13