

The use of Therapeutic Storywriting Groups to support pupils with emotional difficulties

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Trisha Waters presents the theoretical basis for Therapeutic Storywriting Groups, an outline of how they work in practice and a summary of the research report commissioned by SERSEN to evaluate their impact on pupils' learning. The article finishes with a short case study of a nine-year-old boy who is on the special educational needs register for behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.

Keywords: therapy, story-writing, EBD, case-study, pupil support.

Introduction

Therapeutic Storywriting Groups use the metaphor in stories written by both pupils and teachers to address emotional issues that are impeding pupils' learning. Pupils are referred to the groups because of concerns about their behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESDs) and most will be on the special educational needs register. For many of these pupils, their emotional difficulties also prevent their accessing the educational curriculum. Teachers supporting pupils with BESDs can find themselves wondering whether to prioritise the pupil's emotional well-being or to focus on their academic achievement. Therapeutic Storywriting Groups have been developed to address both emotional and academic literacy at the same time. They provide an emotionally containing environment in which pupils are encouraged to write stories in which they can project their own worries and concerns onto story characters. By working through the emotional safety of story metaphor, pupils are able to discuss and process feelings that might otherwise be overwhelming or inappropriate to share in an educational setting. However, what makes this approach different from other therapeutic interventions used in schools, such as play or art therapy, is that in Therapeutic Storywriting Groups pupils are engaged in actually writing out their stories and thus also developing literacy skills. The

approach is clearly in line with the Every Child Matters (2003) agenda, the special educational needs policy document *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (2004) and the more recent *Children's Plan* (2007), all of which address the need for emotional well-being along with academic achievement.

With the support of the South-east Region special educational needs Partnership (SERSEN), Therapeutic Storywriting Groups have been set up in over 400 schools in England in the last few years. The model has been used by the DfES (2005) as a case example of exemplary inclusive practice. Following the initial phase of dissemination, SERSEN commissioned a research evaluation into the impact of Therapeutic Storywriting Groups on pupils' learning.

The first part of this article will look at how the groups are set up and discuss the underlying theoretical principles. A summary of the SERSEN evaluation report, 'Writing Stories with Feeling' (Waters, 2004b), will be presented in the latter section.

Which pupils benefit from Therapeutic Storywriting Groups?

Therapeutic Storywriting Groups target pupils identified by their school as having emotional difficulties which are impeding their learning. The intervention is designed to be used for the 7 to 12 year age range. The reason for the lower limit is that younger children, particularly those with BESDs, are generally not ready to engage with the formal structure of group writing sessions. At the other end of the age range, pupils who are coming up to adolescence are entering what Piaget termed the 'conceptual stage' of cognitive development and with this comes an intuitive facility to read metaphor in a way that is not accessible for the younger child. A consequence of this ability is that adolescent pupils may be able to interpret the stories of others and confidentiality within the group can become an issue. It is for these reasons, that the model is most appropriate for the 7 to 12 age range; although a professional judgement needs

to be made which takes into account the pupils' emotional and cognitive stages of development.

Pupils are required to write for themselves. However, pupils with emerging writing skills (SATS level 1) can participate as long as they are at least able to read back to the teacher what they have written. If the writing is of poor legibility, the teacher can then type out what has been read and place it underneath the child's own writing.

Selecting the group

Groups consist of four to six pupils, referred by their class teacher or SENCo as having emotional difficulties that are impeding their learning in the classroom. An emphasis is placed on balancing the group by including not only pupils who act out but also those who 'act in'; that is, those who are withdrawn and disengaged. Teachers are encouraged to maintain a gender balance as it is easy to overlook the emotional needs of a compliant but withdrawn girl.

Group facilitators and training

Therapeutic Storywriting Groups can be led by SENCos, special educational needs support teachers, learning mentors, teaching assistants or school counsellors (for ease of expression the term 'teacher' will be used in this article to refer to this group of professionals). In order to run a Therapeutic Storywriting Group, teachers are first required to attend a three-day training course which usually extends over a period of six weeks. The training days are spaced out over a term to give participants the opportunity to set up a Therapeutic Storywriting Group while the course is being taught and to bring material from their groups for discussion to the later training days.

The training focuses on developing some key skills which include:

- active listening skills;
- understanding the significance of and responding to metaphor;
- use of subpersonality theory in relation to story (Waters, 2004a);
- group management;
- assessment, reporting and referring on.

Underpinning theory

The theoretical model presented in the training focuses particularly on the relationship between emotional and cognitive development and makes particular reference to Bion's (1965) theory of thinking that states that anxiety needs to be sufficiently contained in order for thinking to take place. The training looks at different models of the self and draws on Assagioli's (1965) theory of subpersonalities

which provides a graduated process for integrating different aspects of the self. The workplace counselling skill of active listening is also a core aspect of the training. Teachers practise using metaphor in their own story writing to address emotional issues and are also trained to keep reflections on pupils' stories within the story metaphor. In this way personal issues, which may be overwhelming for the child if discussed directly, do not need to be brought explicitly into the session.

As Weare (2003) points out, there are many terms in use in the field of emotional development. The term 'emotional learning' is used in the training and in the SERSEN evaluation report (Waters, 2004b) to refer to the development of emotional literacy or emotional intelligence. Emotional literacy, popularised by Goleman (1996), is generally defined as, 'the ability to recognise, understand and appropriately express our emotions' (www.nelig.com). Reference is also made to Gardner's concept of emotional intelligence. Gardner (1993) considers emotional intelligence to be made up of two aspects; the intrapsychic intelligence and interpersonal intelligences. *Intrapersonal* (or intrapsychic) intelligence is concerned with our own internal unconscious feeling world, whereas the *interpersonal* is concerned with relationships with others in the external world and overlaps with what is referred to as social intelligence. In relation to story metaphor, the intrapsychic world is generally expressed through fantasy, fairytale and dream-like imagery, whereas the interpersonal is expressed through the interaction of characters typically set in a world of everyday reality.

Structure of a Therapeutic Storywriting Group Session

Groups run weekly and have a maximum of six children. The groups are described to parents and pupils as an opportunity to explore different feelings through story characters. Each session lasts about one hour and includes:

- relaxation and feelings check-in;
- suggestion for new story theme;
- silent writing when children and teacher both write stories;
- time to share stories and draw pictures;
- a listening game to finish.

The session begins with a short body relaxation, at the end of which each child writes down a feeling word that best describes their current emotional state. Each person then has a turn to say a bit about why they are feeling as they have described and they then place their feeling word with those of others on a 'feelings ladder'.

The teacher then presents a story theme that reflects some of the emotional issues in the group. The teacher will use this story theme for her own story which she writes while the children write their stories. By asking the children for sug-

gestions for her own story, she both models asking for help and encourages discussion of the emotional issue on which she has focused. For instance, if there are issues around anger for some of the pupils in the group, the teacher might begin with a story opening such as,

Dino the dragon lay outside his cave. Never before had he felt so angry.

The teacher will then ask the children why they think Dino might be feeling angry. The children naturally project their own experiences of being angry onto Dino and typical pupil responses might be 'because he'd been told off again and it wasn't his fault' or 'none of his friends would play with him' or 'someone was throwing things at him'. The teacher makes a note of these suggestions and includes at least one of them in her story. She retains overall control of her story but uses it to model the resolution of emotional dilemmas. As the teacher develops her story, it is used to provide further points for discussion about pertinent emotional literacy issues. The engagement of the teacher with her own story helps establish a focused writing environment as well as providing a model of good academic story writing. The pupils can use the same story theme as the teacher or one of their own choosing.

There then follows about 15 minutes of silent writing during which all pupils and the teacher write their story. After this each member of the group, including the teacher, has time to share their story. It is at this point that the teacher uses active listening skills to reflect the feelings expressed in each pupil's story. She will also draw on her awareness of sub-personality theory (Assagioli, 1965) to bring the children's attention to specific characters in their stories. Members of the group are encouraged to provide constructive feedback on each other's work and can ask for ideas for the next part of their own story as modelled by the teacher. The teacher ensures that all members of the group feel emotionally safe during these group interactions. While listening to the stories, children can illustrate their stories. The drawing activity deepens and extends the story metaphor and can help children with ADD or ADHD to listen to the others. The session ends with a short game designed to develop listening skills.

Evaluation of the impact of Therapeutic Storywriting Groups on pupils' learning

The evaluation report 'Writing Stories with Feeling' (Waters, 2004b) was commissioned by SERSEN in order to evaluate the impact of Therapeutic Storywriting Groups on pupils' emotional, social and academic learning. This evaluation followed on from the SERSEN Therapeutic Storywriting Initiative which had delivered a series of three-day training courses, to 60 teachers drawn from eight education authorities in the south of England. The following section gives a summary of the methodology and major findings of this evaluation study.

Research questions

The overall aim of the evaluation was to evaluate the impact of Therapeutic Storywriting Groups on pupils' emotional, social and academic learning. The following research questions were formulated to address this aim in more detail:

1. In what ways do Therapeutic Storywriting Groups impact on pupils' *emotional learning* and in particular their ability to:
 - access and articulate their feelings;
 - process feelings through story metaphor?
2. In what ways can Therapeutic Storywriting be considered to impact on pupils' *social learning* and, in particular, their ability to listen to and empathise with others?
3. What impact does Therapeutic Storywriting have on pupils' *academic learning* and, in particular, their
 - motivation to engage with writing;
 - imagination;
 - self-esteem as writers?

Methodology

The evaluation adopted a predominantly qualitative methodology, although some quantitative measures were used where appropriate. With particular reference to assessing the impact on pupils' emotional and social learning, the topics under investigation, that is, the child's own intrapsychic and interpersonal feeling states, are by their nature subjective; pupil voice was therefore used as the main data source in this area, with teacher interviews used to triangulate and validate the data gathered from the pupils. Specific methods included:

- semi-structured group interviews with five groups of pupils who had attended at least ten group sessions of Therapeutic Storywriting;
- individual semi-structured interviews with individual pupils;
- semi-structured interviews with teachers leading the storywriting groups;
- analysis and display of key issues identified in interviews;
- case portrayal of three individual pupils, drawing on a content analysis of a selection of their stories.

The sample cohort

The research focused on 21 pupils drawn from five groups in four schools in which teachers who had attended a three-day training in Therapeutic Storywriting had run a Therapeutic Storywriting group for at least ten sessions. Pupils were from Years 3, 4, 5, and 6 and all the groups were run by the SENCo.

Of the 21 pupils interviewed, 14 were on the special educational needs register, with the remainder being monitored for possible inclusion on the register. Ten pupils were at

School Action level and four were at School Action Plus. Three of the pupils had previously been temporarily excluded from school. All had been referred because of emotional, social or behavioural difficulties. For a majority of the pupils these difficulties were preventing them accessing the curriculum and/or forming constructive relationships with peers. For two of the pupils these difficulties were expressed in a tendency to self-harm.

Eight pupils had been the subject of child protection concerns and two were currently on the child protection register. About a third (six pupils) were identified by teachers as silent and withdrawn, a third (seven pupils) as having particularly aggressive behaviour and two-thirds (14 pupils) as having friendship difficulties.

Ethics and confidentiality

Permission was sought from parents for pupils to take part in the research. The names of the schools and local authorities were omitted and all pupil names changed in the report (as they are in this article) in order to protect the identity of the pupils. In addition, care was taken to protect the privacy of pupils both when conducting the research, by not asking intrusive questions, and when writing up the report, by not referring to unique incidents which could either embarrass or identify particular individuals.

Analysis of pupil interviews

The interview questions were drawn up to encourage pupils to give their views on a range of topics and these were then analysed using a thematic categorisation of data. One of the key themes was the pupils' perception of the purpose of the Therapeutic Storywriting Groups. This was ascertained by asking how they would describe the group to another child who knew nothing about it and who would benefit from attending the group. The analysis gave their responses as follows.

It is a place where you:

- write stories;
- can calm down;
- can share feelings with each other;
- listen to each other's stories;
- can have fun;
- get to listen to the teacher's story;
- can write about feelings;
- get to know other children.

They said that the children who would benefit from attending the groups would be those who:

- are shy or have emotional problems;
- need help with writing and help to think about what they are saying;

- have family problems;
- don't really feel very comfortable in their class;
- don't really concentrate in class and don't listen;
- want to improve their stories and might want to be story writers when older;
- are getting picked on or are being teased;
- may have had a few problems and need someone to talk to.

Discussion with the SENCOs about the reasons for individual referrals to the groups showed that for almost all of the children their response to this question reflected their own personal needs or situation.

Each section of the report includes representative examples of the pupils' comments. Maya, a Year 6 girl, said she would describe the group to another child as a group '*for people who may have had a few problems and need someone to talk to. You can write stories and talk about problems but don't have to say it is you.*'

In one of the group interviews, some Year 5 and 6 girls discussed how they would describe the group to another child:

Nina: Quite exciting and friendly, because like if you make a mistake or like do something wrong . . .

Yasmin: You don't have to worry.

Rose: Yes and it's very calming for people that have problems.

Nina: You get to write the stories and get your feelings out, and you can get like bad moods out of your head.

You get to talk to people as well.

Mia: Because you just concentrate on your story sometimes and just forget about everything else.

Rose: I think 'concentrate' is like too strong a word . . . but there isn't another word, you don't have to concentrate lots but it's one of those things that you can just do easily.

Liam's story

Here is an individual pupil profile that draws on the range of data gathered about the pupil, including an analysis of the child's stories, to show how he used a Therapeutic Storywriting group to explore and process difficult feelings:

Nine-year-old Liam was on the special educational needs register for emotional and behavioural difficulties at the level of School Action. While an able boy capable of engaging with educational tasks, he had often been sent out of class and also excluded on a number of occasions because of 'tantrums' and aggressive behaviour. The SENCO said he had a '*short fuse*' and described him as '*a time bomb*'. She reported that when he lost his temper he could kick out, throw furniture or refuse to move. He saw himself as a victim and would never take responsibility for his actions. She also mentioned he had talked about wanting to kill

himself and that he often scratched his right arm. His class teacher described him as the most difficult pupil to handle in her class. The headteacher described him as 'intimidating' and said that he bullied other children. Liam, however, in discussing the storywriting group described himself very differently, saying, 'I thought the writing group was going to be hard and I'd be really shy like I usually am.'

A number of Liam's stories explored the polarity between victim and bully identified by his teacher. His first story was about a selfish bunny called Barry who 'didn't even know he was greedy and selfish'. Barry had no friends. The story ends with Barry trying to become friends with some other bunnies but they only see his presence as threatening and think 'he will be horrible' to them:

*He went up to the other bunnies while they were eating carrots. He had a carrot with him. He dropped it on the ground and said,
'Hello everyone! Mind if I eat with you?'*
*They all ran away. While they ran, one of them said,
'We'd better get out of here or he will take our carrots and be horrible to us.'*
*Barry said,
'That's it! I'm going on holiday.'*

In a later story the main character is able to escape his role as victim. Dino, a 50-year-old dragon, lives in a cave that is too small for him and is terrified that he will be killed by soldiers if he tries to find a bigger, more comfortable cave. (The cave can be seen here as a metaphor for the sense of self).



Liam explained that 50 in dragon years meant the dragon would be the same age as himself. While we usually think of a dragon as an angry and scary creature, much like a bully, in this story the dragon clearly feels the victim:

Three days later he saw no soldiers anywhere. So he flew out slowly. All of a sudden someone shouted, 'Kill the dragon!' and a zillion arrows came from the left and a zillion from the right. It was absolute chaos. Luckily Dino managed to fly away. [Liam added when reading out: the dragon didn't know he could fly until he tried.] He found himself a beautiful cave and he lived happily ever after.

Liam initially distanced himself slightly from the rest of the group but from the second week onwards he chose to sit

closer to the others. His surprise at enjoying the group was also reflected in his response to the question about the teacher's story which he said he enjoyed but found it 'a bit shocking – 'cos I don't normally like stories in a special writing group.' He also described the group as 'really fun'.

Interest was mentioned both in recommending the group for children 'who don't get interested in much – this might interest them' and also for himself when talking about his listening skills: 'Normally in class I'm not very good at listening but I actually take an interest now.'

Given the picture presented by the teachers, Liam focused remarkably well on the body relaxation at the beginning of sessions and said himself that 'I've been really relaxing, really like good and it calmed me down.' He also found the writing activity relaxing, saying, 'it was a way to get all your feelings out. And it calms you down just doing a little bit of writing.'

One week during the feelings check-in, one of the other boys in the group said that he was upset because Liam had teased him in the playground. Liam responded in a different manner than usual by apologising to the boy concerned. When asked how he got on with the other members of the group at the end of the course of sessions, he said,

'Before we came to the writing group me, Nancy, Sean and Sarah weren't really good friends and usually argued but now we're the best of friends.'

Liam thought his stories had improved 'really a lot' by coming to the group and that it had particularly helped him write story beginnings, to write more and to improve his handwriting and punctuation. He said he felt 'a bit sad' about the group finishing and that he was 'going to miss all the story writing and the relaxation time 'cos you don't get much of that in the class.'

Summary of research findings

The evaluation found that, overall, Therapeutic Storywriting Groups had a number of positive effects on pupils' emotional, social and academic learning. In particular, it:

- enabled pupils to use the medium of story writing to process emotional experiences;
- helped pupils move through difficult feelings;
- encouraged pupils to develop co-operative and trusting relationships with peers;
- supported listening and speaking skills;
- fostered an interactive relationship between the teacher and group with respect to story writing skills;
- increased pupils' concentration and motivation to engage with story writing;
- improved pupils' self-esteem as writers.

How to set up a Therapeutic Storywriting Group in your school

Further information on training to run a Therapeutic Storywriting Group is available on The Centre for Therapeutic Storywriting and SERSEN websites:

www.TherapeuticStorywriting.com
www.SERSEN.uk.net

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