Teachers and students with severe learning difficulties working together to co-construct personal narratives using Storysharing®: the teacher perspective

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The telling of personal stories is a feature of everyday life. Young people with learning difficulties may find it difficult to report what has happened to them. A project was set up to investigate the impact of Storysharing® on the co-construction of personal narratives by staff and students in a special school. The current study investigated the teacher's perspective. The sample was comprised of four special education teachers who had been involved in the implementation of Storysharing®. Semi-structured interviews were carried out at the end of the intervention period. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. Three organising themes emerged from the data: 'Enactment Process'; 'Benefits to Child'; and 'Curriculum.' The Storysharing® intervention appeared to be positively associated with perceived changes to the educational practice of the teachers, revealing its potential for developing narrative in the classroom.

Key words: education, interaction, learning difficulties, narrative.

Introduction

'No story lives unless someone wants to listen' (J. K. Rowling, July 2011)

Telling stories is one way that we make sense of our personal experiences (Lambrou, 2014). By sharing our own stories with the people who matter in our lives, we are able to express something about who we are and to make connections with family and community (Fivush *et al.,* 2011). There are two main types of narrative: fictional and personal. Fictional stories are either original compositions or recall a previously heard or read story (McCabe *et al.,* 2008). Personal stories centre around significant, "reportable" events that hold meaning for both the teller and the listener (Labov and Waletzky, 1997; Labov, 2008). Children develop the ability to participate in the telling of personal narratives much earlier than for fictional narratives (McCabe *et al.,* 2008), supported by parental scaffolding (Petersen and McCabe, 1992).

Some individuals find it difficult to relate their real-life experiences due to communication difficulties (Grove, 2011). Children using a computer-aided device for communication produced narratives that lacked structure, with high usage of 'and' as a linking device, and a strong reliance on closed questions with yes-no answers (Soto *et al.,* 2006; Bailey and Bunning, 2011). Narratives by individuals with learning difficulties were characterised by a lack of relationship marking between characters and poor temporal ordering of events (Grove and Tucker, 2003), and restricted lexical diversity with low productivity generally (Scott and Windsor, 2000). Using a wordless picture book to stimulate narrative construction, Capps *et al.* (2000) found that children with learning difficulties were less able to infer the emotional states of characters than their typically developing peers.

The National Curriculum of England and Wales describes a statutory requirement for schools to develop spoken language across the whole curriculum (DfE, 2013). However, Grove (2014) observed that oral narrative was inadequately represented, with narrative opportunities typically restricted to written formats within English. Whilst the development of personal narrative is reflected in the learning goals of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017), the transition from oral to written narratives at Key Stages 1 and 2 is likely to disadvantage those with severe learning difficulties, many of whom will not develop functional literacy skills (Grove, 2014).

A range of narrative-based approaches have been developed to counter the challenges of individuals who have communication needs. Story grammar approaches have been adopted to promote linguistic complexity and the inclusion of key narrative elements (e.g. Liboiron and Soto, 2006; Soto and Yu, 2007). Other outcomes have included: gains in macrostructure or the salient elements of the story, e.g. setting, internal response, resolution (Petersen *et al.,* 2010; Epstein and Phillips, 2009; Kouri and Telander, 2008) and microstructure elements, e.g. cohesive markers, mean length of utterance, conjunctions (Isbell *et al.,* 2004; Soto and Yu, 2007; Soto *et al.,* 2008). The roles of teaching staff have been variously defined in terms of scaffolding techniques used, pictorial support and associated activities (Spencer and Slochum, 2010). Similarly, Westerveld and Gillon (2008) reported that group narrative intervention was effective in increasing knowledge of story structure, through the discussion and identification of key elements, listening tasks and story retell.

Multisensory storytelling (MSST) is a narrative approach that reduces the reliance on written text by integrating sensory stimuli into individualised stories (Fuller, 2013). Recent evidence from behavioural analysis and participant interviews has emphasised the value of MSST in engaging listeners both socially (Young and Lambe, 2014) and educationally (Watson *et al*., 2002). For example, Young *et al*. (2011) developed multisensory 'sensitive stories' collaboratively with professionals to enable young people with severe to profound learning difficulties to cope with difficult issues such as epilepsy and sexual development. Post-intervention interviews reported increased engagement and improved professional perceptions. However, potential issues around intervention fidelity have been noted, with report of discrepancies in staff adherence to the MSST protocol (Ten Brug *et al.,* 2012) and a lack of positive change in staff sensitivity and effectiveness (Penne *et al*., 2012). Preece and Zhao (2016) concluded that MSST made valuable contributions to curriculum access as well as facilitating the learning and socialisation process amongst students with a range of special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)

The role of adults appears to be critical in supporting children's narrative expression (Petersen and McCabe, 1992). Griffiths and Smith (2016) asserted the importance of individualised responsiveness to helping children recall and express ideas. These processes are crucial elements of Storysharing®, a new approach to supporting individuals with communication difficulties to share personal narratives in the context of human interaction (www.openstorytellers.org.uk). Designed for children and adults with severe communication difficulties

associated with learning difficulties, Storysharing® emphasises the co-construction of personal narratives. The process involves scaffolding initially by more competent adults (Vygotsky, 1978), and engaging individuals through use of multimodal communication (Labov and Waletsky, 1976; Petersen and McCabe, 1992; McCabe *et al.,* 2008). Storysharing® encourages the development of a repertoire of collaborative conversational strategies to support participation in storytelling e.g. active listening, modelling and participation promotion strategies. Grove and Harwood (2011) observed positive staff and participant perceptions, for example opportunities to share stories beyond dedicated sessions and improved social confidence. Reported gains from a small scale study included improved use of prompts by teachers, more complete narratives and emergent expression of affect (Bunning *et al.,* 2016). The current study considered the application of these strategies, and the role of teachers as active co-narrators, in educational practice. There was one research question: how do teachers perceive the contributions of Storysharing® to their educational practice?

Methods

A qualitative study was conducted, using a phenomenological approach as described by Creswell at al. (2007). The setting was a co-educational school catering for children aged 4–19 years with a range of learning difficulties, in an urban location of south-west England. The school was divided into three departments: primary (ages 4–11), secondary (ages 11–16) and sixth form (ages 16–19) to facilitate age appropriate National Curriculum delivery for all pupils. The school was an Academy Trust, operating as a generic Community Special School, and had gained specialist status for physical and sensory needs.

In order to capture different perspectives within the one setting, a purposive sample was recruited consisting of four participants, referred to as teachers, who occupied different roles within the school. Specifically, this was a curriculum access manager, a subject specialist and two class teachers with varying levels of experience. All the participants had received training in Storysharing® methods so that they could apply the approach. Participant characteristics are summarised in Table 1.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee for the host school. Prior to audio recording the study format was explained to the participants. Consent

Table 1. Summary of participant characteristics

Partici-pant	Designation & Responsibilities	Experience: years; months	School work: years; months	Storysharing® Involvement
P1	Teacher for 9 students aged 10–12 years; 5 TAs.	2;0	1;0	Level 1 trained; leads weekly session
P2	Curriculum Access Manager -Storysharing® leader. Coordinates MDT teams, organises staff training and manual handling.	30;0	8;0	Level 1 trained; involved in previous project; supported NQT with Storysharing®.
P3	Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) for 8 pupils in Years 8–10 alongside 6 TAs.	10;0	1;0	Level 1 Trained; Delivers group Storysharing® session for her class.
P4	SEND Teacher for Year 6 and Literacy coordinator.	10;0	5;0	Level 1 & 2 trained; involved in previous project.

forms were then completed indicating agreement to participate. Only members of the research team had access to the project data. Pseudonyms were used to preserve participant anonymity.

Intervention

Storysharing® was introduced to the teachers in a one-hour induction (where the principles were explained, with a question and answer session), followed up by observing sessions with modelling of the Storysharing® principles (within a group intervention), dedicated sessions with teacher and student dyads (which was filmed and later discussed to identify strengths of the co-telling) and evaluation (with a review of the goals and activities and next week's action plan). The intervention was conducted over a 15-week period, with a total of two staff induction sessions and 27 group sessions (individual sessions occurred as part of group sessions once a week). Implementation in the classroom was flexible and the teachers in different classes adapted to the needs of each class. For example, one sixth form class had regular sessions and created class folders; another used the Storysharing® techniques in a review of the week and in preparation for transition. Differences also existed between the methods used to collect stories, such as accompanying children on trips (to demonstrate how to find a story), creating permanent art displays (e.g. story trees, story houses and post boxes) and sending worksheets to parents.

Data collection

Individual interviews with the four participants were conducted by an independent researcher on the same day in a quiet space in the school. The participant and interviewer sat at adjacent angles of the table, with the interviews recorded on a digital audio device. A topic guide was developed and prepared in consultation with the Storysharing® trainers in advance of the interviews. However, the participants were also encouraged to direct and contribute to the interview at their own discretion. The duration of the interviews was determined by each participant's teaching duties and school responsibilities and ranged from 19 to 35 minutes. On completion of the interviews, the audio data were uploaded to a computer. Two student researchers transcribed the interviews verbatim using the conventions from Braun and Clarke (2013). After training in the use of Nvivo-10, data organisation and management software, the transcripts were imported for analysis. First, each student researcher read and reread the entirety of their transcripts to familiarize and orientate to the data, with any items of potential interest to the research question recorded in note form. Then the data were organised by generating nodes (at the level of organising themes) to capture the essence of the data content. To fully explore the experiences, concepts and perceptions expressed by the participants, a label and definition was created for each node, from which subthemes and basic themes were extracted. A second independent analysis of the data was also conducted by the lead researcher. After completion of individual analyses, the nodes were compared and any discrepancies discussed until consensus on a final thematic framework was achieved. Schematic diagrams were created to illustrate the hierarchy of themes and their inter-relationships.

Findings

Three organising themes emerged from the data: 'Enactment Process', 'Benefits to Child' and 'Curriculum'. Figure 1 shows *Educational Practice* at the centre from which the three organising themes radiate.

'Enactment Process'

This theme captured the features associated with carrying out the intervention. Drawing on their experiences of the intervention, the teachers identified positive changes in their own and others' educational practices. There was a sense of
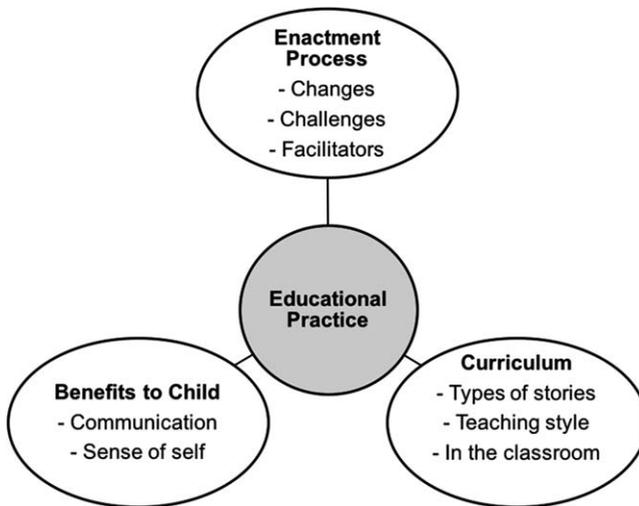
Figure 1. Themes in educational practice associated with Storysharing®

openness in relation to the communication environment that was referred to as: '...much more relaxed, freer ....' [P2]. In particular, staff attunement to the children's communication needs was recognised:

'Everyone's much more fine-tuned and aware of tools that we can use to assist these children to socialise and communicate and express themselves.' [P1]

Whilst many of the changes reported were indeed positive, *challenges* were also reported on two levels. Firstly, the teachers identified difficulties concerning the management of the new intervention, which included the lack of '...robust monitoring.' [P2]. Secondly, the actual introduction of the intervention to their educational practice was a recognised difficulty that '... *took a while to get settled.'* *[P1]* with *s*pecific reference to the challenge of changing usual practice:

'Getting teachers to rethink how they spoke to children and students and how they approach communication was really really challenging.'[P2]

However, the teachers appreciated the relevance of the training received, with particular value attributed to modelling in the classroom. Familiarity with both the children and the intervention were declared important *facilitators*. Feelings

of confidence amongst staff were supported by opportunities to review and appraise their own practice:

'...to reflect with the other teachers as well, what's worked and get other ideas.' [P1]

Use of video feedback was considered a particularly effective mechanism for development of narrative facilitation skills, alongside a coordinated school approach, with:

'... somebody leading it, one of the teachers really, who at least even if it's part time, they are class based and have a regular group.' [P2]

'Benefits to Child'

'Benefits to Child' resonated throughout the teachers' accounts, with explicit examples given of how Storysharing® had impacted positively on the children involved. The communication of the children captured improvement in the children's engagement, such as their ability to attend and involve themselves in a range of communication events:

'Her class I've noticed are much much better at taking an interest and listening ...and looking...and being attentive at the person who's going to share the story.' [P2]

Improvement in the children's ability to take responsibility for opening a communicative act, was also attributed to the intervention:

'He will initiate conversations and he will go up and share things ... he would never ever have done before.' [P2]

Closely connected to communication was the children's sense of self. The teachers identified improved awareness of own agency among the children. The Storysharing® intervention was viewed as 'empower(ing) them' imbuing the children with the 'confidence to share independently.' [P1] and to '...go outside of their comfort zone.' [P3].

It was associated with helping the children to find a voice, enabling 'them to process their thoughts and share things.' [P3], whilst also providing a means of

'. . .working things out in the moment.' [P4] and of providing a platform for students to share and explore similar experiences with their peers who are '. . .a bit further on in their journey.' [P4].

'Curriculum'

'Curriculum' captured references to the learning objectives of the classroom.

There was a strong emphasis on the changes observed in the 'teaching style' of those involved in the intervention. The teachers recognised the deliberate move away from traditional methods of questioning and the need to tailor teaching style:

> 'Finding ways that work for those children, what's going to equip them. . . .' [P1]

Use of Storysharing® principles were observed in everyday educational practice:

> 'Her teaching style has definitely changed and I hear her using it all the time.' [P2]

Other areas of impact on educational practice included assessment:

> '. . . to see what the children have processed, what connections are they making, what are they recalling, without feeling on the spot, without feeling tested.' [P3]

The effectiveness of modelling as a strategy to develop the children's' narration was expressed, as well as utilisation of materials and props, including simple voice output devices such as a Big Mack, to support Storysharing® in their educational practice. The teachers felt more confident in the use of such equipment and other materials that served as objects of reference *". . . to just enhance whatever we are telling." [P2]*. However, preparing materials in advance was considered vital to enabling the children to share their stories:

> 'On the day that I knew I was going to have that story I had made a censer with an incense stick that he could swing around.' [P3]

Storysharing® 'in the classroom was linked to dedicated time with regard to timetabling, and the planning and delivery of group sessions:

'I think because we do it weekly they've really tapped into the idea of what we're doing.' [P4]

Conversely, two teachers implied that dedicated Storysharing® sessions were unnecessary:

'I don't need to timetable it anymore.' [P2]

For these teachers, the priority was embedding the principles into spontaneous everyday communication:

'We use it just everyday really .... it will be 'oh so you went to the'... 'oh for dinner, oh I bet you had a'... and then they fill in the gaps so it's just throughout.' [P3]

This created opportunities for students to experiment and learn in various curriculum subjects:

'If they were doing some sort of discovery science things and they'll use it that way.' [P1]

Storysharing® principles were also applied within creative subjects, specifically as a vehicle for students to explore emotions and experiences

'....within a kind of therapeutic approach where we've combined music, art and Storysharing® together.' [P4]

An essential component of Storysharing® within educational practice involved the collection of stories from students and parents. A postbox in the classroom was used for teaching staff to deposit a story topic noted from everyday school activities, and following up stories sent in from home in order to

'...put a bit of meat on the bones for the story.' [P3].

The teachers recognised that personal stories were unique to each child, or that the same story from a shared experience could be interpreted differently by individuals in the group:

'I suppose what they decide is which story has particularly floated their boat.' [P2]

Two types of story were mainly collected. The first revolved around everyday routines (familiar, predictable and reoccurring events) such as religious practices:

'He's a Greek orthodox and he goes to church so he has recently been doing stories about when he has to carry the sensor and things like that and he has to wear a lovely gold cape.' [P3]

The second type of story captured novel events, which referred to unfamiliar or unconventional experiences. There was recognition that novel stories could also address fairly complex concepts associated with particular emotions, including loss and bereavement, jealousy and abuse.

Discussion

The teachers viewed Storysharing® as playing a positive role in their educational practice, which is consistent with other narrative-based studies (e.g. Young *et al.,* 2011; Penne *et al.,* 2012). There was some acknowledgement that while the new approach took a while to settle into everyday practice, it also provided many opportunities to acquire knowledge, apply to practice, and consolidate skills over a period of time. The availability of the trainers and the practical nature of the training (e.g. modelling and video reflection) were valued, which resonated Young *et al.* (2011). For example, the trainers assisted with assessing the individuals' needs, advising on materials and with the rehearsal of storytelling episodes, which maximised engagement in the storytelling partnerships. The contextualised nature of the training and its in-built flexibility, e.g. twilight training sessions supplemented by in classroom facilitation, the role of video feedback, appears to have circumvented some of the problems associated with a one-off workshop (see Penne *et al.,* 2012).

The teachers reflected on their own communication style and the need to adapt to the individual child's presenting needs. This is similar to the findings of Petersen *et al.* (2010), who identified that oral narrative development was positively influenced by adjusting support according to the needs of individual participants. Repeated rehearsal of personal stories may have promoted feelings of confidence in both the children and the teachers. The teachers recognised this as providing opportunities to 'attune' to students' needs, characterised by individualised responsiveness and scaffolding (after Griffiths and Smith, 2010; Petersen

and McCabe, 1992). The Storysharing® process appeared to reveal not only something of the children's communication skills and confidence, but also something of their sense of agency. For example, the teachers were quite clear about how the children were able to express their own identities.

The teacher's view that Storysharing® was adaptable to their own teaching preferences and the assessed needs of their students, resonating the findings of Spencer and Slochum (2010), where the teachers suggested that a narrative intervention could be easily adapted to accommodate both individual and classroom needs. This is consistent with McCaffrey's (2013) view that there is no formula for the creation of storytelling. Seen as a 'way of working things out', the intervention was perceived to offer alternative ways of addressing difficult topics, facilitating open discussions and encouraging students to seek information from each other. This is resonant of views expressed about MSST, that children with learning difficulties seemed to cope better with sensitive topics (Young *et al.,* 2011). Value appeared to be placed on locating the narrative in the teacher-student interaction process.

The teachers did not view Storysharing® in isolation from the curriculum. Indeed examples were given as to how it might be applied to, and enhance curriculum delivery across a range of subject matter, e.g. in science and music, which resonated observations by Preece and Zhao (2016), and Young and Lambe (2014). The use of scaffolding in the co-construction of stories, as recognised by the teachers, has been associated with improvements in teacher effectiveness (Sheehy *et al.,* 2009; Berry, 2006). Storysharing® supported and actively encouraged the use of multiple representations of words and meanings, which facilitates broader access to the curriculum for students with SEND (see Sheehy *et al.,* 2009). This is particularly relevant for students with communication needs associated with learning difficulties, who are often reliant on communicative forms other than speech.

Limitations

This was a small-scale study of the impact of an intervention, that focused on the co-construction of personal narratives by students with learning difficulties and their teaching staff. Conducted in a single school, the findings, whilst illustrating particular phenomena, are not representative. Further research is needed across educational establishments attended by children with learning difficulties. The sample was purposive and reflected different roles and responsibilities in

the staffing team. However, it neglected to include teaching assistants who were involved in classroom support. Data collection was conducted during the busy school day, which meant that other duties affected the amount of time given to the interviews (e.g. P4 had a restricted window due to other demands).

Conclusions

Personal narration was perceived as having value, not only in the actual telling of an experience to others, but also in activating the curriculum learning process for students with SEND. The location of the intervention within the school setting facilitated a sense of ownership of Storysharing®, which the teachers grew into their own educational practices. The Storysharing® intervention has the potential to serve as a catalyst to support teacher-student communication in the classroom, the developing agency of young people with learning difficulties, and educational processes.

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