THE IMPORTANCE OF FICTION AND STORYTELLING IN A PRISON CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a four-month reading program that was implemented at a state prison and outlines how fictional stories, both read and told, can develop psychological insights such as mentalization and emotional literacy. How activities such as this can have therapeutic benefits without actually being therapy is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

"This book is full of symbolism," shares Mr. Carpenter[1], a student in my state prison reading group. Mr. Carpenter, like the others in the group, has struggled with reading his entire life. Now, at sixty-seven, he is tackling reading, and his love of reading emerges as we read *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl.

"What do you mean?" asks Mr. Calise.

"Well, James' parents are killed and the peach is a magical fantasy, but it is also a symbol for the nurturing environment he needs," answers Mr. Carpenter. He continues, "We could all use a peach—right?"

"Yeah," adds Mr. Taylor, "there are other symbols in this story—the rhinoceros that killed James' parents is like the pain and hurt we all experience in life. We are all killed by rhinos all the time."

This is the sort of exchange I participated in with my students when I began teaching reading at a state prison. When I first arrived at the prison, I dug around the school looking for literature. There were not many fiction books, but I found enough copies of *James and the Giant Peach* to get us started. This classic novel by Roald Dahl is a fantasy of escape, empowerment, and friendship, and each day my students came to read with seriousness. Their glasses pushed down to the tips of their noses, they discussed the pain James felt and how we all need an adventure away from those who oppress us. All of my students struggled as readers, and reading instruction was integrated into our daily lessons. The discussions we had while reflecting on the reading pushed my own thinking about a book I had regarded to be for children, and taught me a great deal about the power of interpretation and reflection.

For four months in 2018, I had the opportunity to teach reading daily to students at a state prison. I was committed to using fiction and storytelling to teach reading despite the enormous resistance of the permanent teaching staff who taught reading through newspaper articles, bland stories in workbooks, and historical texts that they thought students would encounter on the General Education Development (GED) examination.

The benefits of reading and storytelling for improving well-being and emotional literacy have been increasingly recognized. My work at the prison was influenced by the work of The Reader Organisation as

1 All names used are pseudonyms.

described in Jane Davis's article (2009). The purpose of each reading group was to engage and stimulate adults learning to read by reflecting on literature and by listening to stories told orally. I hoped to offer an experience that might develop and enhance my student's ability to mentalize (Allen & Fonagy, 2006). Mentalization, which has much in common with the concept of emotional literacy, concerns the ability to recognize thoughts, feelings, and motivations in one's self and in others. Using this information to guide action and behavior is a foundation of mental health. Engaging in fiction and fantasy through literature and stories may have the potential to develop this capacity (Oatley, 2011).

THE BENEFITS OF READING FICTION

There are also recognized benefits in reading fiction in relation to well-being. Keith Oatley (2011) identifies how fiction can enhance capacities for understanding others, improving relationships, interacting in groups, and dealing with the problems of selfhood. He suggests that through reading we can create mental models to enlarge our ability to empathize. Joseph Gold (2001) has identified ten psychological consequences that may arise from the use of story and poetry in therapeutic encounters. These include language growth, learning about life, identification and modeling, cognitive shift (or reframing), problem-solving, learning about emotions, normalization, and sharing.

Others have argued that reading fiction cultivates empathy (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013). When a person mentally travels into a story, picturing it in rich detail and getting into the minds of the characters, that person will be more adept at relating to people and be more inclined to assist others when they are in need (Johnson, Cushman, Borden, & McCune, 2013). There are other significant fruits of reading fiction, such as lessening people's racial bias (Johnson, Huffman, & Jasper, 2014) and raising their interest in the well-being of animals (Malecki, Pawlowski, & Sorokowski, 2016). There is even some evidence that reading regularly forecasts sharper, healthier mind (Bavishi, Slade, & Levy, 2016).

THE READING GROUPS

The purpose of the reading groups I created was to bring the pleasure and value of reading to my students. The structure was simple: at least one person reads aloud from a text—usually short stories, novels, or poetry rather than non-fiction or self-help books—and then the group discusses their responses to that text. The process of listening and reflecting is valuable and can help students attune to their own feelings and those described in the text.

The process of listening to literature being read aloud rather than reading internally allowed students to think about and reflect upon the content in a different way. It is a slower process than reading silently, but it is a shared experience which can help facilitate a more engaged and emotional response to the work. Real experiences can be compared and contrasted with what is read in a way that recognizes both the uniqueness and universality of the experience. Davis (2009) is convinced that literature not only helps us find enjoyment, but also helps us endure pain and difficulty.

THE ART OF STORYTELLING

I introduced an oral storytelling component to our reading groups. Telling stories is a universal activity that has been a means of entertainment, education, and a way of passing on traditional values and practices since time immemorial, and it is now enjoying something of a revival (Collins, 1999). Storytelling, in this way, is not the same as reading a text aloud or reciting from memory, despite some similarities. It is a more spontaneous

piece of social interaction—the storyteller makes eye contact with her audience and uses tone of voice and gesture to amplify meaning to paint pictures in the listener's mind and create a unique, emotional event.

The stories told could be fictional, true, or a blending of the two. Often, fictional material will draw upon folkloric or mythic sources, stories that have lived in oral traditions. Real-life storytelling has also become increasingly popular with the growth of storytelling performances such as "The Moth" (http://themoth.org) or "True Stories Told Live" (www.truestoriestoldlive.com), in which people tell stories from their own lives in front of an audience. Oral storytelling seemed to fit very easily into the structure of our groups and balanced well with reading stories aloud. Both activities are about the experience of living, structured in ways that enable reflection.

DAILY INSTRUCTION

Our reading and storytelling groups met for one hour each day, five days a week. The program was open to whomever would like to participate—there was no element of compulsion, but it was integrated into a regular classroom and offered as part of the reading program. In the reading program, I taught basic reading and writing strategies, and we read novels together. *James and the Giant Peach*, a book with a theme of friendship, was our first experience. Although the characters in the book experience small conflicts, their friendship prevails time and again. Delving into this story provided space for students to discuss their own families and friendships, both lost and held.

My main innovation was the oral storytelling component, where we all told stories of many kinds. Sharing stories was a powerful emotional experience, establishing a storytelling format in the group and enabling my students to tell their own stories. In storytelling the teller and the listener interact in a way that echoes the bond between a carer a young child; both are engaged in a shared activity in which they can interact and are attuned emotionally (Frude & Killick, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The reading and storytelling groups worked well, even though my project was structured as a short-term intervention. The students who participated contributed with great enthusiasm. I had some concern that students might find both listening to stories and reading aloud more suitable for younger children or that reading youth novels might insult them, but my concerns were proven groundless. My students were happy to listen to stories and (usually) comfortable reading aloud to one another. Given the nature of incarceration, there were times when all was not plain sailing, but the extent and quality of the student's engagement in the groups was remarkable.

The biggest impediment to the reading groups were the permanent teachers, who showed little interest in engaging in new, research-based approaches to teaching reading, writing, and listening. They were especially resistant to teaching fiction. I am not sure what the explanation for this is except that change is hard and teaching novels is often more work than using workbooks and worksheets. My short experiment perhaps indicates that professional development and further mentoring of teachers around the benefits of teaching fiction to their students is needed. Cultivating a more active reading culture among the teachers would help—encouraging teachers to form a reading group and meet together to talk about the readings may be a starting place.

Given the nexus of illiteracy, criminal actions, and high recidivism rates, we as a society should be doing everything we can to encourage reading behind bars. When I returned to my classroom after my students had

been on lockdown for over two weeks, we engaged in a debate about the transformative power of Roald Dahl's writing. For an hour, ten men sat joyously discussing a literary work. Mr. Potter said, "I thought my brain had stopped working, but reading and talking about this book has proven my brain still works." Fiction matters and reflecting on fictional stories and how we, as readers, experience them, matters—especially to incarcerated men and women. ⌘

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