Multi-sensory Storytelling (MSST): A Tool For Teaching Or An Intervention Technique?

Multi-sensory storytelling (MSST) is an approach to storytelling in which ‘stories are not simply told but can be experienced with all our senses’ (Fornefeld, 2013). The act of narration is supported by the use of relevant objects, chosen for their sensory qualities (e.g. feel, smell, sound, weight, temperature) and for their appeal and relevance to those experiencing the story. MSST was first conceptualised as a specific approach in the late 1980s by Fuller (Fuller, 2013). Since then, MSST has been identified as an enjoyable activity for children, young people and adults with profound and multiple learning difficulties (PMLD) (Fuller, 1999) – as well as for others with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) – and is regularly used with younger children, older children and adults.

In recent years, there has been increasing interest within the UK and Europe regarding the use of MSST, particularly in the field of special education. The literature suggests that such stories can support the development of literacy skills in PMLD (Fornefeld, 2013; Watson, 2002) and provide such individuals with opportunities for interaction and enjoyment (Park, 2013). Many schools and teachers have adapted their own multi-sensory versions of existing stories, developed their own stories to suit a particular need, or both. Furthermore, commercially produced multi-sensory stories are also available both as complete activities (e.g. ‘Bag Books’ and ‘Story Sacks’ in the UK, ‘mehr-Sinn® Geschichten’ in Germany) and as scripts (Arnold, 2013; Grace, 2014). As a result the approach is being used ‘frequently and enthusiastically’ across a range of settings with children and adults (Vlaskamp et al., 2011, p.107).

Studies have been undertaken by researchers associated with the Profound and Multiple Impairment Service (PAMIS) to
evaluate the impact of MSST in helping individuals with PMLD deal with and understand sensitive issues, including living with epilepsy, undergoing dental treatment and managing sexual behaviour. Further research in the United Kingdom using the Storysharing® approach has identified that MSST can be used to support the development of both fictional stories and personal narratives (Grove, 2014; Grove et al., 2015). Research undertaken in the Netherlands and Flanders has focused on adherence to storytelling guidelines and protocols (Penne et al., 2011; ten Brug et al., 2012; Vlaskamp et al., 2011), and staff behaviour in interaction during storytelling (Penne et al., 2012). However, there has been little if any research focused on more fundamental questions regarding MSST: how, why, where, when and with whom this approach is being used so ‘frequently and enthusiastically’. Therefore the research questions addressed within this study were:

- How are multi-sensory stories (either ‘home-made’ or commercially-produced) used within day-to-day practice in the classroom and school?
- What opportunities does the approach provide, and what factors affect its use?

Method

An exploratory case study methodology was identified as appropriate to research this relatively new area of investigation. It has been identified that the most likely educational placement for children with PMLD or SLD (those with whom MSST are typically used) is a special school therefore data collection was restricted to such settings.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with school-based professionals to investigate their attitudes towards and understanding of MSST. Unstructured observations of storytelling sessions allowed the researchers to see how they used MSST in practice, and to observe the extent to which they followed guidelines/their practice aligned with the existing literature.

Sample

Data were collected from 5 special schools in England. All schools self-identified as making extensive use of multi-sensory stories, both those developed by school staff and commercially produced stories. Purposive sampling was used to select the research sites, to ensure that a range of potential settings and students were considered. Selection criteria comprised: school type; range of SEND addressed; age range; and location.

Data collection

Twenty-seven interviews were conducted with school-based professionals, whose experience of using MSST ranged from <1 year to >10 years or more. Observations were undertaken of 18 sessions where teachers were using MSST as part of the typical school day. The observations were conducted using non-participant unstructured observation techniques with field notes made in situ.

Ethics

The research was undertaken in accordance with the British Educational Research Association’s Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011).

Data analysis

Transcripts of the interviews and the records of the observations were analysed using thematic coding analysis. An a priori list of predetermined codes was derived from the research questions and literature. These served as an initial template, with additional inductive coding emerging through the process of analysis.

Expected Outcomes

This analysis identifies that MSST was viewed positively, and that it was considered to contribute to the curriculum access, assessment, learning and socialisation of students across a wide range of SEN – and in particular, to the experience of students with PMLD. MSST was used in a wide variety of ways for a wide variety of purposes. In many respects such findings seem unsurprising and indeed to be expected with regard to an aspect of teaching practice. However, comparison of these findings with extant literature regarding MSST identifies noteworthy points of divergence regarding the function, design and delivery of MSST.

Function of MSST

Much research literature concerning MSST has focused on use of the approach to deal with individual problems or issues. In stark contrast, no teachers interviewed for this study had used storytelling in this way. The ways that MSST is used in the extant literature and the ways it was used by these teachers appear to differ.
Design and delivery of MSST

Much literature regarding MSST stresses the importance of adherence to identified guidelines. However, this is very different from the way that the professionals who participated in this current study approached MSST. To them, it is ‘a tool that you have to adapt and individualise to the needs of the kids’ and ‘there is no real right or wrong way to do it.’

Comparison of the data collected in this study with much of the research in this field suggests the desire to develop a quantitative evidence base in this area may be leading to artificial and unnecessary limits being placed around MSST. Moreover the emphasis on adherence to guidelines fails to acknowledge the pedagogic skills of these professionals, or the ways in which teachers are reflecting in action and adapting their practice according to those reflections.

References


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