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Themes and Reflections from the White Water Writers Collaborative Novel- Writing Project.

Executive Summary

All of us are subject to dominant narratives. These are ideas of what is normal, accepted behaviour and attitudes. Dominant narratives are culturally constructed and resistant to change. Personal narratives are associated with identity and are constructed by ourselves. If personal narratives disagree with dominant ones, psychological distress may be experienced by the individual. One such dominant narrative is that further and higher education may not be suitable for young, working class people in certain geographic locations. The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) funds projects which have the aim of widening participation in further and higher education in areas of low participation. One such NCOP funded project is White Water Writers. This is a project that gives groups of young people the opportunity to collaboratively write and publish a novel in a single week, with the intention of raising aspirations in the writers. The idea being: if I can write a book in a week, what else can I do? Previous research into White Water Writers has shown the project has a positive effect on a number of outcomes including locus of control and well-being. The present study sought to evaluate the efficacy of the project by asking the following questions: What are the main themes that the writers tackle in the novels; how do

they reflect on the process and what they learnt from it; can White Water Writers raise aspirations in the writers. It did this by analysing the books for themes, and interviewing the writers and staff members. Two main themes were identified: diversity and connectivity. It was found that culturally constructed, dominant narratives clashed in the books with personal narratives. It was also found that the writers explored aspects of themselves, using fiction as a safe place to experiment with new ideas and to say things they would not ordinarily be comfortable saying as themselves. Moreover, it was found that writers' confidence was increased by taking part and that they felt more able to achieve other goals in life, including academically.

Introduction

Narrative

Personal narratives, according to Murray (1999), allow us to create order from a disordered world. Creating a narrative forces us to give meaning to events and to order them in a way that makes sense. Moreover, these narratives, which we continually re-write as we re-evaluate our experiences are co-created between us and our environments, and serve as the basis for our identities (McAdams, 1993). For this reason, McAdams states, the stories we tell about ourselves may be rich sources of data regarding our cultural norms and how we see ourselves.

Adolescence is a time of change, with individuals re-assessing their relationships with their families, peers and society (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006, 1). The sense that adolescents make of this period — the narratives they create for themselves — may help or hinder them.

However, we are all influenced by 'dominant' narratives (Hammack, 2008). Dominant narratives are culturally constructed and may be positive or negative. As dominant narratives are created not by the individual but by society, they are resistant to being re-written.

Dominant narratives are pervasive in our society. If culturally constructed narratives disagree with personal ones, psychological distress may result. For instance, the socially constructed, dominant narrative may emphasise the importance of standing up to bullies. However, a victim of bullying's personal experience may lead them to feel unable to follow such an action, thus leading them to feel an even deeper sense of isolation.

Narrative therapy offers the opportunity for individuals to emancipate themselves from dominant narratives (Carr, 1998). It does this by encouraging people to tell stories about their experiences, allowing them a greater sense of control. Narrative therapy asks individuals to write about real experiences. Fictional writing, however, can also be a useful tool for emancipating individuals from dominant narratives. Fictional writing encourages

people to revisit past experiences and to reconstruct them in the light of a fresh assessment. Moreover, in fictional writing, dominant narratives can be challenged and different outcomes imagined. Another benefit of fictional writing is the possibility of exploring personal experiences that may be upsetting, through a fictional character, thus eliciting less intense emotions (Pennebaker, 1997). This is supported by Hunt (2010), who claims fiction encourages writers to overcome preconceptions they may have of themselves and to explore inner truths.

A powerful dominant narrative is one that enforces the perception among young working class people that higher education is not for them. Archer and Hutchings (2010) found that young working class people, especially, though not confined to, white males, perceived that pursuing higher education represented a betrayal of their working class roots. They deemed the benefits of a university education as conferring on them a middle class status, which threatened their working class identity. This 'othering' of themselves extended beyond entering higher education to concerns of how they would fit in once there.

Much of the focus of widening participation in further and higher education in low participation areas is on white males. In addition to a strong working class identity, a dominant narrative of education is one of feminisation. Reay (2010) states that the feminisation of education is problematic for young working class males who, during adolescence, reject the feminine and move closer to dominant ideas of masculinity. However, Reay, in a single case study, discusses a young white, working class male whose closeness to strong female role models puts him at odds with the dominant narrative of masculinity. This leaves him negotiating the world of education while attempting to balance his desire for a good education with the expectations of his peers.

It seems, therefore, that dominant narratives of class and education are powerful barriers to participation for young people and, where dominant narratives are at odds with those of the individual, potentially the cause of psychological distress.

White Water Writers

White Water Writers is a project that gives groups of young people the opportunity to collaboratively write and publish a novel in just one week. Although guided by a facilitator, every idea is generated by the writers themselves. The project was built on the idea of collaborative creativity, with writers sharing the responsibility for brainstorming, character development, plotting, writing and proofreading, and is aided by the use of collaborative software. The process relies on communication between the writers; every idea is heard, discussed, negotiated and either accepted or rejected by a group decision.

Present study

The present study conducted a thematic analysis of 3 novels, written during White Water Writers weeks at three schools in the north midlands of the UK. A thematic analysis identifies key words in a text and groups them into themes. The project was funded by Higher Horizons+, part of the UK's National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), which invests in widening participation in further and higher education. Each writing group were asked 'What matters to you as young people today?' as an initial prompt. The purpose of the analysis was to discover which main themes the writers tackled in their novels. Focus groups of each of the writing groups were also conducted. In these, we asked the writers about their experience, how they found the process and how they feel it affected them. Finally, teachers were asked to reflect on the project. All interviews were thematically analysed.

Method

Design

The present study was a qualitative intervention where three groups of ten adolescents took part in a White Water Writers project. The participants collaborated with each other to collaboratively write and publish a novel in a single week, guided by a facilitator. The collection of interview data took place at a later date.

Participants

30 year 10 school pupils (27 female) from schools in the north Midlands of the UK were chosen to take part based on the following criteria. Each participant had to be in academic years 9-13 and from quintile 1 postcodes, making them eligible for National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) funding. NCOP funding targets areas of low participation (quintile 1) in further and higher education. School contacts selected participants based on their own criteria from a list of NCOP eligible students.

Procedure

White Water Writers takes place over five days. On day 1, writers were prompted by being asked 'What matters to you as young people today?' They brainstormed ideas, created and fleshed out characters, made a storyboard and laid out each chapter on a CRC card in correct chapter order. Day 2 began with each chapter being bullet pointed with up to ten things that happen in that chapter. Once done, writing began using Google Drive document sharing word processing. By the end of Day 3 a first draft was completed. Day 4 was spent proof reading on paper and entering corrections on the online documents. Day 5 was taken up choosing cover art, a title, chapter titles, a blurb, writing author bios and making finishing touches. The facilitator only moved the writers on to the next task. He did not suggest any ideas, touch a keyboard or assist with the proofreading. This ensures the book is entirely the achievement of the writers. The book was then uploaded to Amazon's self-publishing site and was available to buy a few days later.

Data collection

PDFs of the novels were printed off. Interviews with the writers and staff took place up to 3 months later. These were audio recorded. Teachers were also invited to submit answers anonymously to an online survey.

Data analysis

The novels were thematically analysed as per Braun and Clarke (2006). Key words and phrases were identified. These were then grouped into themes. Several themes were identified, with two dominating and being common to all three novels. Interview data was subjected to a thematic analysis in the same way.

Analysis

Two major themes were interpreted by the researcher: diversity and interpersonal connectivity. Two of the texts covered the topic of homosexual relationships and feelings, while the third dealt with intimate relationships among peers. Homosexual relationships were troublesome for the protagonists in the stories, with personal, societal and religious prejudices causing distress for those grappling with homosexual feelings. One character, Simon, confided that he began a relationship with a girl to hide his homosexuality from his parents, who were Christian:

Well as you know, I am gay and my family have a Christian heritage. They didn't know how I really felt, and so I decided to put on a mask at school and in the end got a girlfriend. (Cardinal Newman)

Here, the dominant narrative — that of religious prohibition of homosexuality — is in conflict with Simon's identity as a young, gay man. He finds it easier to conform to the dominant narrative, to the point of instigating a heterosexual relationship. However, in the fantasy world of an enchanted forest, where no dominant narratives exist, he feels free to explore his

sexuality. The young man Simon confides in, Tyler, has feelings for him, but recoils when he acts upon them. After kissing Simon he pushes himself away and says:

"I'm sorry, that was never meant to happen...I'm so disgusting..." (Cardinal Newman)

However, as the fabric of the reality they find themselves in begins to fall apart at the end of the book, Tyler overcomes the shame he feels and accepts his sexuality. The dominant narrative of sexuality had been overcome, replaced by an inclusive narrative. However, this acceptance had to struggle against the background of judgement and prejudice. This was more implicit in the second text, in which members of society were segregated from each other by means of a government policy intended to organise people and keep them happy. However, the policy sees homosexuality and criminality conflated, as both groups are forceably separated from the rest of society:

I want him isolated from everyone. I don't want my people learning from him. They are straight and being gay is not accepted here". (Rudheath)

The dominant narrative here is that homosexuality needs to be contained. That heterosexual people ought to not be exposed to it. This prejudice is aligned with orthodox masculinity, which places strict rules on what is acceptable behaviour, but also ostracises anyone who does not conform (Blanchard, McCormack & Peterson, 2017). One aspect of orthodox masculinity is the feminisation of education (Reay, 2010), which sees young males of any class who exhibit orthodox masculinity reject education, especially literacy based subjects. The present study took participants from areas of low participation in further and higher education. The reasons for low participation in FE and HE are complex, including class, location, gender and socio-economic status (Ingram, 2018). Common to these is the attitude among some young people that FE and HE is just not for them: a dominant narrative that

persists in areas of low participation. However, in both the texts analysed above, we can see dominant narratives of homosexuality, that have been linked to the rejection of education among working class boys, discussed and resolved in a fictional setting, where any outcome is possible.

The third text analysed did not deal with themes of sexuality. It did, however, focus on another feminised concept, intimacy. Protagonists in all three books analysed felt the urge to be understood by others and connected with them:

The way they talked about this made Mya remember the times when they would do nothing but sit and talk at the park, and this made Mya not feel so alone in this world of nothing she had someone to understand her, someone to talk to, someone to rely on. (Cardinal Newman)

During adolescence, feelings of isolation increase. At this age, young people often find it difficult to connect with their parents. They, therefore, are likely to turn to their peers. However, if they do not have peers to turn to, or those who will understand them, feelings of loneliness are exacerbated (Maes, Vanhalst, Spithoven, Van den Noortgate, & Goossens, 2016). In one text, the main protagonists have all emotions except one removed by a well-meaning scientist who had experienced loneliness as a child, therefore having to come together to feel complete:

A feeling of tranquillity, integrity swirled in everyone's stomachs and the feeling of together ran through their veins. Everybody's emotions calmed and everybody felt connected. (Co-op)

Adolescence is a time where individual identity is sought. However, the above excerpt suggests togetherness is valued highly among teenagers. Feeling connected leads to calm, implying anxiety associated with feeling isolated. This highlights the dichotomy that accompanies adolescence: the need to seek one's own sense of self, coupled with the desire to feel part of a group. The texts suggested that the participants, though in their early teens, were aware that adolescence is a time where the parameters for relationships change, with previous friendships replaced by more mature ones:

It was confusing to them both, how one interaction could spark a friendship so strong. It was something new to them both, since they were 18 now and had given up on all of the childish introductions and being best friends with someone you'd talked to for at most one day. (Cardinal Newman)

In summary, adolescence is a period during which we seek our own identities. However, this is not such a simple matter. While, on the one hand, adolescents seek an identity of their own that is at first separate from their parents, they must balance this need with the urge to remain close to their peers. Changes to their identities and changes to that of their peers, plus the needs once met by parents not met elsewhere, can lead to loneliness if not negotiated well (Laursen, 2013).

Interviews

Focus group interviews were conducted with the writers. The purpose of these was to discover what the participants themselves made of the process and their experience of it. Of special interest was the effect the week had on their confidence levels and aspirations.

It was thought that writing fiction would allow participants the opportunity to explore issues that mattered to them in a safe space. A thematic analysis of the books suggests they did so, and this is supported by the participants themselves:

I mean there were aspects of your personality that you could put into it but there was a bunch of like imaginary things you'd like to put into it. It's like either aspirations for what you want to be or like something you think is good in other people and it was good to like put it all into one kind of caricature. (Cardinal Newman)

Here, fiction is explicitly being used to engage with aspects of the writer's character that she wanted to explore. The writer here was unconsciously using a technique Hunt (2010) calls fictional autobiography, defined as the use of fictional techniques to capture personal experience. For Hunt, the restrictions placed on us during our formative years by dominant narratives lead to a sense of identity that is resistant to change, particularly if we did not feel safe during our upbringing. Fictional autobiography provides just such a safe space to explore new, more flexible identities. This is reflected in the following comment by a writer who was asked if the experience had changed her at all:

Like even people who don't feel like comfortable with everyone in the group they felt that they could express themselves as well. Yeah it was a great way to show who we are as a person. (Cardinal Newman)

The efficacy of autobiographical biography and White Water Writers as a process for providing a safe place for young people to explore their identities, experimenting with new ones and having the confidence to change is supported by one participant who discovered for herself the potential of narrating the life of a fictional character as a push toward choosing your own qualities for yourself:

I want them but now that I was able to like voice them and see how easy it was for my character to have them now I think I want them even more than what I did before.

(Co-op)

Here, the writer is describing how she was able to endow the character she was responsible for with qualities that she had previously harboured for herself. The novel writing process allowed her to think about herself differently by creating metaphors for experience that can then be played out in a fictional (safe) setting. Moreover, she was able to be liberated by 'hiding' behind the metaphor for herself she created. The technique the writer unconsciously stumbled upon is similar to the Self as Source (Moskowitz, 1998), which calls upon the writer to reflect upon themselves and to use different aspects of their characters as the main source material for their writing. This was reflected by one writer, who found confidence in speaking through a fictional character. When asked how it made her feel she stated:

Quite empowering. Even though it was kind of indirect because it was through a character it still felt quite special to me to have been able to express myself through that. (Cardinal Newman)

The writers, when asked, also spoke about how the writing week helped them to feel more confident in themselves. An important aspect of the White Water Writers process is that the writers are allowed to take full ownership of the project, with the facilitator guiding them from one task to the next. This ensures that the achievement is their own:

I think being treated like adults also helped us a lot [...] So the fact that it was people our age group spinning us in one direction or the other direction sort of helping us out, let the team work that helped us. (Co-op)

It is thought this sense of accomplishment will lead to an improvement in self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, defined as the faith a person has in his or her ability to complete their goals, is

linked to psychological resilience (Salanova, Bakker & Llorens 2006). It is also associated with an individual's sense of competence and the control they perceive they have over their environment (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis & Jackson, 2003). This was reflected in the comments of the writers:

When I had the book actually in my hands I was like whoah we've done this. I can do things similar to this in the future if I wanted to because I am capable of it as is everyone else in the group. (Cardinal Newman)

The comments from the writers were echoed by the members of staff at the respective schools. Asked if she had noticed a change in the writers, one staff member reported an increase in the confidence of the writers that was sustained beyond the writing week:

I think obviously for their confidence and self esteem, you've got a couple of students there who probably battle with that on a regular basis. It's really, really given them a boost. (Anonymous teacher survey)

While the collaborative aspect of the project makes the achievement possible, this does not dilute the sense of accomplishment for each individual. This is likely to be because each individual had creative contributions accepted and the success of the novel relied on each writers' efforts. It was also noted that the writing camp appeared to bring the group closer together:

So some of them were like a friendship group but they weren't a group of friends per se. There were two girls who don't get on and were like no. But then actually two of those girls we took to London a couple of weeks ago and they actually roomed together. And I think a lot of it was a result of having a week, that intense week together, where you've got to get on, and you kind of see, I suppose you see things

from different perspectives. And you start to see other people's experiences, don't they, because you've got that intensity. (Teacher survey)

Here, it is suggested that the intensely creative and collaborative environment of the writing camp was responsible for building closer relationships among the writers, even going so far as to reconcile two girls who had previously clashed. The teacher also suggested it was the sharing of other people's experiences that created intimacy between them.

This study has shown that many of the writers were surprised at their achievement, which has the potential to lead them to wonder at what else they may be able to achieve. This was noticed by one teacher:

[...] being selected for participation in the project has made the students realise that staff see, and value, their academic potential and strong personalities. Also, the students were unaware how much they could achieve when working independently, [...] They surprised themselves, which has greatly increased their determination. (Teacher survey)

The realisation of what can be achieved, which was linked to increased determination, has been identified in the literature as leading to overall well-being. Bandura (1994) suggested a relationship between self-efficacy and well-being when he noted that individuals who reported a high sense of self-efficacy did not attribute failure to an intrinsic weakness but to a lack of effort, which could be easily remedied. Those individuals recovered from setbacks more swiftly than those who reported a lower sense of self-efficacy and were less vulnerable to depression and anxiety (Seymour & Murray, 2016).

Taken together, comments from the writers and school members of staff suggest White Water Writers has a positive effect over all. In particular, the writers report an increase in

their confidence by the end of the week, with the attitude 'if I can do this, what else might I be able to achieve?' prevailing. The efficacy of White Water Writers as a means for writers to explore their identities through fiction and the possibility of growing into new concepts of themselves is also strongly suggested.

Discussion

A major theme in the texts was interpersonal connectivity, expressed through the concept of loneliness. Lau (2016) suggests that the development of social skills in adolescence may reduce the risk of loneliness and its impacts on mental health and academic achievement. The modern world is increasingly diversified, not least of all in the workplace. Adolescence is an ideal time to encourage the development of social intelligence, defined by Lau (2016) as a range of skills developed by an individual to help them negotiate social situations and maintain positive relationships. White Water Writers encourages adolescents to develop social skills of collaboration. The writers reported they learnt how to form a group, how to work together, share ideas and handle tension within the groups. They said, also, they feel they will be able to carry these skills into the rest of their academic career. This suggests White Water Writers can help negate loneliness, improve well-being and aid academic performance. The present study also suggests that White Water Writers may provide a safe place for adolescents to explore issues that matter to them. Some of the writers reported using the fictional characters they wrote to express thoughts and ideas they would not normally be comfortable expressing. This sense of safety in fiction can be used to explore a wide variety of issues. The theme of diversity, expressed mostly through the prism of sexuality, fed into thoughts of isolation. However, attitudes to sexuality were used as a means to explore the meeting of dominant narratives with personal ones, reflecting a time in a young person's life when the search for a personal identity can be at odds with

expectations from parents, teachers and the wider society. Dominant themes of sexuality clashed in the books with personal identities struggling against them but eventually being accepted. It was also clear that the writers consider isolation and loneliness an important topic, with the need to feel connected to others providing a sense of safety and belonging they appear to value. Indeed, when used in psychotherapy, similar writing groups, which encourage self disclosure, increase group cohesion and stimulate intimacy (Wenz & McWhirter, 1990). This is supported by the present study, in which one teacher who spoke of the difficulties the group had at first, said that pre-existing conflicts were resolved, lasting relationships formed and the group was brought closer together by the process. The present study supports previous research suggesting that taking part in a White Water Writers writing camp can lead to an increase in confidence. Self report from the participants and those of their teachers suggest that the sense of accomplishment that comes with the completion of the novel, and the experience of managing group dynamics, can lead individuals to believe they can achieve much else they had previously not considered possible. This supports the idea that self-efficacy is subject to influence. Linnenbrink and Pintrich (2003) note that children with high levels of self-efficacy are more likely to behave well and be more motivated to work, adding that teachers may design lessons accordingly. It seems, therefore, that as self-efficacy in young people can be increased using a properly designed intervention, White Water Writers is equipped to positively influence a student's sense of competence in themselves and what might be possible for them. The experimenting with a character's qualities in a fictionalised setting also appears to lead individuals to believe they can adopt such qualities for themselves. That is, by taking control of the personal narrative of a fictional person, they are encouraged to believe they may take control of their own personal story and identity. White Water Writers is funded by a programme which looks to encourage young people into higher education who would not normally consider it for themselves. The present study suggests it is well suited to do so through increasing

confidence in individuals and enabling them to challenge dominant narratives by means of taking control of their own personal stories and identities.

Limitations

The present study had a number of limitations. The participants were not selected randomly. To be eligible for funding, all participants had to be from a quintile 1 postcode, which makes it impossible to generalise the findings. However, since the project being evaluated targets young people who live in quintile 1 postcodes, this is not a shortcoming for the study itself. The participants were then chosen by their schools based on their own criteria, which were unknown to the researcher. While the thematic analysis was conducted following the process laid out by Braun and Clarke (2006), the researcher also led the writing project and though every attempt was made to be impartial, triangulation of themes by the participants themselves would serve to confirm or deny the findings. Finally, the participants were heavily skewed toward females, with only 3 of the thirty participants being male.

Conclusion

The present study set out to discover what adolescents taking part in a week-long collaborative novel writing camp talked about as the main themes. Diversity and connectivity were identified as two main themes. The study suggests adolescents can use fiction to explore issues that matter to them in a safe space, to experiment with identity through the characters they create and, in challenging dominant narratives, rewrite them. It is thought, therefore, that White Water Writers has the potential to encourage young people to rethink previously static attitudes toward education and to feel more confident taking part in further and higher education.