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Interpreting young people's self-expression through characters and relationships in collaborative creative writing

The importance of the lived experiences of young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) has become increasingly recognised in schools, demonstrated through a greater adherence to Article 12 of The United Nations (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child: a right to be heard. This is evidenced in England's Education, Health and Care plans, which document not only an individual's special educational needs and the support they need but also the 'views, interests and aspirations' of the family and the young person themselves (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015).

Self-expression allows insight into one's self-understanding and is an opportunity for a young person to articulate and develop their personhood (Tshivhase, 2015). Adolescence is a key period of a young person's life for identity formation due to the impact of biological, cognitive and social changes. Meeus (2011) concluded that a commitment to identity was related to better adjustment and more positive personality traits.

Self-Expression in Schools

Considering their engagement with social media, young people appear to be interested in self-expression and sharing their experiences with others (Livingstone, 2008). Yet, during the school day, opportunities for self-expression are often limited. Many schools promote social participation, e.g., a school/student council, as a means of encouraging self-expression and developing young people's self-socialisation, i.e., influencing their social development and agency (Baraldi, 2008). But such self-expression exists within an adult-driven framework and thus is constrained to the institutional context (Craig, 2003).

Due to their flexible nature, creative activities, such as art or dance, are a typical medium for self-expression in which a young person can explore their personhood through creating representations of their identity in a social context (Hawkins, 2002). In their review, Bungay and Vella-Burrows (2013) concluded that engaging in creative activities can have a positive effect on wellbeing for young people, including promoting confidence, self-esteem and positive behavioural changes. Despite this, there is currently limited opportunity for creativity and self-expression within England's National Curriculum. The Coalition Government in 2010 dictated an increased focus on English, mathematics, science and physical education, which, coupled with economic austerity, has resulted in reduced resources for creative subjects, such as art and music (Craft et al., 2014).

Written Self-Expression

Writing presents a key medium for creative self-expression. Evidence suggests that disclosure through writing about emotional life experiences, as in writing therapy, can ameliorate feelings of anger, anxiety, distress and depression (Frattaroli, 2006). For adolescents, Travagin et al. (2015) concluded that expressive writing improved wellbeing and increased academic performance for participants at risk of mental health issues. However, the reasons underpinning the effectiveness of writing in reducing negative emotions and improving wellbeing are not well understood. Pennebaker (2006) identifies multiple overlapping processes that may lead to positive outcomes, including cognitive changes through reorganising information and freeing working memory, and emotional changes through reducing the impact of thoughts and the arousal associated with them.

Benefits of creative writing can also be noted through writing fiction that may draw on these lived experiences. Nicholls (2009) suggests that drafting and refining text can support authors to emotionally distance themselves from an event, thus reducing its negative impact, and reconnect with current, felt experience, as in a 'mindful' approach. Anecdotal

evidence, e.g., Lourey (2017), suggests that exploring life experiences through the lens of creative writing can produce similar benefits to engaging in writing therapy without directly addressing difficult subject matter. Additionally, while the bulk of research on creative writing has focussed on individual writing, collaboration during the writing process may lead to even more benefits for young people. For example, it can encourage positive interactions and writers can act as mutual inspiration for one another to generate developed and complex ideas (Vass et al., 2008).

White Water Writers

White Water Writers is a week-long intervention that enables groups of up to ten participants to write and publish a novel in five days using a collaborative writing process. The project is a psychology-based intervention which has been delivered in schools, prisons and other settings. The intervention was delivered free of charge to schools thanks to funding. Participants are given a short brief that is designed to stimulate their thinking around a topic (e.g., a school trip). They develop their ideas into a novel that is then made available for sale online. Authors attend a book signing where family, friends and the local press to celebrate their achievement.

White Water Writers is suitable for students with SEND due to its highly structured process. Stages of the project address the three components identified in Gersten and Baker's (2001) meta-analysis as key for improving writing. 'Explicitly teaching steps of the writing process' is achieved through the facilitator scaffolding specific tasks such as planning, writing and proofreading. 'Conventions of a writing genre' are taught by the facilitator helping writers through a brief, storyboard and chapter cards to develop a specific type of novel, such as a mystery. 'Guided feedback' is implemented through writers having their work proofread, but this is carried out by other writers, not facilitators.

It is important to emphasise that all stages of the process are self-directed by students to increase their sense of responsibility. All content is produced by the writers themselves and the facilitator does not offer any advice about the plot. Thus, authors have ownership over their text, which is therefore likely to reflect their thoughts and experiences.

The writing process is based on self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2008), which posits that humans have three basic needs: autonomy (feeling in control of one's life and acting in line with personal values), competence (feeling able to control outcomes and experiencing mastery over tasks) and relatedness (feeling connected to and caring for others). Conditions that support these innate needs foster motivation and engagement, including persistence and creativity. The basic tenets of this theory are promoted in the White Water Writers intervention as authors have full control over the novel (autonomy), are scaffolded to achieve success in a challenging task (competence) and collaborate with others to achieve their goals (relatedness).

Thus, this study aims to explore the self-expression of children with SEND through interpreting the product of their collaborative creative writing in White Water Writers.

Method

Participants

We invited secondary special schools in one locality to participate in the White Water Writers programme, and ran the intervention just before the summer break when there was more flexibility in pupils' timetables. We returned to these schools in following years; two books were written in one school and three in another (N = 5 groups). 41 students in total (29 males) aged between eleven and fifteen years old engaged in the camps, having been selected by their teachers to participate based on the suitability of the project and the perceived

benefits they would gain by participating. We did not collect any further data about participants other than what they chose to include in their biographies.

Intervention

Participants attended a week-long White Water Writers intervention to collaboratively write a novel. On Monday, students developed ideas, took responsibility for one character and planned out the novel chapter-by-chapter. On Tuesday and Wednesday, students wrote the novel using an online program to expand and develop chapter ideas. On Thursday and Friday, students proofread printed copies of the chapters and made corrections. Participants also designed the cover and wrote biographies. Participants were guided by a trained facilitator who supported the process but did not contribute—or comment on—ideas. The five completed novels were published and made available for sale online and the writers received printed copies at a book signing event.

Analysis

We collated the five novels over a period of six years. As we started this research after the novels were published, some of the pupils were no longer attending the schools and so we did not contact them to participate in the analysis of the novels. Thus, the following analysis is our interpretation of novels, in which we look for common themes across them.

We conducted reflexive thematic analysis on the novels to identify and organise themes, guided by the steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, we read the novels thoroughly with notes made in the margin every paragraph to generate initial codes, e.g., 'taking charge of situation'. We used a mindmap to organise codes into meaningful groups, which became initial themes; a theme was defined as "patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82), e.g., 'heroism and villainy'. The predominant themes were those most prevalent in the texts. We established patterns and commonalities

between the texts, and refined themes through discussion. We continually consulted the novels and themes to ensure that all themes were fully explored and representative of the texts. We selected quotes to support themes and reported these verbatim.

Themes

Based on their five unique briefs, the five groups produced novels about: a school trip (*Superheroes Save the Day*), a corrupt video game (*The Game Heroes*), a discovered artifact (*The Mystery of the Locket*), a haunted house (*The Nightmare on Dark Woods*) and a magic classroom (*The Secret Room*). We derived four predominant themes from these texts: heroism and villainy, fictional powers, social relations, and anthropomorphism.

Heroism and Villainy

Across the novels, characteristics of heroes and villains were similar, and authors created highly contrasting profiles for their protagonists and antagonists, which were most notable in the characters' actions.

Heroes were described as responsible individuals, who demonstrated prosocial behaviours, such as picking up litter and apologising when wrong. Responsibility was also demonstrated in taking charge during a threatening situation:

> *The people in the Zoo are scared. They start fighting each other they are so scared, they go crazy and beserk. They started stealing things from the gift shop. The 3 superhero children realise that nobody was going to try and save the animals. 100 feels warmhearted about the animals. 100 decides that they need to save the animals from getting hurt.* (*Superheroes Save the Day*, p. 62)

In this quote, taking action to help others contrasted with behaviour from the general public, which highlights the heroes' special quality of behaving responsibly and prosocially in testing scenarios.

In combat, heroes demonstrated problem-solving skills, involving flexibility and creativity, to overcome foes:

> *Jill had the most amazing idea, when Jill's laser beam didn't work he shot Fred's metal chest on purpose. He did this to reflect his laser beam like a laser torpedo. The aliens were surprised and didn't jump out of the way. Slowly the aliens were ping ponged by zaps, as they were hit they turned into blocks.* (*The Game Heroes*, p. 19)

Problem-solving in difficult situations was prevalent throughout the novels in the actions of the heroes. This and other heroic actions were predominantly demonstrated in a group context, with protagonists pooling their resources to face challenges.

In contrast to the teamwork of heroes, the (typically lonely) villains in the novels had an agenda for controlling others, and a misguided belief in their superiority, particularly over vulnerable characters such as young people and animals:

> *Ego aim and punches, he expects to break the gorilla's face. The gorilla does not feel it and looks at Ego blankly, the gorilla punches Ego and sends him flying back into the cage. Ego gets back up and jumps onto the gorilla whilst hitting him on the face. "I'll kill you puny beast! I am a king on my planet and you are not!" screamed Ego.* (*Superheroes Save the Day*, pp. 86–87)

Cruelty towards others, combined with heightened emotions, was characteristic of the villains; they were frequently violent, but this was rarely a successful strategy for overcoming other characters. However, authors recognised that a villain's current behaviour may be a product of their challenging past:

> *A long time ago Adolph's dad beat him up when he was a child. He is now 32 years old. This made him very very sad and upset. He had nightmares about how his dad used to hit him. He always got sent to his bedroom and this made Adolph angry. He played mean pranks on people and bullied people he works with by laughing at their*

clothes. His only friends were other bad guys. Really Adolph did want to have friends but he was too upset about his past. (*The Secret Room*, p. 10)

The past of villains was made reference to more frequently than that of heroes, likely to highlight its negative impact. Regardless of their misdeeds, the villains were rarely killed by heroes and were offered redemption, which demonstrates additional attributes of forgiveness and understanding that was associated with heroism.

Fictional Powers

A further defining aspect of a hero was the use of powers to influence a situation. Powers typically centred around the ability to control, such as telekinesis (i.e., the ability to read minds) or influencing the weather.

Fictional powers assisted protagonists in their quests, particularly in combat with foes:

Jacko cast a spell on Adolph and Osama using the magic chain they had found in Spain. Jacko shouted "expelliarmus". There was a massive thud as Adolph and Osama screamed and they fell to the floor. They both smacked their heads on the floor. Lily and Jack gasped at what they saw. The spell had been cast that makes you into a good guy. This stopped Adolph and Osama from being bad. (*The Secret Room*, p. 52)

This quote demonstrates how powers were used to support the heroes' agenda of resolving a situation without resorting to violence and creating redemption for villains.

In accordance with the group context of the heroes, it was uncommon for protagonists to use their powers alone; they often combined abilities to have an increased impact:

There were too many soldiers for the children to fight. Then Jill has an idea. "Let's put our powers together to make a giant ball!"

> *They all look at the sky. Dan shoots ice. Alex shoots fire. Jill shoots. Barry runs round and round at incredible speed.Will then controls the big ball of superpowers and throws it at the soldiers. Giant laser beams shoot down from the sky onto the soldiers. Some get blown up. The others ran like screaming babies.* (*The Game Heroes*, p. 52)

As well as demonstrating the range of superpowers featured in one story, this quote highlights characters' use of synergy (i.e., working together to create a greater effect than could be achieved alone) that was notable through the stories.

As is typical in literature, good always triumphed over evil in the end. The outcomes from using fictional powers collectively led to positive emotions, including those of pride and empowerment:

> *Jill and Fred were now feeling happy and excited. They were glad Fang was gone. They were surprised but it made them feel strong and healthy. They knew that if they saw another alien they would be less scared.* (*The Game Heroes*, p. 20–21)

Superpowers were consistently made reference to in terms of increasing a character's confidence and self-belief, with the above quote also highlighting the expectation that overcoming a challenge increases chances for future success.

Social Relations

As already alluded to, an important part of defeating foes was working together. Relationships featured in all stories, both in terms of peer relations and relations with authority figures, such as parents and teachers.

Protagonists tended to be groups of young people who had aspects in common (e.g., attending the same school) but typically highly individual personalities. Peer relations were predominantly discussed in a positive manner, with many references made to friendship, sharing and helping one another:

Buster was dragging John across the floor, looking for a place to help John. Buster found a bedroom so he put John on the bed and rushed to try and find a wet cloth. Buster found a bathroom and he left the door open. Buster found a cloth and he put it under the sink and he said "this should do it". (*The Nightmare on Dark Woods*, p. 42)

As well as physically caring for one another, protagonists also offered frequent verbal encouragement, e.g., against foes. This supported relationships between protagonists to create a team.

More challenging peer relationships were also explored in terms of arguments and conflict resolution, including one reference to the bullying of protagonists:

The bully could see Buster behind the school at break time, and the bully said to Buster, "Oi, I want a word with you tramp, ". There was no one around to help him. Buster felt frightened. (*The Nightmare on Dark Woods*, pp. 15–16)

Such negative interactions represented further challenges for heroes to manage. However, conflicts were always resolved, often quickly, with the above story culminating in the protagonist and bully uniting against the foe.

Despite the responsible behaviour of protagonists, they were not always in charge. Authority figures in the novels were represented as family members and professionals (e.g., teachers, doctors). Rule-breaking and independence from authority was common across the novels:

"Ok" said Lily but I need to check with my mum but then James interrupted. "No lets just go and forget about your mum" said James in a angry tone. Then they went without asking their parents but James didn't care about it he just wanted to go down the boatyard and dive the White Seagull. "No we have no time an adventure awaits" (*The Mystery of the Locket*, p. 26)

There was often disagreement between characters with regards to obeying rules, which, given that the authors were adolescents, could indicate their moves towards independence.

Despite the inclination towards rule-breaking in the interest of action and excitement, relationships with authority figures were almost always positive, with frequent examples of respect and care from parents and teachers:

> *The girls and boys sit down in their seat. Mr. Smith checks that everyone has their seatbelt on because he wants the children to be safe. Mr. Smith was extra careful to make sure the bad children had their seatbelts on.* (*Superheroes Save the Day*, pp. 12–13)

Teachers and other authority figures were described performing various caring acts to meet the needs of young people, such as providing food and emotional support. In the above quote, supporting young people despite their behaviour describes an unconditional type of care.

Anthropomorphism

As well as relationships with other people, interactions with animals were also prevalent. Animals appeared in all stories, both on a parallel with humans as characters, i.e., protagonists or antagonists, and as owned by humans, i.e., pets or animals in a zoo, but always with attributed human characteristics (anthropomorphised).

Animals featured as main characters with major storylines of their own:

> *Toby [a dog] puts the flower on the floor and moves it with his nose just like he had done with the bone. She picks it up, sits up and barks a thank you. They wag their tails with happiness and go back to their window seat. Sue puts the rose flower on the floor and they both curl up together to rest. Toby say's "love you". Sue replies "I love you" They both close their eyes and sleep.* (*The Mystery of the Locket*, pp. 119–120)

Romantic love was not a key feature in any of the stories, which is likely due to the age and experiences of the participants, and animals were the only characters in the novels to express such an emotion.

Animals were also antagonists, typically in the form of monsters:

When the moon shone bright in the dark forest, he was so, so strong but he was even stronger when he became a fire wolf because the fire wolf was the most powerful creature of all.. He was so clever that he avoided the daylight and deceived the neighbours by appearing to be a regular dog. (*The Nightmare on Dark Woods*, pp. 20–21)

Villainous animals were similar in their characteristics to villainous humans; they had a tendency towards violence, solitude and superiority. Interestingly, animal antagonists demonstrated fewer human characteristics than their animal protagonist counterparts, including fewer instances of communication between characters and internal events, such as emotions and thoughts.

In relation to humans, animals were highlighted as companions with whom the protagonists shared time and affection:

So I had no one to play with and I was alone but James kept on playing with me and I never felt any younger when I was playing with my best friend James, we have been really close with each other, we are mates him and I." (*The Mystery of the Locket*, pp. 18–19)

As well as demonstrating the detailed character roles for animals, this excerpt highlights the close relationships that humans and animals shared in the stories. Authors also included many examples of protagonists looking after animals, akin to the instances of authoritative figures caring for young people.

Caring for animals also extended to defending them against foes. As previously

mentioned, villains exercised their control over others through violence, often directed at weaker counterparts, including animals:

> *The elephants who are shy and afraid, quietly tell the children how Ego pokes them with a long stick. Tornado spins and swirls, she is angry and says to the elephants and giraffe, "I will toss him away from the zoo."*
>
> *Tori clenches her fists and little tornados start to appear from her hands.*
>
> (*Superheroes Save the Day*, p. 38)

Based on their positive feelings towards animals, the protagonists were angry about the maltreatment of animals, and as such offered retribution to avenge the animals. This may be related to the weaker status of animals compared to humans and the caring roles that protagonists demonstrated.

Despite different storylines, themes highlight strong similarities in the novels in terms of characters and their relationships. Interpreting the above illustrative examples can identify aspects of life that, through their inclusion, are likely to be important to the young authors.

Discussion

Summary

Participants created dichotomous profiles for protagonists and antagonists. Heroes were described as authoritative and responsible individuals who, through working together and using fictional powers, experienced feelings of pride and empowerment for their successful actions in testing scenarios. On the other hand, villains were described as lonely and controlling with a misguided belief of superiority that resulted in violence; however, participants recognised underlying reasons for this behaviour. Personal agency, i.e., controlling one's own actions to have influence in a situation, featured in both character profiles. For heroes, this was represented through taking charge in a threatening situation and controlling fictional powers, whereas for villains, this was demonstrated through the use of

violence in an attempt to control other characters. Given their adolescent age, this could represent participants' concern with personal agency in their own lives, including their understanding of and responses to the influence of authority figures in decision-making. Shogren et al. (2010) found that young people without a disability typically enter adolescence with an externally-oriented locus of control (i.e., they feel that external forces are more in control of events in their lives than they are) but this becomes more internally-oriented as they age (i.e., they begin to feel more in control of events in their lives). However, those with a general learning disability tend to have a more externally-oriented locus of control than their peers throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Control being a key theme in the novels suggests that participants valued opportunities to exercise agency and responsibility in their lives.

Similarly, participants described relationships between protagonists and authority figures (e.g., parents, teachers) as positive in terms of support and meeting their needs, while still testing the boundaries of independence. As well as reflecting positive relationships that participants may have with their own caregivers, this could also indicate participants' internal conflicts about their independence as they progress through adolescence. Terrone et al. (2014) highlighted that in comparison to their non-disabled peers, for adolescents and young adults with Down's Syndrome, family members—especially mothers—are a key influence for promoting behaviours related to personal and social autonomy, i.e., taking care of themselves and their social and working life. These novels may demonstrate the important role that authority figures can play in supporting participants in their wish for increased independence.

In terms of peer relationships, characters (with their individual personalities) experienced positive social relations and strong friendships, including examples of caring and conflict resolution; even negative relationships improved. This could reflect participants'

experiences with their peers and the value that they place on maintaining positive social relations. Heiman (2000) reported that adolescents with learning disabilities who attended specialist settings had significantly fewer friends than those who attended mainstream settings, and did not often socialise outside of school. The novels may highlight participants' perceived importance of their social relationships.

Animals were anthropomorphised by participants as protagonists and antagonists, demonstrating similar characteristics to their human counterparts but also experiencing emotions not displayed by human characters, i.e., romantic love. This could be because the participants themselves have not experienced romantic relationships, so the anthropomorphic dynamic could function as a lens through which the young authors could explore love. Wiegerink et al. (2008) identified that adolescents with cerebral palsy had less experience with dating and romantic relationships than their non-disabled peers, citing barriers such as a lack of self-confidence and experiences of being treated differently. Discussing romantic love through animal characters may indicate that participants are beginning to explore this aspect of their adolescent lives, which is currently unfamiliar to them.

In relation to human characters, animals were described by participants as companions that were cared for and protected from evil. This could reflect relationships that participants have with their own pets and their enjoyment of extending caring acts towards animals, as well as their appreciation of supporting those more vulnerable. Animal-assisted therapy is a relatively new intervention but a review by O'Haire (2013) highlighted benefits for children and young people with autism spectrum disorder, including increased social interaction and communication, and decreased stress and severity of autistic symptoms. The inclusion of animal characters and their relationships with human characters may suggest that participants experience similar benefits with animals in their own lives.

It is interesting to note that while Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory (2008) was used in the development of the project, the themes that arose from the novels are also linked to this theory. For example, there was discussion about the importance of relationships, indicating a focus on relatedness. Authors used fictional powers and responsible character traits to represent competence. Autonomy was indicated by rebellion against certain authority figures. Self-determination theory has often been used to understand adolescent experiences (La Guardia & Ryan, 2002). Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that these themes were derived from the novels, and they may indicate common challenges in adolescence for young people with SEND.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the novels varying widely in terms of brief and storyline, the themes across the novels were very similar. We interpreted the content of the novels to demonstrate aspects of life that may be important to the authors. Thus, the intervention has provided an opportunity for self-expression for the young people. The novels may have acted as a safe space for participants to explore their experiences and thoughts, such as discussing the potentially confusing subject of romantic love through animal characters. According to research, such self-expression through the collaborative creative process may lead to further positive outcomes for the participants, including positive effects on wellbeing, social interactions, self-confidence and self-esteem (Bungay & Vella-Burrows, 2013; Vass et al., 2008). Furthermore, although participants were not instructed to write about difficulties they had experienced, if challenging scenarios that they authored were related to negative events in their own lives (e.g., bullying), such disclosure may allow the young people to emotionally distance themselves from the experience and reduce the uncomfortable emotions associated with it while exploring their experiences (Frattaroli, 2006; Nicholls, 2009).

However, taking an interpretative approach to analysis could undermine the young people's voices; we analysed the text to create our own, potentially unique, interpretation. Despite engaging in activities to support the trustworthiness of themes (e.g., triangulating themes, creating an audit trail), it is important to acknowledge that the interpretation may not be reflective of the authors' views and intended messages. In future research, this could be assessed through member checking: sharing the analysis and interpretation with participants and obtaining feedback.

As well as interpreting the content to gain a greater understanding of what is important to these young people, the current study has implications for special education practice. In an ever-narrowing curriculum, creative writing represents an opportunity for self-expression without overly focusing on the mechanics and conventions of writing, and the student-led process promotes the autonomy and responsibility that these young people value. The pupils' high level of engagement with the collaborative writing process also suggests the potential suitability of this approach in other interventions. For example, it may be appropriate to consider involving young people with SEND in an adapted process of creating Social Stories™, an intervention aimed at increasing understanding of social situations and teaching social skills (see Gray, 2015). Encouraging the participation of young people in this process, and thus adding a sense of responsibility and ownership, may improve the efficacy of the Social Story™, which has thus far been found to be limited and inconsistent (e.g., Garwood & Van Loan, 2019). This could be an avenue for further research.

The results of the current study suggest that the White Water Writers intervention gave young people with SEND the space to explore their identity and challenges in their lives. The themes across the novel were very similar even though the plots were diverse, which suggests that the project might be 'tapping into' the lived experiences of adolescents. However, further research is needed to better understand how this process works and whether

engaging in the self-expression in this intervention leads to the positive outcomes that have

been identified through other forms of creative writing.

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