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Enhancing Outcomes through Children's Literature

Key words

Child; young person; family support; children's literature; parenting capacity; social work assessment.

This paper discusses the topic of enhancing children's development through paying attention to the role of children's literature in their lives. The discussion is based on the findings from a small scale, in depth purposive study undertaken in England which showed how the process of adult /child reading can have a significant and wide ranging role in enhancing child outcomes. The study began with a literature search which revealed the value of parent*/child reading for child development as expressed in education and psychological literature (e.g. Tucker, 1981; Bearne and Watson, 2000) and was followed by an empirical study of 33 parents' reading practices with their 71 children. The data from interviews was analysed in the light of current agendas in child welfare in England concerning parenting capacity and outcomes for children (Author, 2006). It focused on what the implications of the findings might be for child welfare policy makers and practitioners.

The study considered three themes:

- The social and emotional development of vulnerable children and young people and how that can be enhanced.
- The place of children's literature in enriching social, emotional and moral development.
- The assessments and interventions made into children's lives by social work and other children's workforce practitioners.

Background

Most ordinary parents read with their children and enjoy it, often without consciousness of the consequent benefits in terms of relationship building and child development. Although parents are often aware that early literacy and access to a range of books and information are likely to improve a child's

educational attainment. It is an ordinary, yet profound activity which, most take for granted, which some are deprived of and which can be harnessed to improve outcomes for all children. While there is a literature on the use of books with children by therapists and specialist practitioners (such as adoption workers) there has not been much focus on how the use of children's literature is a tool for practitioners to bear in mind in the course of their day-to-day assessments and interventions.

The researcher ascertained the views of a sample of 33 parents on the impact of reading with children on their parenting capacity and considered the implications of understanding the process of parent/child reading for child welfare practitioners. It aimed to: examine the contribution to child development and wellbeing that accrues from the process when parent and child read together; to observe how the transaction between parent and child develops not only literacy but also a range of attributes connected to holistic personal and social development; to quantify, from interviews with parents what elements of the child's development (as articulated by social work policy makers) were involved in the transaction of parent/child reading.

Samples

Two purposive samples of parents were recruited:

- Eleven parents were recruited by word of mouth from a community (baseline population).
- Twenty-two were recruited through family support projects (varying levels of need)
- From six different areas of England
- From a range of cultural and economic circumstances.
- From a range of ethnicities, backgrounds.
- Without current child protection concerns

It should be noted that the first eleven parents were a 'snowball sample' recruited through a toddler group from a residential suburb; all were white

women and lived in comfortable circumstances. The second group of parents (22) were recruited through the five family support projects they had chosen to attend for two main reasons: support on parenting matters and /or enhanced play or other opportunities for their children. Twenty were mothers and three fathers. Those who did not describe themselves as white British described themselves as Scottish (1) Irish (1) English /Iranian (1) Japanese (1) Black/British (1) Pakistani (1) Asian Hindu (1). This sample included seven individuals who had experienced adverse childhood circumstances themselves.

These 22 parents came from five different parts of England and the other 11 from a sixth. This include urban and semi rural environments. Four parents struggled with their own literacy. The 33 parents came from a range of economic circumstances ranging from being part of a dual professional couple to raising a child single handed on state benefits. They had a wide range of educational attainment which, as might be anticipated, led to differences in the range and quality of reading undertaken with children. At the same time, the parenting aspirations of the two samples were not dissimilar, nor were their pleasure in reading to the children. Importantly individuals were recruited in their role as a parent who was prepared to talk about reading with children.

Data collection and analysis

The parents were interviewed face to face using an in-depth questionnaire. They gave consents in writing to the interviews and subsequent use of data, in line with a university ethics procedure. The interviews were tape-recorded, transcribed, and then analysed qualitatively using the framework of the parenting capacity dimensions of the *Assessment Framework for Children in Need and their Families* (Department of Health et al, 2000). Demographic data was gathered for context, which became important in relation to the analysis. The findings were first analysed in relation to the Assessment Framework parenting capacity dimensions: basic care, emotional warmth, ensuring

safety; guidance and boundaries; stimulation; stability. It was found to be the case that the ability to enjoy parent/child reading appeared to be inherent in a positive parenting style and could be relevant to the parenting capacity dimensions of the Assessment Framework. All 33 parents in the study understood this and thought reading enhanced parent/child interaction in a whole range of ways. At the simplest level:

It makes you feel very special if someone reads to you...you can enjoy being read to more than television...it gives you opportunities to talk if you don't understand, and pleasure. (5)

At more complex levels creative links could be made between parent/child reading practices and parenting capacity (Author 2008). In this paper, the findings are now discussed in relation to the *Every Child Matters* outcomes (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008): be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; achieve economic wellbeing. Thus a focus is placed on outcomes for vulnerable children in the community and looked after children, both of whose vulnerabilities arise from the hazards of their environments and deficits in parenting (both individual and corporate) that they might have experienced. When referring to levels of intervention the paper draws on the conceptual framework constructed by Hardiker et al (1999) which refers to interventions designed for:

- base populations (universal)
- first (vulnerable groups and communities)
- second (early stresses)
- third (severe stresses)
- fourth (social breakdown: in care)

Hardiker et al. identify welfare interventions which are last resort (safety net) or which address needs and combat social disadvantage through remedial interventions, social casework, care planning and community development.

It is only too easy to see child/parent reading as not a concern for busy practitioners who address needs, plan family support and make compulsory and remedial interventions., especially when involved cases of serious abuse. However, in family and child support work it can be argued that this activity is very relevant because of the potential for improving children's social and emotional development and educational outcomes and it's role in a positive parenting capacity. There is a therapeutic literature relating to direct work, which could be equally used at early stages of work to support children, young people and their carers by a range of child welfare practitioners and others who work or live with vulnerable children. (Aldgate and Author, 2007).

The Every Child Matters outcomes

In terms of *being healthy*, reading with children contributed to their basic care; attachment, closeness, attention; physical contact, relaxation, special times; emotional warmth and stability. The process of reading was shown to be especially important for building relationship. As one of the parents (a young man raising a child on his own who had in the past taken drugs and alcohol to excess and been in prison) commented:

I know it may sound a bit corny but I feel that when I am reading to him about things that we have a real connection. It's like a bond between us when we are sat there, reading (31)

It seems important that all practitioners consider the importance of this process for promoting attachments between adults and children, especially as it has potential for building attachment and for reunification and repair.

In terms of *staying safe* parents reported that they were using stories for: handling hazards, preparing children for new or challenging experiences and as a positive activity to keep children safe and off the street. Parents wanted books with content that reflected their life experiences. There was some contrast here between parents who lived in safer environments and those

who didn't. For example some parents easily provided a rich reading experience for children:

We go to the library a lot, probably once a fortnight and they get six books each (6)

Others were using family support to meet need

We come here (family support project) for them to learn different things and quality time (24, 25, 26)

Others were seeking a safer environment

When we come out of here (family support project) there are needles on the park and cars everywhere (32)

For all the families access to a range of reading and literacy activities was important, for some this needed active support. Only the 11 parents in sample one had a range of accessible library provision, the other 22 families were using family support projects and schools for resources, lacking in the community.

In terms of *enjoy and achieve* reading together contributed to: parent and child pleasure, fun, education and stimulation. Stories were used to share experiences and prepare for life. For example a parent said:

It's not just reading a story, but talking about it and laughing at the funny things that happen (6)

All 33 parents expressed enjoyment. Unsurprisingly the extent and depth of the way this contributed to the child's achievements can be linked to parental educational background and social advantage or disadvantage (Author, 2006). Any child not receiving these kinds of experiences could be said to be experiencing neglect of a very vital component of childhood and practitioners need to be alert to the opportunities for enhancement.

Reading helps children have the capacity to *make a positive contribution*.

Vicarious experiences, through books, develop empathy and emotional awareness and contribute to moral development and the formation of values.

Parents were choosing books to promote these kinds of qualities. One parent said that reading stories:

Brings out the sensitive side of boys (6)

Another said

He knows all about black and white children because I've got a black friend. I haven't got any Pakistani or Chinese friends so he's got a book about it (27)

And another

It brings it real, if they have read something in a book they understand what it is like, you can show them ... and take the worry out ... they are not the only one (12)

Literacy is part of a child or young person's journey towards *achieving economic wellbeing*. It is well known that literacy and life chances are linked (Crowther et al., 2001). Being literate contributes to combating disadvantages and enables children to exercise agency (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). However, in the study, the children experienced different levels of opportunity. This parent could not read herself so:

School days like, after tea they have to learn their alphabet and read their school books or something, like they might read books out loud and I listen. (30)

She was living on benefits and had limited extended family support. Other parents, like these two teachers, were providing a very complex experience:

It makes you feel very special if someone reads to you. It allows you to experience a more kinetic approach. (5)

The one I read to most is 6 and he has a huge range of books to choose from and is moving on to what were the older children's books. (3)

Comparing children in need with the children of the above parents, suggests that more could be done to enhance the experiences of parents and children who would like to do more, but lack personal or economic resources.

Policy and practice implications

Improving childhood literacy has been a goal of recent public policy in England (DfES and National Literacy Trust, 2006). Children, who are not regularly read to by an interested adult, are likely to experience disadvantage in the education system. They may also be unable to participate in other literacies (e.g. information technology; emotional literacy). Further, a child who lacks the experience of snuggling up to a carer with a book, or talking about books they have read, may not only become disadvantaged in terms of educational opportunity but may also be deprived of a key opportunity for, relationship, fun, social, personal and emotional development across a range of dimensions.

In this sample, parents with a rich legacy of being read were enjoying passing that on. Others, with more impoverished backgrounds or living in more disadvantaged environments were engaged in reading with their children but benefitted from support and opportunities to do more. However providing more books is no guarantee that anyone will read them and providing incentives for parents read with children cannot make anyone enjoy the process. If initiatives to promote child/parent reading are to be successful, practitioner and volunteer support in a range of settings is needed. Otherwise, vulnerable children and their parents, particularly those with few economic resources (Hardiker's levels 1-3) are unlikely to experience the richness that some other families take for granted. This activity therefore needs to be embedded in policies and frameworks which guide practitioners' thinking and actions. Pro-active practitioners could:

- Embed child/ parent reading in family support at early levels of intervention.
- Ensure that Looked after Children read and are read to.
- Use books when communicating with all children.
- Work collaboratively in communities to enhance literacy opportunities such as book clubs.

Conclusion

The activity of child/adult reading and the contribution it makes to positive child outcomes needs to be part of the mind set of all those who meet children in need and children who are looked after. It is a creative tool that all those in contact with children can take more account of, not just in a generalised way but in a focused, intentional, thoughtful part of their assessments, supportive and therapeutic interventions with vulnerable children and their families.

Books can provide positive parenting experiences

I think one of the lovely things is having a child snuggle down your lap reading something. (7)

And help to transform children's lives

Be an Egyptian child beside the Nile, be a rabbit in Watership Down, be a foundling so lonely in a mediaeval castle that the physical ache of it reaches out to you ... be one of a gang of London kids playing on a bomb site ... be a king ...

(Spufford, 2002: 114)

*The term parent is used as shorthand and can include anyone in a parenting/caring role with children e.g. step-parent, foster carer etc.

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