

Effect of Therapeutic Story Making Intervention on Reading Skills and Academic Resilience

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Introduction

Adolescent students from low socio-economic backgrounds studying in government schools located in rural areas are confronted with several cumulative risk factors placing them at-risk for both healthy psychosocial adaptation and academic success. The risks for development among these adolescents include economic factors like low income status that deprives them of several essential resources, school factors like crowded classrooms and understaffing in school leading to minimal social support in the school context, familial factors like lack of parental support for education, parental unemployment, physical abuse in the family, and sociopolitical factors like belonging to lower caste and lack of political support (Annalakshmi, 2015). These risk factors jeopardise not only academic performance and retention in school but also their psychological wellbeing (Mallin, Walker and Levin, 2013). These at-risk students display problems in academic, emotional, social, and behavioural areas of functioning. Reading difficulty seen in younger children from this background grows consistently as they grow into adolescence that directly affects their academic performance. They also experience internalising and externalising problems that make academic success more challenging.

The efficacy of therapeutic story making delivered by teachers or parent in enhancing emotional, social and academic functioning in children with emotional and social problems coupled with poor literacy has been well documented (Waters, 2010). In the original

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format of the therapeutic story making conceived by Waters (2004) involved pupils-at-risk of exclusion and with poor literacy creating stories with their parents or teachers which not only helped the adults gain a good understanding on the emotional and behavioural problems of the child but also led to better reading skills among the participants.

In the present study, the efficacy of therapeutic story-making intervention delivered by peer mentors in enhancing reading skills and academic resilience was evaluated. While many studies have reported efficacy of mentoring by a non-parental adult in promoting resilience among at-risk children and adolescents studies (Southwich, Morgan, Vthilingam and Charney, 2010) that have used peer mentoring for this target group have not been reported. In the present study, peer mentors who also come from a background similar to the student mentees delivered the intervention. Since peer mentors and the mentees shared similar background they could relate better to each other making it easier to provide and receive reliable support in addition to enhancing interpersonal relatedness. The similarity also had a unique advantage in peer mentors being a perfect role model for the mentees. The peer mentors may be able to inspire and motivate the student mentees better than a non-parental adult who is not from a background similar to the student mentees.

Objectives

The present study aimed at designing a therapeutic story making intervention to be delivered by peer mentors and evaluating its efficacy on improving reading skill and academic resilience among at-risk students. The study examined the efficacy of the intervention in effecting change both in the student mentees as well as the peer mentors.

Methodology

The methodology adopted was predominantly quantitative although some qualitative data were also used. Data were collected from student mentees, peer mentors as well as teachers to evaluate the efficacy of the intervention. Quantitative data were collected using standardised psychological tools that assessed reading comprehension, academic skills — reading/language art, school engagement, academic self-efficacy, perceived social support, resilience, conscientiousness and psychological problems. Semi-

structured interview schedule was used to examine the effect of intervention on student mentees and peer mentors. Teacher-based assessment of the impact of the intervention on academic skills as well as problem behaviours may be seen as one of the unique strengths of this study.

A single pre-test–post-test–follow-up design was employed to test the efficacy of the therapeutic story making intervention in improving reading skills and psychological resilience. The project involved developing a reading comprehension test and then using it to evaluate the efficacy of the intervention. The project was carried out in three phases:

- Phase I involved developing a reading comprehension test in Tamil for Class VII students.
- Phase II involved providing training to ‘to-be-mentors’ to deliver therapeutic story making intervention to student mentees.
- Phase III involved peer mentors delivering the therapeutic story making intervention to student mentees.

Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the best predictor of academic achievement at the baseline and to identify the best predictor of gain in academic achievement after the intervention. Thematic analysis was carried out on the qualitative data collected through interviews with student mentees, peer mentors and teachers to examine the efficacy of the intervention.

Findings of the Study

The evidence from this study clearly suggests that therapeutic story writing has improved reading skills as well as academic resilience among the participants. Improvements in the various domains like academic, social and personal were evident as a result of the intervention. Specifically, the intervention has had the following effects on all participants, both student mentees and peer mentors:

- Helped participants improve reading skills with regular reading exercise where they read out their stories as well as passages from the textbooks.
- Fostered resilience in the participants in the process of story writing that emphasised resilience characteristics.

- Promoted conscientiousness as a result of increased sensitivity to discipline, planning, organising, etc., because of working on such themes to make stories.
- Enabled the participants to use story writing as a medium to process and express their emotions thereby improving their internalising as well as externalising problems.
- Built academic skills in the participants via improving specific skill like identifying a main idea, identifying detail, grammar, written communication, vocabulary, phonemic awareness, phonics, generating and answering questions, visualising ideas, drawing conclusions, identifying inferences, determining author's purpose, and understanding point of view.
- Encouraged student participants to develop cooperative and trusting relationships with peers mentors and vice-versa.
- Increased student mentees' interest to help others because of their 'receiving' from the peer mentors.
- Increased interest to engage with story writing leading to increased interest in academics.
- Improved participants' school engagement, school attendance and academic performance.

Implications for Educational Policy and School Practice

The present study has direct relevance for educational policies related to improving learning outcomes of students from at-risk population. Enabling inclusive education implied by education of SCs, STs, minorities as well as students from rural background cannot be realised in the fullest spirit unless their needs in personal, social and academic domains are met and problems in these domains are attended to. Today, the Ministry of Human Resource Development of Government of India has identified comprehensive education as one of its priorities. Comprehensive education focussing on ethics, physical education, arts and crafts, and life skills can be achieved through implementing therapeutic story making intervention as a part of school curriculum. The therapeutic story making intervention has significantly improved internalising and externalising problems, and resilience in the participants. Several studies have suggested that resilience building intervention can improve health behaviours among children and adolescents who are at-risk. The findings of the study hence are also relevant to child health.