

Fictionalised stories co-produced with disadvantaged children and young people: uses with professionals

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Introduction

This chapter draws on a research project in which a multi-disciplinary team of academics worked with disadvantaged children and young people to collect their life-narratives of 'resilience and transformation'.¹ I will examine the ways in which the fictionalised stories that were created have been received by a range of professionals, and the purposes to which they may be put to help understand problems faced by many children and young people. The project used a participatory research approach to collect qualitative interview data from children and young people by their peers, while adult researchers also conducted interviews with the young people and a range of others involved in their lives. Drawing on notions of story-telling as a means of promoting empathy and understanding (e.g. Keen 2006, Djikic and Oatley 2014), the qualitative data were used to co-construct stories in several different ways. For some stories, the interview data were transformed into fictional 'assemblages', collecting together different elements into new wholes; others were created individually with one or two young people. Most were written as short stories; others were reproduced as animations, and one documentary-type film. The stories were designed to provide a means of communicating disabled and disadvantaged young people's perspectives on their own lives, to raise awareness, provoke empathy, and ultimately to bring about social change. The use of *fiction* was perceived as appropriate for several reasons. Fictional characters are often identified with by readers, thereby inviting empathy, "even when the fictional character and reader differ from one another in all sorts of practical and obvious ways" (Keen 2006, p. 214). Secondly, overtly fictionalising our participants' experiences was

a pragmatic way of ensuring anonymity; and, thirdly, the use of fiction in the construction *process* of the stories enabled our young people to imagine a plethora of possibilities, introducing alternative futures from those that appeared to be mapped out for them. The creation of the stories therefore contained a therapeutic element for our young people, while the final product could arguably have a therapeutic effect on unknown young people who might access the stories in the future. Possible selves theory (Markus and Nurius 1986), which employs a focus on imagined visions of the future to understand issues relating to individuals in the present, was not developed with a therapeutic intent, but it has inevitably been applied in a range of disciplines, including psychotherapeutic contexts (e.g. Bak 2015). For the project, it is a useful way of considering possibilities for young people to imagine 'hoped-for' rather than 'feared' versions of the future, incorporating positive messages for other young people.

The project design

Stories to Connect (Satchwell et al. 2015) is a project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council for three years between 2015 and 2018. A multidisciplinary team of four academics, two research associates, and numerous volunteers from the student body, engaged with a group of 13 young people with a range of (dis)abilities who all accessed a children's charity. Our joint aim was to share the stories of young people who face challenges in their lives, to raise awareness and ultimately lead to social change. After many hours of regular workshops and meetings, involving playing games, sharing food, engaging in research training, and making discoveries about ourselves and one another, the core group of 13 young people were supported to go out and collect life-narratives from other disadvantaged young people. In addition, the adult researchers conducted interviews with the young people to understand their hopes, fears, and the way the research impacted on them over time, as well as interviews with parents and carers, and other significant adults in their

lives. The result was a collection of nearly 100 interviews, which were transcribed. We also collected fieldnotes relating to the workshops, and engaged in a range of story-telling activities with the young people, where they built on their own and others' experiences to create story arcs and storylines which were later written up with the help of a variety of writers (see below for more details on the construction of the stories). Alongside these activities we visited primary and secondary schools to work with children and young people to ascertain their ideas about stories, including when, why and how they engaged with stories in different formats, and what they saw as the characteristics and purposes of stories. Analyses of these various forms of data provided us with a range of findings, including sets of challenges, barriers, support mechanisms, and outcomes as experienced by around 65 disadvantaged young people, along with insights into what children and young people thought stories were for, and how to make them.

The project included co-designing community phygital (physical-digital) artefacts to tell the stories in innovative ways. For example, we created a suitcase of stories using an authentic old leather suitcase containing an iPad screen and a set of 3-D printed figures; also an interactive picture map, designed with our young people, via which the stories can be seen and heard as short films on a mobile phone or tablet. Illustration, animation, and oral narration complement the written word, and the stories are available in both digital and print formats. Our early research and ongoing interactions indicated that both the instigators of the stories and the potential receivers of them were inclined to prefer visual literacies to more conventional reading and writing, although our research into children's associations with stories revealed their use of a wide range of modes and media. Therefore the use of digital literacies and alternative modes of presentation of stories were designed to increase accessibility and to engage audiences in different ways. The intended audiences for the

stories are multiple and diverse; however, here I discuss the affordances of the final fictional stories as resources for professionals who work with children and young people.

Construction of the stories

The stories were constructed in collaborative ways and thus represent multiple layers of interpretation. I suggest that the construction of the stories was itself a form of analysis, whereby different individuals brought different perspectives to the process, but always inspired by the original data which had emanated from the young people.

Writers who transformed the data into fictional outputs included students in English language, literature and creative writing, animation students and filmmakers, a group of writers called the Society for Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and members of the research team, including myself. Each writer approached the task differently: for example, I was able to draw on my own observations of individual young people and my own research fieldnotes, as well as extracts from transcripts; other writers had never met the young people but relied on being sent briefs from the research team and several sources of data, including transcripts and observational notes. Inevitably each writer – and each researcher – consciously or unconsciously made choices at each stage of this process, and each drew on his or her own sensibilities, memories, and experiences. We asked for reflections on this writing process, and it became clear that the writers interwove their own interpretations and experiences during their creative involvement in fictional writing. The actual process of writing the stories is less under scrutiny in this chapter than in some of the team's other written outputs (see e.g. Satchwell 2018, Satchwell and Davidge 2018), as the focus here is on how the outputs might be useful for professionals. However, it is highly relevant to the present discussion that the fictional stories have been crafted in ways that have always made the young people's perspectives central to the story, along with the additional layers of interpretation and creativity applied by the writer who chooses what to foreground and what

to background or delete. A further layer was added when artists contributed illustrations. Often their choice of which elements of the story to illustrate, and how they decided to depict characters and events, would be significant factors in how the finished stories were received. I suggest that all such choices are a form of analysis of the data, insofar as the most resonant or salient aspects of information provided by the children and young people are those that are most likely to rise to the surface and become most prominent in the 'final cut' of the stories.

Forty-three of the stories have been produced as individual books, printed with coloured illustrations provided by a range of artists. Nineteen stories have also been produced as films, freely accessible through the website. These films are also accessible via the phygital objects that have been co-designed with the young people, but this currently relies on the researchers transporting the phygitals to different venues. Ultimately the map and its accompanying app which will provide access to a selection of the stories will be available as free downloads.

The stories have been trialled, as books and through phygitals, with a variety of different audiences including primary age children, secondary school children in a Pupil Referral Unit, university students on a Childhood Studies degree programme, teachers, social workers, dramatherapists, postgraduate students in education and social work, and members of the public at a variety of events. Activities carried out included:

- Reading stories to groups of schoolchildren and their teachers and asking both adults and children for verbal and/or written feedback on how the stories made them feel, and how the stories might be useful for other children;
- Sharing a selection of stories in film format and/or book format with university students on relevant courses, who then worked in small groups to collate their personal responses, and to consider how they might use the stories with children or young people in their (future) career;

- Providing sets of storybooks for dramatherapists, social workers and a counsellor to use in their practice as they wished, and then interviewing them about their experiences.

Although we did not prescribe specific uses for the stories, we are currently developing accompanying resources which envisage them being shared with individual or groups of children in school or more informal settings to discuss themes of isolation and loneliness; discrimination and injustice; mental health and wellbeing; growing up and transition; job-seeking and independence – all of which feature in the stories. They could have the function of helping an individual who has a similar problem, or they could be used to raise awareness of issues faced by others. The main sources of data to be drawn on in this chapter are notes, observations, and transcriptions of interviews and focus groups from the trials with professionals/practitioners who work or are training to work with children and young people. As will be seen below, a range of responses were received, which could be perceived as both negative and positive, raising questions about audience reception and assumptions about empathic response.

Responses to the stories: the importance of change

The project evolved from the premise that stories are a tried and trusted means of learning and understanding. This includes learning not only about other people, places and events, but also learning about oneself. Although definitions of empathy are contested (see Gair 2012, for example, for an overview), our project relies on an assumption that fiction can provoke empathy in its readers. This view is supported from a psychological perspective by Djikic and Oatley (2014), who refer to literature's capacity to 'unfreeze' the reader's personality system and allow other people's experiences in, claiming that readers of literature can become more empathic as a result. This 'unfreezing' is not dissimilar to the notion of

being 'caught out' as an interviewee below described the therapeutic effect of drama or literature.

Connections have been made between inducing empathy and overcoming prejudice (e.g. Pederson et al. 2004 in relation to attitudes to indigenous Australians; Finlay and Stephan 2000 on empathy reducing racism). On a grand scale we are attempting to challenge prejudice and in this way inspire social change through our stories. On a smaller scale we envisage the stories helping to overcome individual problems encountered by young people today. In addition to the booklets and website, there are plans for the stories to be collated into books suitable for both professionals and children, with a range of accompanying resources.ⁱⁱ The uses of our fictional stories might therefore be three-fold: first, professionals can learn about young people's issues by reading about them as experienced first-hand; secondly, professionals (teachers, social workers, community workers) can use the stories with children, individually or in groups, to help understand a problem encountered by themselves or others; and thirdly, children and young people can learn from reading the stories independently, or with a teacher, parent, or sibling. We are assuming therefore that our stories will evoke a response of some kind, and as Lawrence Sipe (1999) writes in considering children's responses to literature, "we would not be interested in response if we did not feel that this work can offer some real benefits for children" (p. 127). Sipe concludes that links that children make between literature and their own lives "have the potential to be both informative and transformative for their developing sense of themselves as individuals and members of society" (p. 127). Given that the work of teachers, social workers, and therapists who work with children and young people is focused on learning, transformation, healing, and other forms of social change, the use of fiction is compatible.

A Dramatherapist who viewed the stories described the value of a dramatic or literary experience as "entering one's own house by the back door", and experiencing the shock of

recognition of one's own situation as an "Ah" or an "Ow" moment. He continued: "You might not immediately realise what it is that has touched you – you might not recognise what or how that's happened." But that moment could be a catalyst for change. Dramatherapy works at the interface between fantasy and reality with a particular aim: "The creation of fictive, dramatic worlds aims to challenge, to alter and directly bring about change for the client, both within the time of the Dramatherapy and in the client's life outside therapy." (Jones 1996, p. 11).

Bringing about change was also a crucial driver for social workers. Describing her motivation for joining the profession, a mental health social worker I interviewed explained:

"Basically I wanted to be helpful in the world and do something meaningful that might help other people. I like social work because of its holistic view of people – not just looking at people from a medical perspective but their whole system and how that impacts. It's less oppressive, more understanding and empathetic than other mental health professions."

While for a Dramatherapist the use of fiction is part and parcel of what they do, the mental health social worker commented that she would be more likely to use 'real-life' examples in her 'holistic' approach:

"I would normally use a true story because – like a recovery story blog – it gives hope, and we could look at that together and show that this person thought they'd never get better and they did. All hope is not lost. But fiction could also be useful – I've never thought about it before."

Other professionals agreed that the uses of fiction opened up possibilities for change. A social worker commented that simply depicting young people in a range of situations – in jobs, volunteering, joining youth clubs, at college, living independently – as our stories do, is

a way of enabling young people suffering from anxiety or depression to see alternatives. A counsellor referred to the stories as:

"A psychologically healing thing – the stories are positive – they have happy endings and instil hope. That is enormously valuable – if you can offer somebody an insight into their own grim situation and see that there is hope at the end that is extremely valuable. So they have healing potential."

As themes that occurred in many of the discussions with professionals, I shall discuss (a) the differences between fictional and factual stories, more often seen as 'case studies' or simply 'examples' in practice; and (b) the particular characteristics of stories created collaboratively with disabled or otherwise disadvantaged children and young people.

Fact or fiction? Does it matter?

In discussing the affordances of fiction in this section, I consider the notions of intention and reception, and the impossibility of controlling for readers' interpretations. This leads to a consideration of happy endings versus realism, and finally to a discussion of differences between a text book and a story.

Intention and reception

A teacher consulted about the finished stories commented:

"You can create more of a relationship with fictional people, more than people in a blog. You aren't intruding on anyone's life by thinking you could be friends with them. The gaps that fiction allows means that you can fill them in in a way you want to – it makes it more yours."

This concurs with the "interpretive gaps" discussed by de Freitas (2003, p. 4) and Leavy (2015), which allow readers to "actively develop empathic connections to the characters (and

the kinds of people they represent)" (p. 56). De Freitas refers also to "a space of difference" (p. 4), reflecting Iser's (2000) 'liminal space', which allows the imagination a valuable means of understanding both other and self. Fiction, therefore, can engender empathy by constructing a "highly intimate relationship with the imagined other" (De Freitas 2003, p. 5) through the act of reading which involves interpretation that is both personal and interpersonal. These gaps lead to multiple possible readings of a text: indeed, once our stories are 'released' into the world, they take on lives of their own intertwined in different ways with those who encounter them. While this is to be welcomed as what Dimock (1997) refers to as the "democracy of fiction", it also means that the intention behind the stories is not necessarily communicated to the receiver.

A focus group with students on a Childhood Studies degree raised some interesting points. They were shown a selection of the film versions of the stories and also the text versions, which at this point were presented as rudimentary plain text, rather than formatted by our designer as illustrated little books. Although they considered the project to be valuable as a whole, the students' verdicts on some of the stories were somewhat negative. They did not explicitly address the differences between fact and fiction, but their comments relate in part to the choices made in the fictionalising process of creating the stories – as referred to above. For example, they felt that one story conveyed a "very simplistic approach" and did not "fully encompass the complexity and multifaceted nature of speech, language and communication difficulties" which was a theme of the story. Rather they thought: "it could have been done in a more meaningful way, such as the young man joining a group and finding like-minded people, rather than approaching a stranger with an angry looking dog". The story in question had originally been created, amidst much hilarity, by a young man with Down Syndrome in a story-telling workshop. At the end of the story, the two fictional characters, who both have difficulties with speech, hitch-hike to Switzerland and join the

Mountain Rescue Service. The students felt this "portrays unrealistic expectations" and was "probably more useful for whoever made it than a wider audience". These comments raise interesting questions to do with intent and reception – as well as about the relationship between fact and fiction. In this case, the story had been created as a light-hearted representation of a fantasy, while also touching on real issues relating to communication difficulties. The students appeared to take rather literally a story that included a girl called Bob who likes to communicate via interpretive dance and who has an army of (imaginary) animals for protection.

Another story, about bullying, was also seen negatively by the students as they struggled to "understand why there was no consequence for the bully and their behaviour", and "why the teacher did not act when told about the bullying". This story was created with a young woman who discussed her own experience of bullying, and how telling the teacher meant that she felt safer. The issue of perspective was for us an important consideration: our stories represent narratives from the point of view of someone who has had that experience. An omniscient story-teller might include a bully getting his comeuppance – but from the perspective of the victim, it is her own growth and change (represented in this story by a physical growth due to secretly eating meals at both her gran's and her mum's) that is central.

There is perhaps, therefore, a tension between evoking empathy from an audience, and providing solutions to problems. The students appear to have been considering the stories as a means of helping children to overcome their problems, as indicated by their comments on the stories being "too simplistic", not dealing with "the complexities" of issues, and that "children would then go home and ask for a dog if they were bullied", as happened in the story. This is also relevant to the tension between fact and fiction: as it happened, many of the young people we worked with found that having a pet (usually a dog) was beneficial, as was talking to a non-judgmental ally. While presenting the insider perspective of the child who is

the victim of bullying, we have not built in advice, nor a more sophisticated representation of the issue of bullying incorporating a range of different considerations.

Happy endings vs realism

Another aspect which is relevant to a discussion about fiction over fact is the ubiquitous 'happy ending', which in the case of these two stories the students described as "unrealistic". I asked professionals for views on whether it was legitimate for the teamⁱⁱⁱ to have appended fictional 'happy outcomes' to stories that had a basis in reality. Generally the view was that: "They don't feel like magic wand endings, they feel more like realistic outcomes" and "these stories stay grounded because they are borne of the real world" (comments from a mental health worker).

Referring to a story called 'Train Alone Day', one practitioner stated:

Train Alone Day – the happy ending is just that she gets home – it's very neat and beautifully done. If you had problems getting out of the house or interpreting timetables it might offer – it might not – but it might offer hope – oh you could get home against the odds.

The social worker who used blogs would not, presumably, choose a negative example of a real-life account for her service-users, any more than we would choose an unsatisfactory outcome for a story. So, although hitch-hiking to Switzerland and working for the Mountain Rescue Service might be 'unrealistic' in one story, the safe arrival home is clearly a realistically minor yet personally monumental achievement for the protagonist of 'Train Alone Day'.

Although no-one who has been consulted so far has expressed the view that 'it's boring and nothing really happens', that is a possible response to some of the stories. Being based on disabled and disadvantaged young people's real challenges, the theme is sometimes

simply being able to leave the house, make a journey, or talk to a stranger. These issues correspond to their own individual aims expressed by our participants at the beginning of the project when we conducted base-line evaluation interviews. Some had ambitions to be able to talk to people more easily, to travel independently, or to find a part-time job. Each example of change is proportionate to the circumstances of the individual. Our young people have reviewed, edited and approved the final versions of the stories; however, we can never assume that stories will be received as they are intended, nor that the relationship between fact and fiction is as finely balanced as we would hope, as the Childhood Studies student feedback has demonstrated.

Textbooks vs stories

Considering the education of professionals using our fictional stories, we might ask, What does reading a fictional story have to offer that reading a textbook or a case study example does not? I suggest we need to take account of both the professional perspective and the child perspective. Imagine a social worker interacting with a child experiencing a problem such as family break up and a sense of isolation. What would a textbook say? It might provide theories from psychology about why children segregate themselves in ways that isolate others (e.g. homophily); or it might explain the economic and social factors that lead to parents separating. There might also be advice on how to help children to feel they are not to blame for situations beyond their control; or guidance on making friends. The textbook would be aimed at the adult, not the child, and would assume a certain level of maturity, previous knowledge and an ability to apply theory to practice. The child, on the other hand, would know exactly how she felt but may not have the ability to articulate or even understand how or why she felt that way. Arts therapies often rely on children expressing their feelings in ways other than words: by choosing colours, shapes or movements, thus using a technique of 'distancing' the child from the situation, while also allowing connections to be made. The

uses of fiction can have a similar effect: offering a means of entering by the back door, as opposed to the front door which might be represented by the textbook approach. Our stories, when we have read them with small groups of young people, have had a remarkable power to provoke discussion of quite intimate details about their own lives, while purportedly discussing the life of another, fictional, character. For example, a story that included the death of a loved one led to a conversation about the circumstances leading to one of the young people in the group being taken into care. Even though this was a group activity, the researcher facilitating the group was struck by the respect and attention given to the young person who had been affected. This example demonstrates how a story can become a catalyst for both individual healing and group cohesion. As several writers have argued (e.g. Neuman 1999), a story in the physical form of a shared book, and even a shared e-book (Kucirkova et al. 2013), becomes a conduit between adult and child, amongst a group of children, or between a child and her own problems. Discussing the characters and events in a story can be a means for addressing issues of immediate relevance for the readers.

Further, a textbook tends not to contextualise issues, nor to make connections in the same way that a story does. Gordon Wells (1986) explained the contribution that literature can make to children's development, helping them to understand cause and effect. Stories help young readers to “follow and construct a narrative and expository sequences, recognise causes, anticipate consequences and consider the motives and emotions that are inextricably bound up with all human actions and endeavours” (Wells 1986). Telling a child it is not her fault that her parents have split up is not the same as the child seeing the break-up from a different perspective. Perspective is something that fiction can provide. Often it can be from a more distant and omniscient perspective, rather than from the confined view of a child caught in the midst of a family in distress.

In a textbook, we might be encouraged to understand a diagnosis of autism through a list of psychological traits. These are generally expressed in negative terms as 'social and communication disorders', and a 12-point checklist includes, for example: "Very demanding of other people's time" and "Behaviour often disrupts family life" (Skuse et al. 2005, p. 572). We might then be tempted to view our young person as having such traits to a greater or lesser extent and thereafter to 'label' him or her as 'autistic'. Several of our stories were created with children and young people who had received such a diagnosis; but most of the stories do not mention disabilities at all, except one which begins with the line: "Hmm." Mr Snake drummed his fingers across his chin. "You don't *look* autistic." This story, entitled 'Black and White', was inspired by a young woman who had struggled with the tensions of whether her diagnosis was a help or a hindrance throughout her school life. Our stories aim to highlight similarities, not differences, and so even those that are specifically inspired by young people with a diagnosis of a specific learning difficulty or disability are about other things: baking cakes, solving riddles, making friends.

To some extent the stories may be similar to a real-life case study or a blog, but it is the gaps afforded by fiction that become significant. In the story 'Black and White', the protagonist strikes a teacher and has to deal with the consequences. This aspect of the story is one that causes children to draw in a breath; and caused the young woman who had inspired it to whisper, "I wish I really had hit him".

The particular characteristics of stories created collaboratively with disadvantaged young people

I suggest that what is distinctive about the stories produced in our project is that they are produced by, with, about, and for children with a range of difficulties and disabilities that they live with on a continuous basis. In essence they can be conceived of as 'insider stories', created by experts on their own lives, and giving the (collaborative) author a special

authority. The knowledge contained in the stories belongs to the young people, not to an author in a privileged position, *imagining* what it might be like to be disadvantaged. Therefore, the stories are about real issues, set mostly (but not always) in realistic situations. This is the young person's reality, even if it is surprising to some readers. For example, some children in a secondary school where we trialled the stories could not understand that the protagonist of one of the stories drank beer but was shy like a small child. For the real-life inspiration of the story, these two characteristics were by no means incompatible. Another story was created with a young woman with autism about the anxieties she felt about staying at a friend's house. The young woman had never been away from home before, even though she was aged 20, and the story portrays emotional responses often associated with much younger children. The fact that the story is about a sleepover, but is written about a young woman, arguably means that the target age-range is not clear, but also gives credence to emotions and anxieties that do not cease with the end of childhood. This particular story provoked the young woman's mother to say, "I never really understood how she might feel until I read that story", which in itself is a remarkable endorsement of the power of the story. While they might appear anomalous, idiosyncratic, or unrealistic to some readers, parents and carers have commented that our stories present aspects of their young people that they recognise but had never fully understood.

Although I make a claim for the stories as 'insider' stories, accounting for their one-sidedness, or "conscious partiality" as Mies (1983, p. 23) describes, the collaborative authorship of the stories means that the insider/outsider status is layered and complex. The adult researcher and creative writer (both of which roles I have inhabited in this project) are outsiders in the sense that they have not lived the experience in question, but the detailed knowledge that is drawn upon to create the stories belongs to insiders who do have first-hand experience. The combination contributes to a story that coheres reasonably well, while also

remaining true to the young participants. I contend that the inducement of empathy in the audience is enhanced by the deliberate combination of authentic data and "artful manipulation", which Watson (2009) warns against. Watson suggests that qualitative data should not be appropriated and re-presented by researchers with the aim of provoking empathy, not least because claims cannot be made for the 'sameness' of the experience for participant, researcher, or audience. However, our stories aim to evoke feelings of recognition in those who read them. We cannot claim that they have the 'same' experience, nor that their feelings are the 'same' as those experienced by either the instigator of the story or the character(s). Nevertheless, our adult professional readers have commented on feeling "as though I'm inside his head", or "I'm supposedly a confident grown-up person, but I often feel like that [nervous about meeting new people]", again noting the similarity of the human experience rather than the difference of those with disability.

This brings us to the notion of fiction as a means of overcoming 'othering'. Emphasising sameness rather than difference may be a significant step for readers, whether they are professionals or young people, and the concept is worth discussing further in the context of these stories. It is interesting that the young researcher group hosted at the university where the project took place, and whose membership overlapped with the Stories to Connect group, had chosen as their symbol a picture of a wheelchair within a globe split apart. None of the young people currently attending the group is a wheelchair user, but they all have disabilities of one kind or another. Their use of the wheelchair as a conventional symbol of disability might suggest that the young people have accepted the 'othering' imposed upon them, arguably therefore accepting a position of subordination. Applying Jensen's (2011) definition of othering, the wheelchair symbol can be seen as an example of powerful groups having "defined [people with disabilities] into existence in a reductionist way which ascribes problematic and/or inferior characteristics" to them. The Social and

Communication Disorders Checklist referred to above (Skuse et al. 2005) would be another example. While our young people's construction of themselves as 'disabled' or 'autistic' might appear to be accepting subordination, it can also be interpreted as "capitalization" (Jensen 2011, p. 66), whereby they are appropriating part of the discourse usually used about them as 'others'. This capitalisation on othering has elements of both "resistance and reproduction" thereby "open[ing] a space for agency" (p. 73). One of the stories that I wrote up myself, based on a story-line created with a young man and with reference to several other young people, is called 'The Old Armchair'. When I introduced the character whom the protagonist desperately wanted to talk to, I created her as a wheelchair user. It was only reflecting after the event that I related the inclusion of a wheelchair to the young people's choice of logo. I suggest that, along with the young people's capitalisation, the story is another means of calling into question the discourse of othering, by representing the wheelchair user as a focus of desire, rather than as a problem. Indeed, in the story, it is the male protagonist's own disability and experience of abuse that inclines him to empathise with the situation of the wheelchair user – vulnerable to abuse by others on whom she is dependent. Our hope is that this and other of our stories can help people to realise that 'others' have characteristics like themselves, sharing feelings, emotions, predicaments, and challenges.

Concluding thoughts

In this chapter I have described a three-year research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council which has led to the production of a collection of stories of 'resilience and transformation', co-produced by, with and for young people with a range of disabilities and challenges. Drawing on notions of story-telling as a means of promoting empathy and understanding, and using participatory research methodology, data from peer interviews and other sources were transformed into fictional 'assemblages', collecting together different elements into new wholes. These stories were designed to provide a means

of communicating young people's perspectives on their own lives in a form that both dissociated them and collectively embraced them. Fictionalisation allowed us to obscure identities, while presenting both challenges and tested 'solutions' or wished-for outcomes as experienced by the young people. In this sense, the element of fantasy enabled the young people to consider alternative selves and imagine possible futures, while inevitably drawing on their existing knowledge. The layers of meaning created by this collaborative method of story-making arguably allow for potential resonance with other young people and professionals alike. Given that many of the young people in the research have disabilities, learning difficulties, are in care or on the edge of care, their stories are important for professionals who are likely to come into contact with young people who may have had similar experiences. At the same time, such young people's voices are often lost, and their expert inside knowledge of systems and structures is unrecognised, as are their hopes for different outcomes.

Using the responses of professionals from different fields, I have considered the stories' potential value as means of learning about oneself and about others, from the perspectives of children and young people as well as the professionals who work with them. In doing so I have highlighted the importance of the fictional quality of the stories, and how they might differ from a case study or textbook approach. I also claim that the unique ways in which the stories have been constructed contribute to their potential to resonate with those who access them. The efforts to retain the voices and concerns of the young people whose stories we have recreated add to the authenticity of the final products.

The stories are accessible through a variety of digital and print, video and animation formats, with the added dimension of our co-produced 'phygital' artefacts, designed to increase the appeal and accessibility of the stories for wide-ranging audiences. However, the

focus here has been on the content and construction of the stories themselves, with an emphasis on their potential for use by and with professionals and young people.

In producing the stories we have attempted to 'connect people', with a recognition that people are more similar than they are different. The distance, or the gap, provided by a fictional story is a means of bringing us closer to an understanding of both ourselves and others. Considering othering theory, I have suggested that the young people, by being directly involved in the production of these stories, have in some cases appropriated and capitalised on their status as subordinate others. The stories turn the tables in presenting themselves as the protagonists of their own narratives.

A Dramatherapist interviewed about his reactions to the stories and links with his own practice said:

"The more open you are to your differences – and with your differences – the more able you are to make connections with other people."

He also described the 'otherworldliness' provided by arts therapies that 'allows you to explore all your facets'. This is the principle upon which our stories are based: that we can enter a world not unlike our own, to recognise similarity and thereby understand difference.

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ⁱ The full title of the research project which this chapter draws on is: *Stories to Connect With: Children and young people creating phygital community artefacts to share the life-narratives of resilience and transformation*. The project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council 2015-2018.

ⁱⁱ A book deal is in negotiation for a two-volume set, one book with the illustrated stories for children and young people, and an accompanying book for professionals with resources and activities.

ⁱⁱⁱ The team includes writers, young researchers, academics, and various others according to which story is being referred to.