Risk and Resilience: A Perspective from Traditional Tales and Nursery Rhymes

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Abstract

The risk and resilience framework (Stanley, 2003) views developmental outcomes as the consequences of young people's responses to the risk and protective factors that are operating in their social settings.

Students in the School of Education at The University of Waikato at Tauranga can have the opportunity to apply the framework to models and situations of their own choice.

The present paper describes the first author's work, a risk and resilience analysis of traditional English fairy tales.

The point is made that fairy tales are themselves a protective factor and they are typically communicated to children in circumstances that are conducive to the development of resilience.

The study of resilience has been part of a revised way of viewing the various personal difficulties that can be experienced by children and youth (Windle, 1999). Prior to resilience research, investigations tended to portray young people as the passive victims of risk factors that produced enduring conditions. By contrast, work in resilience has "underscored the importance of understanding good as well as poor adaptation, competence as well as symptoms, and protective processes as well as risk processes" (Masten & Powell, 2003, p. 21).

Stanley (2003) suggests that the risk and resilience approach has four key components. The first of these is an appreciation that children and teenagers exist in an array of social settings, such as family, peer group, and neighbourhood. Secondly, each of these environments or ecologies can contain risk and protective factors and processes that impact on students. The third point is that people actively engage with their ecologies and modify them. The fourth component of the risk and resilience framework integrates the other three aspects; over time the individual's interactions and transactions with his or her ecologies produces a distinctive developmental pathway and trajectory which is adaptive to greater or lesser degrees.

Assignment work at The University of Waikato at Tauranga has shown that students can readily represent the constituents of risk and resilience. A wide assortment of physical models has been prepared, such as snakes and ladders boards, mazes, and lottery wheels, and there have also been musical pieces and mathematical analyses. Amongst other gains, the opportunity to engage with the relevant ideas in a tangible way seems to heighten understanding of the respective roles of chance and choice in human affairs. From a different perspective, the variety of designs that has been submitted might be seen as providing some validation of the four-dimensional model (Stanley, 2003). Recently, the components of risk and resilience were incorporated into a personal interpretation of traditional English rhymes and tales. While there is a distinctly light-hearted quality to this undertaking, it also manages to express a number of the larger meanings associated with the defining constituents.

Social settings that endanger and enhance children's development

Bronfenbrenner's social systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) provides a means for understanding the multiple ecologies that impact on children and youth, and whether these be from afar (distally) or directly and immediately (proximally).

When Baby Bear faced the emotional impact of home invasion, and the resulting damage to the family's possessions, he was well supported by both Mother Bear and Father Bear. Assistance at this micro-level contrasts with helping endeavours that are offered by an exo-system. For instance, the King's horses and men who attempted unsuccessfully to rescue Humpty Dumpty could be seen as the State's social services. Not to be ignored, macro-system influences might also be felt in fairy tales. Did Goosey Gander, the man who wouldn't say his prayers, upset the local minister or the societal expectations of the time? Does the ditty of Wee Willie Winkie express beliefs about a healthy sleep regime for the young? Bronfenbrenner's chronosystem reminds us that events and contexts
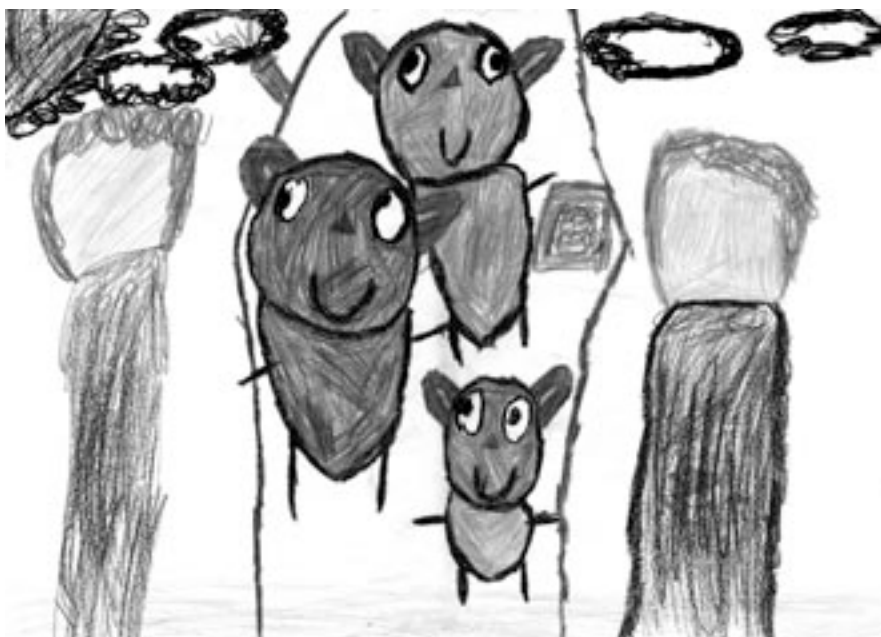
need to be considered over time. Hickory Dickory Dock certainly portrays the transition of time. It will not be one o'clock for ever.

Risk factors have been defined as "any influences that increase the probability of onset, digression to a more serious state, or maintenance of a problem condition" (Kirby & Fraser, 1997, p. 10-11). Miss Muffit was frightened by the spider and the pig was probably not the only food stolen by Tom the Piper's son. Individual risk factors or conditions (e.g., poor health, diminished intellectual capacity) could make it difficult to maintain emotional competence. Environmental risk factors, such as poverty, can constrict the ability to provide nurturing care and resources. We do not know where Miss Muffit's family was, and seemingly they were unable to allay her fears. Similarly, supervision of Georgie Porgie was apparently absent. And why did Tom steal that pig? Risk factors can also be cumulative, as they were for the Old Woman who lived in a shoe; or sequential: "For the want of a nail, the shoe was lost.'"

Protective factors are the forces that help children resist or ameliorate risk (Kirby & Fraser, 1997). In this regard, individual traits are perhaps of special interest, like the placid, caring Tommy Stout, or the well-developed problem-solving abilities and self-confidence shown by the Three Little Pigs. These qualities are complemented by external protective/resilience factors, and included here is a close relationship with a care giver, warmth, structure and expectations by parents, positive connections to adults in the extended family and outside of it, favourable socioeconomic circumstance, and attending effective schools (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). It is interesting that the interventions of Cinderella's fairy godmother, and Dummling's exchanges with the old man in the Golden Goose story, both led to socioeconomic advantages and assured the characters of success in their lives. Yet these advantages only came about when the characters observed the structures put forward by their mentors. Each mentor was very much a 'prosocial' model, providing warmth and caring along with guidelines for positive and considerate interactions within and beyond the family.

The third element in the risk and resilience framework, which emphasises the nature and quality of a person's relationships with his or her environments, can pose some significant questions. For instance, why was Georgie Porgie so antisocial with both his male and female peers? Had he been excluded from the usual interactions with age mates because he was 'different' from the others? Further, does he react the same way with siblings if he has any? And how does he cope socially in the more structured environment of the classroom as opposed to the playground?

Resilience: Pathways, patterns, and early care giving

The pathways that fairy tale figures and real people tread are not free of bumps and obstacles; adaptation may stumble at different points in development, or it may falter in different areas of development. A resilient figure or person is one who overcomes unfavourable odds like growing up in an impoverished neighbourhood, or who persists despite severe stress (e.g., ill health of a parent), or who recovers from trauma, such as maltreatment. (Kirby & Fraser, 1997). The stories of the Three Little Pigs, the Ugly Duckling, Little Red Riding Hood and Jack and the Beanstalk might all be considered as showing manifestations of resilience. According to Masten and Coatsworth (1998), most definitions of resilience refer to 'competence', which is often understood to mean success in age-appropriate developmental tasks. We need to be aware when resilience judgements and determinations are being made, however, that some tasks can be specific to a group, and what is deemed to be success in one class or culture may be considered negatively in other circumstances (Luthar & Burack, 2000).

Human development research is increasingly demonstrating the significance of attachment and care giving to the scaffolding of self-regulation and cognitive functioning in young children (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). There are complex interactions amongst these systems, which collectively have the capacity to deliver compliance, prosocial behaviour, and personal competence. Fairy tales are typically communicated by a caring adult (parent, early childhood educator, junior primary school teacher) in a warm and supportive environment, and they can be accompanied by music, movement and humour. The tales touch people emotionally and cognitively, and within the cognitive domain there are likely to be developments in language and imagination. Traditional rhymes and tales might be seen then as having an important place in a society's protective processes. This contribution is aside from the valuable lessons about life that the tales themselves can convey. Neile (2006) contends that many of the stories

contain universal themes and each of them can be understood "as a metaphor for human spiritual, emotional and physical maturation" (p. 10).

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