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Matilda the Musical: An Action Research study investigating the potential added value of the arts in children's nursing education.

## **Abstract**

**Background:** Final year children's nursing students evaluated the content of their current course and there was strong evidence they would benefit from supplementary teaching of safeguarding prior to qualifying. The Matilda project was therefore developed to investigate the potential added value of a field trip to the musical theatre show 'Matilda', followed by discussion boards in enabling students to learn about safeguarding children and young people.

**Method:** An action research approach was used, recruiting final year children's nursing students in one university in the South of England. Questionnaires containing both open and closed questions were used to collect data following attendance at the performance and subsequent discussion.

**Results:** Analysis of data collected indicated the use of Arts was a departure from traditional pedagogy which was relished and described by the children's nursing students as an interesting and exciting way of learning. Children's nursing students highlighted how 'seeing' Matilda aided them later on the discussion boards to identify categories of abuse and correlate this with the effects of abuse.

**Conclusion:** Findings from this study concluded that the use of musical theatre and discussion boards are beneficial to both knowledge acquisition and bonding when delivering safeguarding teaching.

**Key words:** Children's nursing education, Art's and Safeguarding

## **Introduction**

Nursing education needs to provide an effective learning environment which includes innovation to develop competent and compassionate practitioners (NMC, 2018). Children's nursing students are a diverse group who all have differing learning styles, learning theories highlight the need to look at how material is delivered to meet the diverse learning needs of groups (UKPSF, 2011). Chan (2012) states that educators need to inspire nursing students in relation to being creative and develop critical thinking skills to enable them to adapt to different problems they may face in practice. This is especially true for the topic of safeguarding children and young people, which is both a legal requirement of qualified nurses and an integral part of contemporary nursing practice.

Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018) clearly states it is everyone's responsibility to safeguard children and young people and ensure that all have the opportunity to develop in a safe environment allowing for optimum life chances for each child and young person. Final year children's nursing students evaluated the content of their current course and there was strong evidence they would benefit from supplementary teaching of safeguarding prior to qualifying. Through corridor discussion it was clear that the students felt they would appreciate an opportunity to try applying their knowledge they had gained as they lacked confidence. Educators need to respond to these types of

concerns and develop innovative teaching methods to close the gaps, meet the students' needs and to boost the student's confidence and knowledge in relation to safeguarding children and young people aiding them to feel prepared as qualified practitioners (Zhu & Engels 2014).

Evidence exists to support the use of arts in children's nurse education (Clark et al, 2018) in order to stimulate the development of creativity and critical thinking (Frei et al, 2010). Shepherd (2012) claimed that more permanent deeper learning will result if students are exposed to sights, sounds and touch which enhance the creation and recall of the experiences. Moreover, Cummings et al (2010) and Price et al (2013) endorsed the value of field visits. However, little was known about the potential added value of musical theatre for third year children's nursing students in terms of knowledge acquisition and skills development.

Therefore, this educational initiative and subsequent moderated discussion boards followed by evaluation, aimed to redress such gaps in knowledge with the view of giving guidance to children's nursing educators for future educational practice.

### **Study aim**

This study aims to explore the potential for the arts to enable children's nursing students to think critically and reflectively regarding issues related to safeguarding children and young people.

### **Study Objectives**

1. To determine whether students can interpret visual stimulus in the form of musical theatre to identify safeguarding concerns for children and young people.
2. To investigate whether the arts can aid students in appraising the wider safeguarding issues for the child and family.
3. To explore the potential added value of discussion boards as a means to critically discuss the impact of family life on the child's development relating to safeguarding.

### **Method**

This study followed the principles of an action research approach. Action research can be used to improve practice or to take action to rectify a problem or concern (Kumar, 2011). Another clear benefit of action research is the involvement of the community. In this instance, children's nursing students, resulting in the student nurses feeling empowered by being involved in attempting to resolve the current identified concerns (Ellis, 2016). The action research cycle was followed and can be seen in Fig 1. The following process was followed as part of this action research:

#### **1. Identification through evaluation of a need for change**

Informal and formal evaluations of the Children's Nursing program revealed the need to evaluate and improve the delivery of safeguarding teaching across both the BSc and PGDip programs. Children's nursing students reported feeling underprepared in relation to applying safeguarding knowledge prior to becoming a registered children's nurse.

## **2. Development of innovation to address the gap**

The intervention was a field trip to see the musical Matilda followed by a small group discussion online. Through the moderated discussion board (by the lead lecturer who attends the performance) students would be able to discuss and critically analyse wider safeguarding issues, critically discuss the impact of family life as well as utilize their knowledge of child development.

- a. Matilda was introduced to the students during their field specific module in the second semester of the third year.
- b. Students were divided into small groups, an average of eleven per group to attend dates of the performance which comprised a mixture of matinees and evening performances spanning over the twelve months of the study.
- c. Each group were accompanied to the theatre by a senior lecturer.
- d. Discussion boards were opened on the day of the trip and remained open for a period of two weeks.

## **3. Evaluation of the innovation**

Ethical clearance was requested and granted through the Centre for Higher Education Research and Practice (CHERP) Research Ethics Committee. As part of this process a questionnaire comprising both a Likert scale and open ended questions was used to evaluate the innovation.

## **4. Analysis of the evaluation allowing for reflection**

Thematic analysis of the questionnaire was carried out by the lead researcher and sort to identify patterns and frequency of information which was then divided into themes and subthemes. This process allowed for reflection on positives, negatives and potential benefits of the innovation.

## **5. Decision to implement innovation and change current teaching**

This process occurred following reflection of the findings of the study.

## **Recruitment and participants**

Final year children's nursing students in a UK higher education institution in the South of England were invited via email by an independent lecturer not known to the students, in an attempt to reduce the potential for students feeling obligated to participate. Purposive sampling ensured that all participants shared characteristics which were essential to answering the objectives of the study which can be seen above (Ritchie et al, 2014).

### **Data collection**

Data was collected using a questionnaire containing ten questions. This was developed by the researcher and included five Likert scale and five open ended questions, due to the time constraints of this research project questionnaires were deemed the most effective method of data collection (Moule and Goodman, 2014). Following the data collection thematic analysis (see Fig 2) of the open ended questions was carried out by the lead researcher. This sought to identify patterns and frequency of information indicated by student participants (Vaismoradi et al, 2013). Sub themes were then identified to allow the researcher to provide overall themes from the respondent's answers. Members of the research team checked the analysis of the data on a regular basis for reliability and validity purposes.

### **Findings**

In total, n=86 final year children's nursing students over a two-year period were offered the opportunity to attend the field visit to Matilda and take part in the group discussion following the visit. All children's nursing students agreed to take part in the field trip however, due to sickness and family emergencies the total number who attended the field trip was n=82 which is 95%. The response rate for the questionnaire was n=48 (59%). All respondents completed the consent page and fully completed the questionnaire with no responses outstanding.

The following findings were generated from the Likert scale, please see table 1.

Question 1: To what extent were you able to relate theories of child development to the story of Matilda.

In total 47 (98%) of children's nursing students responded positively to question one. Half (n=24) the children's nursing students rated the experience as 'excellent', stating that they thought the field trip had given them an prime opportunity to apply knowledge, 48% (n=23) rated it as 'good' and 2% (n=1) of them responded with 'satisfactory'.

Question 2: Following the performance of Matilda how well were you able to utilise your observation skills and identify child related safeguarding issues?

The responses to question two were over positive with 67% (n=32) of students reporting this as excellent and 31% (n=15) rating the response as good. Only 2% (n=1) of students felt that they were only able to relate safeguarding issues satisfactorily.

Question 3: To what extent has the theatre visit and discussion boards allowed you to appraise wider safeguarding issues for the child and family

Interestingly, question three had the same response rates as question two with 67% (n=32) responding that the field trip was excellent in allowing the children's nursing student to appraise the

wider literature around safeguarding, with 31% (n=15) responding with good. Similarly, 2% (n=1) of children's nursing students responded with satisfactory.

Question 4: Overall how would you rate this learning experience?

It is apparent from the responses to question four that 100% (n=48) of the children's nursing students regarded the field trip as a positive learning experience overall.

Question 5: Overall how would you rate the use of the arts in learning and teaching in nurse education?

No children's nursing students responded negatively to this question with a 100% (n=48) response rate across excellent and good.

### **Thematic analysis findings**

The themes derived from the thematic analysis of the open questions were 'something different', 'Developing knowledge' and 'Bringing it all together'. The definitions of each theme are presented in Table 2.

#### **Something different**

On the whole, the concept of the field trip being innovative was a strong theme across a number of responses. Reference was made to the teaching style being 'innovative' and 'outside the box' of usual teaching. There was indication that moving away from PowerPoints and what was seen to be lectures in the classroom was beneficial to the learning process. Students talked of finding the field trips 'stimulating' and it being 'good to get out of the classroom'.

Children's nursing students felt that levels of engagement with the topic were higher. Interestingly, the children's nursing students made links to whether this teaching and learning would have been as effective delivered in the classroom as evidenced in the below quotes.

*"The most beneficial aspect for me is learning in a non-academic environment. In a way this could be seen as learning whilst also having fun"*

*"As a lot of our learning in university is through lectures and seminars, Arts has allowed me to keep engaged and learn things that wouldn't be as interesting if taught in a lecture or seminar"*

The children's nursing students reported finding the experience helped with morale and gave a positive bonding experience with both their peers and lecturers. This was an unexpected but interesting and positive finding.

*"I feel that field trips greatly enhance the relationships for both peers and with lecturers"*

*"...a great team bonding and morale boosting event....what fun"*

#### **Knowledge**

Knowledge as a theme arose from a feeling that the children's nursing students had increased their knowledge or applied existing knowledge by participating in the field trip. It was clear that the character 'Matilda' created a safe way to apply knowledge to assess her needs as she wasn't real. There was a sense that being able to 'see' Matilda helped visually in identifying signs of potential neglect and the consequences on health and development as evidenced in the below quote.

*"The link to safeguarding was great.....you can actually visualise the signs of the abuse, the consequences and also the developmental concerns"*

Children's nursing students also acknowledged in the responses that safeguarding was a difficult topic due to the sensitive nature and at times distressing content. It was described by one student as an "emotional" topic which is relevant to all nursing practice both acute and community.

*"I feel it's useful in difficult topics such as safeguarding as this can be sensitive and difficult to teach"*

Safeguarding knowledge was also acquired through the discussions boards which followed each performance. Children's nursing students considered how others (peers) saw the abuse and enjoyed interacting in an attempt to increase and demonstrate their own safeguarding knowledge. There was very convincing evidence from the responses that the children's nursing students were able to identify an appropriate category of abuse for Matilda and also explain/demonstrate their own knowledge which in turn increased confidence at a time when it was low due to being on the cusp of qualifying.

*"Neglect and bullying were evident for Matilda"*

*"Learning about the long term effects of abuse"*

*"...found a deeper understanding of safeguarding which was good as we are about to qualify"*

### **Bringing it all together**

Reflection was an identified sub theme which was closely linked to the post theatre discussion, which occurred directly following the performance after the field trip., and the discussion boards. Evidently, reflection allowed the children's nursing students to see Matilda differently. Reflections took place in two formats - formal and informal. The latter was evidenced by the importance given to conversation with peers and the lecturer following the performance. This interaction was potentially the catalyst for the reflective process. When asked what learning had taken place one student responded:

*"After the performance, my peers and I had discussions alongside the lecturer.....also on study space we reflected on the concept of neglect"*

*"...made a short reflection after the performance which allowed me to see Matilda/the production differently"*

More formal reflection took place via the interactive nature of the discussion boards, children's nursing students report that they enjoyed sharing information and seeing others viewpoints.

*"Seeing other people's view points and applications to learning"*

Reflection was described as a safe activity and the discussion boards were seen as a safe way in which to reflect. Evidently this links to the theme of developing and applying safeguarding knowledge as this highlighted that the children's nursing students felt more comfortable to discuss as Matilda was not a real child or young person. Breathing space was thus created allowing the students to reflect and also debate on the best course of action for Matilda which can be seen below.

*"Safe place to voice our feelings"*

*"...how serious and issue neglect is.....safe place in the discussion boards"*

## **Discussion**

Current literature suggests that nursing students from all fields of nursing benefit in a positive way to the use of the arts as part of education (Arvekle, 2015). Similarly children's nursing students in this study expressed benefit of the use of a visual stimulus and saw profit in this in relation to their learning. Arguably, the children's nursing students highlighted how 'seeing' Matilda aided them later to identify categories of abuse and correlate this with the effects of abuse on a child or young person's development on the discussion boards. In addition this supported findings from earlier work where McKie (2007) also purported findings relating to visual aids increasing an empathy skill. This was encouraging as there is strong evidence building supporting the use of the arts in nurse education. Responses indicated that the use of arts was a break away from traditional pedagogy which was relished and described by the children's nursing students as an interesting and exciting way of learning. Development of teaching innovation is not a new concept within nurse education with Quinn (2013) highlighting the need for academics to move away from more traditional pedagogy and embrace innovative techniques for delivering curriculum content. Through embracing innovation the Matilda project used 'visually' stimulating musical theatre to foster knowledge acquisition and application in relation to safeguarding.

Stimulating the imagination of the nursing students through the use of innovation has been previously discussed by Jack (2015) who concluded that this would help to equip the student nurses for the demands of current practice. Findings from this study mirrored this previous research, as the students expressed that they valued the innovative nature of the teaching method and appreciated the academics developing an arts based project to develop safeguarding teaching. When asked to rate the learning experience of 'Matilda' and the use of the arts in nurse education, the responses were positive with no negative responses. An overall positive response is encouraging due to the difficult nature of teaching safeguarding. It is evident from the findings of this study that the use of the arts in the form of musical theatre helped to break down barriers for teaching a difficult topic such as safeguarding. Within the standards for nurse education (NMC, 2018b) the theme of safeguarding is a strong and prominent and thus educators will continue to need to develop interesting and innovative ways to deliver this element of the curriculum.

Utilising reflection to foster deeper learning has been cited in many studies (Holmes et al, 2015). Discussion boards and their interactive nature appears to have developed the children's nursing student's reflective process. Children's nursing students in this study described the use of the discussion boards in a positive manner and saw benefit in the use, additionally Matilda not being 'real' seemed to aid in the reflection as there was no urgency to make a plan of care as there would be in practice.



## Conclusion

Reflection is a crucial part of the action research cycle and as such has concluded, from the findings from this study, that the use of musical theatre and discussion boards are beneficial to both knowledge acquisition and bonding when delivering safeguarding teaching. The importance of these findings are that there is a prompt for academics to be critical of their own practice and there is a need to evaluate current teaching and learning practices. This study has highlighted that children's nursing students valued the use of the Art's in their teaching and learning. For future practice the teaching team will consider a trial of a change from the discussion boards to a face to face reflective session where students can use group work to make a plan for Matilda. Additionally as a result of the success of this teaching intervention the next steps would be to include a multidisciplinary element to the teaching thereby including other professionals who feature in safeguarding practice for example social worker and teachers. This strategy would potentially strengthen this teaching method. Overall children's nursing students valued the pedagogical approach of a field trip followed by discussion boards as an approach to delivering safeguarding training. Also of note, the children's nursing students had the ability to link this to current practice including relevant literature, policy and procedures for safeguarding children and young people.

In conclusion 'Matilda' was deemed by the children's nursing students to be fun, innovative and enjoyable.

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Fig 1



(McNiff and Whitehead, 2010)

Fig 2

Phase	Process	Result
1	Familiarise with the data, read and re read the responses.	Noting down any initial ideas and thoughts.
2	Generation of initial codes across the entire data set.	List of codes relating to how the responses answer the research question.
3	Collating codes into groups and beginning to identify themes.	Initial themes apparent.
4	Reviewing themes whilst considering codes from entire data set.	Generation of actual themes with clear definition of each theme.
5	Collating information and presenting findings.	Detailed findings presented including extracts from the raw data.

Table 1: Depicting the number of responses to Likert scale

Question Number	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Poor	Very poor
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<b>1</b>	24	23	1		
<b>2</b>	32	15	1		
<b>3</b>	32	15	1		
<b>4</b>	48				
<b>5</b>	48				

Table 2

Theme	Definition
Something different	This analytically derived theme related to students perceptions that attending 'Matilda' was new, stimulating, innovative and exciting in comparison as they saw it to other frequently used teaching strategies. Patterns across the data set were identified to support the notion that part of the appeal of 'Matilda' was that it was something different; it was memorable and was a clear move away from more traditional pedagogy and learning styles.
Developing knowledge	This theme related to the generation of knowledge and the children's nursing students views that the musical theatre enhanced their knowledge regarding safeguarding. The knowledge acquisition, as students saw it took 2 forms, those being both application of knowledge already held as well as the development of new knowledge. The knowledge identified as students saw it had direct implications for their practice caring for children and young people by enabling them to link 'Matilda' to current safeguarding policy and guidelines.
Bringing it all together	Bringing it all together was the third theme and brought together the overall impact of 'Matilda' on their learning and practice. The use of the discussions boards was seen as crucial in 'Bringing it all together' as it helped them to learn with and from each other and enabled the application of learning to their practice. Students felt this was a highlight learning opportunity of their course and also offered suggestions about potential improvements for future similar field trips. The perception of the students was that these improvements would enable them to draw their learning together in an even more memorable and effective way.