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Scrapbooking: an application of narrative therapy

Jenny Dougea *

* School Guidance Officer, Australia

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Abstract

This paper outlines an application of narrative therapy to counselling programs with children between ages 9 and 12 years. It combines the principles of narrative therapy with the industry of scrapbooking to provide children with an enjoyable process that enables them to find a new perspective for some of life’s difficulties. In essence it helps a child to externalize problems and eventually regain some optimism for the future. It has been particularly helpful for children with physical disabilities, limiting medical conditions and emotional-behavioural difficulties stemming from known trauma or long-term hardship.

Keywords: Narrative, therapy, children, scrap-booking.

1. Introduction: Principles of narrative therapy

Narrative therapy allows the client to lead a process of story telling where he or she is the main character and significant aspects of his or her life are the plot. Hoffman suggests that we all have stories which are unique because of our perspectives of events, people and interactions in our histories (Hoffman, 1993, as cited in Phips and Vorster, 2009). Geetz refers to “the process of helping someone to name, describe, and therefore possess new knowledge” (Beels, 2009, p5) about their circumstances and history.

Problems are seen as part of the client’s story (Beels, 2009). Narrative therapy allows the client to place emphasis or added detail on to those areas that are considered important. Interestingly, children referred for counselling often have difficulty separating their identities from their problems. They may even name themselves by one of their difficulties: “I am a cerebral palsy kid”; “I am a foster kid”.

In the story telling process, problems are not seen as something needing to be repaired by the counsellor, but as a part of the picture. The process of re-authoring a story enables the client to externalize the problem (White, 1995). Beels considers that counsellors need to focus on questions that bring out an “inventiveness” in the client (Beels, 2009). This was consistent with White and Epston’s notion that we needed to “assist people …to find their own way to overcome difficulty in life” (Beels, 2009). Essentially, we need to be alert for sub-plots, embellishments and anecdotes that will enable us to identify and use our clients’ strengths as we help them to re-author their stories without the dominance of their problems. The change process in narrative therapy involves helping clients
deconstruct and challenge their dominant stories and create more empowering narratives about their lives (M. White, 2000; White & Epston, 1990).

2. Application with children

Narrative therapy has evolved into a wide variety of practices. Practitioners use puppetry, theatre, cartooning, time-lines and a variety of play practices to assist young children to tell and embellish their stories. The scrapbooking process described on this occasion is an innovation which has been used with children in a few primary school in Australia.

Whole-of-life stories are written to foster a life span perspective, aiming to give children relief from being “stuck” in the moment of their present or past dilemmas. Embedding significant events in a whole of life story can assist children to see that they are separate entities from their difficult circumstances (externalizing). It can help children see that critical events of their past or present may not remain overwhelming or a permanent part of their being. It allows children to see that they may be a child with a rich life, temporarily affected by difficult circumstances. It helps them to see that they are separate from these difficult circumstances. It helps them to realize that their past sadness is not who they are. Revisions, reframing statements, and the inclusion of positive events across their lifespan assist with an overall re-authoring that extends perspective.

The handicraft element of scrap-booking is an enjoyable and soothing activity which can help to ease children through disclosures of personal sadness and it allows them to relive and embellish happier memories. Busy hands assist the child to feel that the story is the focus, not the storyteller at that moment.

3. Clients

This process was chosen for children who were referred for support through their schools. They had been referred because they presented with prolonged or disabling sadness in response to personal circumstances. Each child seemed to see himself as overwhelmed by his problem and seemed to wear the problem as a major part of his identity. Low self-esteem was common to all client children.

4. Method

4.1 Setting the scene

Scrap-booking programs were all individual. Each child was familiar with the Guidance Officer from at least one previous contact and from her visibility in the school setting. In the initial session of a scrapbooking program, each child was offered the choice of making a personal scrap book or not. The presence of a variety of scrap books, boxes of ribbons, trim, miniature envelopes, glitter pens, marker pens and other attractive materials may have been enticing in themselves, however every child chose to participate and no child changed his mind or wanted to curtail the program. Children were made aware that they could choose whether their scrapbook would become something to share or something to remain private. (Interestingly, all chose to make a private scrapbook initially, however all eventually wanted to share their scrapbooks. This was perhaps a reflection of the children’s reframing and resultant change to self perception as their stories progressed.)

4.2 Selecting categories

Each child was then asked to list some important ideas telling who he was and what was important to him. Initial responses usually included descriptions of problems. When asked to tell other ideas about themselves, children usually responded with categories like their age, physical characteristics and family circumstances, favourite holidays, likes and dislikes and milestone events. More open-ended questioning elicited ideas that may have included worries or fears, dreams and hopes. Each of these separate ideas was written on a separate post-it note, for the child to remove, amend or re-order. Sometime children ordered by importance, sometimes by chronological order. Children were encouraged to bring in photos or artefacts that they would like included, or that matched the ideas or categories selected.
4.3. Expanding the story

The first step of the story telling began with the child choosing a post-it note as a focal point. The children expanded on the idea noted briefly on the post-it. Each idea was gently expanded or shortened a little, sometimes one idea per week, sometimes several. Some ideas needed more than a week or took many revisions at the start of subsequent weeks. When dislikes and fears were discussed, the cause of each child’s sadness always arose. No child left their difficult issues unmentioned. Sometimes other ideas were added.

Once the story-telling began, the children spoke while the Guidance Officer recorded their story electronically. Details were read back and they sometimes made amendments. At the end of each session the draft was saved as Week 1, Week 2 etc. Each session began with a re-reading of the story so far. Children were asked if they were happy with it or wanted to change something. This prompted some re-framing as children adjusted the semantics of their expressions.

First drafts each week often included copious details, seemingly good and bad, mundane and significant. The children led the process so that nothing was regarded as unfit for inclusion. The children decided the amount of detail included. For the first two weeks, the handicraft aspect was limited to the children working on borders or title pages. No story detail was entered in the actual scrapbook but the children were engaged in handicraft activity. Busy hands seemed to enable verbal expression. When discussing difficult issues, children were given the choice of recording their concerns in code on a separate slip of paper that would be stored in a miniature envelop in the scrapbook. (Such envelopes are readily available in the craft departments of retail stores.) For example, one child initially narrated graphic details about home life. In subsequent weeks he changed that notion to saying that his parents loved him but weren’t doing too well at the moment. An angry description of parent’s behaviour was eventually written in code and stored in an envelope in the scrapbook, but then a revised version was available in the text of his story visible to all readers. Whenever that child came to that phase of his story in subsequent readings, he would grin as if he were sharing a secret with the Guidance Officer. While not belittling the hurt that events had caused him, he had somehow found a way to talk about the events in two different methods: one private and one public. His private coded message used rich language to describe his feelings about issues at home. His public version was a more distanced and courteous expression of his understanding of a difficult relationship.

Intense moments are inevitable in this process when dealing with deeper hurts or concerns. However, there is relief between intense moments. At the end of a session on a sad issue, children would choose an enjoyable category for the following week; family photos, merit certificates, a memorable school camp, a family reunion picnic. Although an extended period was needed for some children, most had a story completed in some form after 4-6 weeks of the program.

In the remaining weeks of the program, children revised sections ready to be mounted in their scrap books. Different sections were trimmed and pasted into separate pages. By this stage children had included significantly more positive events than traumatic events so the handiwork is either good fun because it tells of happy events, or good fun because it has secreted some hidden information, or calmly pensive as children find a comfortable place to put their sadness into their life stories. All scrapbooks had closing pages that mentioned plans and hopes for the future. This is an area where the Guidance Officer sometimes needed to ask questions that could excite the child’s imagination particularly for children who had previously seen their fates as determined by history, disability or difficult circumstances. Most children demonstrated a new awareness of possible future directions, at some point during the process. Some even stated goals.

5. Results

A formal measurement instrument for children’s perception of their circumstances prior to and following the program has not been devised. Using qualitative observation of the outcomes, the available data are the children’s self reporting and parent/carer and teacher reporting. All have observed changes in the children’s understanding and response to their previous issues. All reported increased optimism. Parents and carers reported that moments of sadness, guilt or introspection appeared sometimes but these were seen as transient affects from which they recovered easily. Children themselves reported enjoying the process and being proud to share their stories.
6. Conclusion

Scrap-booking as a form of narrative therapy has been used with a small number of primary school age students in suburban schools in one state in Australia. Child, parent/carer and teacher reports have been positive that children’s mood and self esteem seem to have been enhanced since the intervention. It is thought that the process has assisted to help externalize problems being faced by the students. Future applications and data collection would be helpful to provide an evidence base for this method. Whilst it would be desirable to devise a measure of the child’s ability to generalize the gains of the scrap-booking program to future problems, the complexity of variables would make such a design a challenge. The transient role of school counsellors in students’ lives also contributes to this challenge.

References