A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO SCHOOL COUNSELLING

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ABSTRACT *An approach to the work of a school counsellor which is informed strongly by narrative ideas about counselling offers some distinctive ways of thinking about practice as well as some distinctive and effective practices. With foundations in social constructionist thinking the narrative approach allows counsellors to conceptualise the issues that arise in young people's lives in terms of the discourses or stories that give shape to their lives. This article will demonstrate how this perspective can be translated into some ways of talking in school contexts that avoid internalising deficits in young people and maximise the opportunities for developing counterplots to the dominant stories that young people are oppressed by.*

INTRODUCTION

A narrative approach to school counselling is as much about a set of practices that embody a different philosophy as it is about any techniques or skills of counselling. This philosophy has implications not only for counselling method but also for the way in which school counsellors make sense of educational and schooling practices in general. The ideas that inform the narrative approach can be read as keys for making sense of the influences on the conversations that the school counsellor role in a school community induces. The narrative philosophy offers the counsellor both tools with which to make sense of how students' problems have emerged and ways to think about the influences of the context on themselves. In this paper we want to introduce some narrative ideas and then demonstrate their application in a school setting.

In the background of the narrative approach to school counselling lie the ideas that have given shape to general theories of social constructionist thought (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Davies, 1991; Davies & Harre, 1990; Fairclough, 1992; Gergen, 1985) and more specific narrative approaches to therapy (Epston & White, 1989; White, 1989, 1992, 1995). Rather than elaborate these ideas in general here, we shall refer to them in relation to the context of which we are speaking, the work of a school counsellor. We believe that social constructionist ideas lead the school counsellor into listening carefully to the stories that circulate in the school context. These stories can be understood from a social constructionist perspective to lay down patterns of relating and then offer people limited chances to take up positions within such relations. In this way school stories give shape to the feelings, roles, values, ways of thinking, moral judgments, hopes and aspirations that people in school communities experience. As stories, or more precisely, discourses, they both operate on, as much as they are produced by the consciousness of the people amongst whom they circulate. They are   all

embedded in the language and practices of schooling as well as in the wider discourses that circulate in the communities in which schools exist. This in brief is a starting point for a social constructionist analysis of what happens in schools.

The narrative task of the counsellor and the client, when they meet together in a school context, might be to deconstruct the stories that are giving shape to the client's experience, in order to understand how the client's problems have arisen. By deconstruction here we mean unpacking the knowledges and assumptions that have been exerting a shaping influence, in the process upending the usual privilege given to dominant knowledges that inhere in everyday practices. Michael White (1991) talks about deconstruction as a process of subverting:

> ...taken for granted realities and practices; those so-called 'truths' that are split off from the conditions and the context of their production, those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices, and those familiar practices of self and of relationship that are subjugating of persons' lives (p.6).

In order to achieve this deconstructive purpose, the school counsellor and the client might together trace the history or genealogy of the problem that has brought the person to the counsellor. They might locate the problem in a dominant story and then investigate the influence of this dominant story on the person's experience and in his/her thinking about herself/himself. In this process we would hope that some distance might be established between the dominant story, or discourse, and the person on whom it is having some problematic effects. From there, the narrative school counsellor might work with the person and also with the school context to identify and to begin to develop alternative stories that run as a counterplot to the dominant story.

A CASE EXAMPLE

In order to demonstrate these practices in action let us examine a case example from a New Zealand secondary school. As the story unfolds we shall comment on how it illuminates a narrative understanding of school contexts and problems that secondary school students bring to counsellors. We shall also show how a narrative counsellor might go about responding to such problems in distinctive ways.

> "I'm really worried about Sam - he's so shut off from everyone. I wish he'd come and see a counsellor."

This statement over a cup of coffee in the staffroom had a familiar ring to it. Teachers had been concerned about Sam ever since he arrived at the school three years ago. He appeared isolated, depressed and unhappy. Always dressed in black, he walked the corridors and sat in class with his long hair covering his face, unwilling to make eye contact with anyone. In his second year at the school he had teamed up with another student and together they sent out strong signals that they did not want anything to do with other people. Other students saw them as "heavy metallers" and there was concern about the blackness of their talk.

Some teachers had made an effort to connect with Sam and his friend but had not seemed to succeed. Small disciplinary incidents had resulted in Sam's mother coming to talk to his year-level deans, but little hope had been generated for the possibility of things being different for Sam. The concern continued. Class teachers and deans saw Sam as an "at-risk" student and felt they had tried everything they knew to "break through" to him without success. Frustration and growing concern was beginning to dominate every occasion on which his name was mentioned.

Several teachers had made openings for Sam to come for counselling. Year level deans and classroom teachers had made suggestions about counselling and as counsellor I (Aileen) had sent him letters of invitation. He had rejected all approaches. Then early in his fourth year at the school he walked into the counselling area and asked to use my phone. After he had finished, I chatted with him about how his year was going and one of his replies prompted me to say that it sounded like he wanted to talk some more about what was going on for him. He agreed with a sigh of relief.

Commentary

Let us pause for a minute and consider the stories that have been active in the process by which Sam has been referred to counselling.

First there are discourses that define the role of teachers and schools in society. These stories have prompted teachers, out of professional concern, to respond to Sam's unhappiness and to feel a responsibility to take an action like referral to counselling. Increasing awareness among teachers of the incidence of abuse in families or the ways in which stresses from the home environment can influence classroom behaviour might be expected to have fuelled such concern. However for Sam, the concern has not been welcome at first. Perhaps the position of being the object of teacher concern has been read by him in a way that attaches to him some labels that he does not want to incorporate in his thinking about himself.

Sam has been described by teachers who know him as "bright." From a social constructionist perspective, this description calls into play the kind of "self" that might be expected of a 'bright' person. In school he might be expected to be successful and happy. In the background of such statements lie the powerful educational discourses about academic ability and intelligence that have been so dominant in twentieth century education. They have been tied closely to the practices of testing and examination, which in Foucault's (1980) terms we might expect to serve a disciplinary function in the positive sense of producing templates for identity and positions within relations .

According to our reading of Foucault, the establishment of statistical norms with its resultant social practices of treating those outside the standard deviations as "deviant" not just in a statistical but also often in a moral sense produces daily habits of conversation in school staffrooms. Students are talked about as "bright", "average" or "slow". These qualities are ascribed as essential aspects of a person's being, on the assumption that they speak of stable truth about the person, regardless of context.

That Sam shows signs of the kind of behaviour (rebellious and unhappy) ˙ that fits with a rejection of what a bright student should be like is troubling for concerned teachers. He becomes thought of as 'at-risk'. Because he is bright, there might be greater hope that he might be able to overcome problems in his life more easily than someone considered slow. Through this window a person who does not fit with the identity that the discourse seems to offer them easily becomes thought of as suffering from some internal disturbance. Especially when teachers are feeling frustrated in their efforts to deal with the student, the invitations are strong to relieve frustration by locating difficulties with students in internal processes in the student. Labelling can provide a briefly satisfying respite for the teacher but it also results in a sense of defeat and conversations that have a heavy air about them.

Once students are ascribed some internal disturbance they may often then become subject to a variety of educational procedures to correct the deviation from the norm. Some of these may be disciplinary in a top-down sovereign sense and others may involve referral to counselling to "fix" the problem. When students are talked about as if they are bits of machinery which have either been put together "badly" or have developed "faults", then the school counsellor becomes expected to have some magical mechanical knowledge to put things right.

We believe it is useful to think of counselling in schools in the light of this kind of analysis. As Fairclough (1992) has pointed out counselling may be looked at as an ambiguous activity. Sometimes in a community it may be serving the role of maintaining hegemonic control of those who are socially privileged and sometimes it may be thought of as liberatory, working to ameliorate or challenge or transform the effects of hegemonic control in people's lives. Of necessity it need not be either. From our social constructionist standpoint, it is the context that makes the difference. This distinction is crucial to a narrative approach to counselling. School counsellors can easily find themselves, despite intentions to the contrary, practising in ways that collude with hegemonic control of people or they can, through careful and reflexive analysis, adopt positions which run counter to dominant oppressive realities in young people's lives. However we are of course simplifying matters here to make a point. In the specific situations that school counsellors encounter there are often conflicting discourses at work and it is not at all easy to determine whether one is acting in liberatory or hegemonic ways.

When counselling serves the hegemonic purpose it is commonly used unquestioningly to help "fix" problems which are assumed to originate from some internal problematic traits in the student's character or thinking, rather than to address problematic traits in the stories which dominate the social context. Fixing the problem becomes constructed in terms of fixing the psychological faults or deficits in the person and counselling becomes thought of as the application of expert knowledge to this end.

A narrative approach to counselling would lead us as counsellors to seek to avoid implication in hegemonic processes. Part of this means avoiding labels or ways of speaking which internalise blame for the problems which individuals face.

"The Wall"

When Sam returned for his first appointment, I was curious about what had brought him to counselling. He answered by talking about his fears of being "blocked off" from other people. A turning point had come for him at the end of his third year at high school when he had begun his first serious relationship with a girl (Annie). What he feared was that he was so shut off from others that he was going to "stuff up" the relationship and he desperately wanted it to work. I began to ask questions around Sam's metaphor of being "blocked off", with the thought that this could provide a way of having an externalising conversation around what he saw as the problem. "Is feeling 'blocked off' a bit like having a wall around you?" I asked.

Sam became enthusiastic with this description which fitted closely with his sense of isolation. I went on to ask if this was a solid Wall or were any blocks missing. Had he taken any down or had anyone managed to mount an outside attack? His girlfriend was the first to make a breakthrough, Sam said. As he described her persistence, we wondered if she'd made a study of attacking medieval castles as she seemed highly skilled, although we noted that Sam had weakened a few blocks to give her a hand. As we talked in this way, Sam's voice grew in energy and he increasingly talked about "I" and "the Wall" as two different things.

So I asked if he was interested in breaking bits of it down slowly. He was, and I made it clear that he was in charge of the demolition job and therefore he directed the speed of the job. As breaking down a wall often revealed some unexpected things behind the Wall we thought it a good idea if Sam call rest times. I wanted to make it clear that Sam was in charge of the pace, not me. I am aware through past experience that one of the dangers of counselling is that the counsellor's hope and keenness to witness the development of alternative stories can rush on ahead of the student's hope and commitment to those alternatives. We also talked about how it might be for him to experience feelings the Wall had kept out, and that sometimes this could be painful. A useful starting place might be to look at the resources Sam had to build up his strength for the demolition job.

Externalising the problem

I am deliberately using here a distinctive way of talking about what the person is finding problematic. "Externalising" language (White & Epston, 1989; White 1992) is used to refer to the problem issue - "The Wall." It has been objectified and consistently talked about as something outside of the person rather than linked with some internal dynamic inside Sam. This allows the counsellor and the client to explore its relationship with Sam and with other people and experiences.

I ended this first session by asking Sam what might have happened to the Wall during our conversation as it seemed that there hadn't been too much of the Wall around while we were talking and I wondered how he had been able to do this. This seemed to get Sam thinking that the Wall hadn't been very present and that maybe it was not as strong as he'd thought. This exchange was a first step in the building of a counterplot, or alternative story, to the story of the Wall.

Sam and I agreed that we would meet for four sessions, then review how things were going. At our next meeting I was interested in how the Wall had got there, and asked questions about its history. As Sam talked about his childhood and the beginnings of the Wall we came to see its useful purpose. Sam had been severely abused in his childhood and this combined with other trauma had left him feeling alone and confused. What Sam could now see was that in order to survive he had cut himself off from others so that he couldn't get hurt. We looked at the different ways children and adolescents cope in such situations and he decided that he could well have chosen crime or drugs. The Wall had been useful in protecting him from other harmful things. It had kept him safe.

In this way the externalising language is continued and the counsellor works to extend the metaphor, which starts to serve a deconstructive purpose. It detaches the person from the problem and opens up a gap from which the person can look at the problem and its history in ways that disrupt the close alliance between the problem issue and the identity of the person. From this one metaphor the approach is broadened so that externalising thinking is developed instead of internalising thinking about aspects of personality. Sam is not encouraged to think of himself as a "blocked off" person or as a disturbed personality but as a person whom "The Wall" has been oppressing. In Sam's case the oppression is linked up with a story of abuse. The counsellor develops this idea by asking a series of questions that trace the effects of the abuse and of "The Wall" on Sam.

The abuse is named in a way that makes explicit the power relations involved in its occurrence. Its isolating effects on his life are named. It is not euphemised or interpreted by the counsellor in terms of intra-personal dynamics or located in a functionalist view of family dynamics. The externalising language also defuses the sense of blame that might often be swallowed by children in the process of experiencing abusive circumstances and which might turn up later in life as guilt.

Many people experience much relief from this way of talking which locates problems outside of "self". They feel respected and valued and they can start to imagine a life without the problem. Sam could start to envisage life without "The Wall". Sam's awareness of the fact that the Wall was oppressing him was growing. He had had enough of it. I asked if coming to see me was a bit like beginning to muster his forces against the Wall. Sam replied that it was, as he had got glimpses through the gaps in the Wall of how it might be without the Wall. Moreover, life behind the Wall was now a life where depression was his only friend and he was getting a glimpse in his relationship with Annie of other preferred ways of being.

Building an alternative story

Annie came with Sam to our next meeting. We began to build upon the ways in which his relationship with her offered him an alternative story of himself. She was able to widen the audience of those who were beginning to experience Sam for the first time. Other students were also beginning to notice Sam's smile and conversations. Teachers were telling me that they had noticed a change. These different impressions of Sam became both a source of strength for a new story about Sam and a consequence of it.

Of course there were also times when the responses from a fellow student made Sam question whether life behind the Wall wasn't easier. Building an alternative story is not necessarily a quick or simple process and my response was to describe these times as 'rest times' or 'time out' acknowledging that the Wall was built for a protective purpose and it still might be needed for a while. Sam said that these descriptions were helpful.

These exchanges are examples of the beginning stages of the next steps in a narrative approach to counselling. The narrative school counsellor is always on the lookout for (and indeed actively asks questions to discover) the chinks in the armour of the problem, the times when the dominant story is disrupted, the often overlooked minor victories over the problem. There will always be examples of subversion , even briefly, of its oppression, or events that stand outside of the problematic history, the times when the person acted with a sense of agency in the social conditions of their own lives. Michael White (1992) calls these moments "unique outcomes", because they would not be predicted by the powerful presence of the problem in a person's life and yet they are always present.

Despite the abuse and the isolating effects of the Wall in Sam's life, he had managed to allow himself some opportunities for relationship. He had come to see a counsellor. He had not allowed himself to be taken over by unhappiness all the time. Gradually, piece by piece, a new story of himself was built, anchored in a set of events that did not fit with the influence of the Wall in his life. This was a story of protest against oppression, of breaking the bonds of isolation. Part of developing this new story included involving a clinical psychologist outside of the school who continued to work with Sam for several months over the effects of the abuse in his life. Sam accepted this involvement "as long as he doesn't tell me I'm mad." He had grown to appreciate the way of talking that located the problem as outside of himself.

A SECOND CASE EXAMPLE

Another example from a school context serves to underline aspects of the narrative counselling process. Sally had made an appointment with me (Aileen) on the suggestion of the school nurse because she had been getting a number of migraine headaches. In our first session she described how she was scared that she might end up like her mother who had a history of depression. Sally herself was experiencing "really down times" and described herself as depressed.

We explored how long the "down times" had been around, when they came and how long they lasted. The down times were having quite an effect on Sally's life at school as her friends thought her moody and tended to avoid her if she seemed in a down mood. In response to my calling these times "the downs", Sally seized on the metaphor saying that "the downs" were like uninvited guests who gatecrashed her "place", took over and then left, leaving her to clean up the mess. Not surprisingly the headaches tended to accompany the downs. What she wanted to do, was to have the downs over on an invitation only basis so that she could be sad when she wanted to. She left our first meeting to watch for warning signs that the downs were going to gate-crash and to watch for any times when she was able to shut the door on them.

Again we have externalised the problem issue and developed a metaphor which locates it as an oppressive force operating from outside her. This is an example of how the externalized issue may also be anthropomorphized by a school counsellor working in a narrative way. In the way we talked about it, we gave the problem issue a life of its own and personal characteristics, such as the ability to act strategically and play tricks. Our language could become quite playful and creative, although the purpose was quite serious. Our aim was again to split off the person from a close identification with the problem, thereby opening up space for new identifications to develop.

Sally reported a week later that the downs had gate-crashed only once because she had discovered some of their tricks and had been able to outwit them. She found that her main way of outwitting the downs was by talking to people and she had been spending more time around friends rather than walking off by herself (which was what she had been doing when the downs were around).

Discovering agency

Like Sam, Sally discovered some agency (Davies, 1991) against the problem in the school setting. The possibilities for personal agency are of course crucial to an understanding of what counselling can contribute to people's lives. From a social constructionist perspective we think that personal agency is a little more constrained than conventional humanistic notions of the individual would have it but a different kind of agency can still exist. Bronwyn Davies (1991) articulates it as:

> ... a sense of oneself as one who can go beyond the given meanings in any one discourse, and forge something new, through a combination of previously unrelated discourses, through the invention of words and concepts which capture a shift in consciousness that is beginning to occur or through imagining not what is, but what might be (p.51).

In this spirit Sally and I (Aileen) were then able to look at how she might use the knowledge about how to out-trick the downs at school and apply it in areas of her life outside of school. Sally went on to discover several things about herself which helped her control the downs' gatecrashing. There was more to our counselling work than this, as other family issues were impacting on Sally's life, but her enjoyment in outwitting the downs allowed her a sense of agency against the problem without seeing herself as a depressed person. This perspective also gave her another way of looking at other issues in her life.

It was in the discovery of these events that Sally realised what the dominant story of "the downs" had not allowed her to see, that she already had much of the knowledge she needed to overcome the effects of the downs. This knowledge was not told to her by an expert counsellor drawing on training in scientific knowledge. It was drawn from her by a naively curious questioning style that sought to empower her through re-storying aspects of her own experience that she previously had not selected out for attention. She was then asked to speculate on how she had achieved these successes and to describe the qualities or self-

concepts that might fit with this alternative story. In this way a different account of self starts to develop within her.

WIDENING THE AUDIENCE

Like Sam, Sally has, in the process of finding a way to defeat the downs, stumbled across an audience to her new sense of herself - her friends. For a narrative counsellor this is important. From the social constructionist perspective we would expect that problem issues faced by individuals are connected to discourses circulating in the language communities in which people live (Sampson, 1993). Therefore the development of alternative stories to those in which the problem has its life need also to become located in communities of people.

The school is obviously a useful resource in this respect. Just as school can be a place where stories that oppress people can exert influence, it is also simultaneously a place where alternative stories of resistance to oppression can exist and flourish. For school counsellors and those who seek their help the school is a readymade community of potential audiences to the new story. It is a place where the public recognition of competence and personal worth can be used to undermine the private experience of pain and isolation.

Overcoming the sense of professional deficit

But curiously school counselling has not always seen itself as advantaged in this regard. The narrative approach to counselling has its roots in the family therapy literature. In published writing about school counselling, there has been a question mark over the applicability of family therapy knowledge in the school context. While there has been considerable enthusiasm in the school counselling literature for application of family therapy ideas in schools (e.g. Fine & Holt, 1983; Framo, 1981; Golden, 1986), there has also been a tone of considerable caution and deference towards the "real" family therapists who presumably work in agencies elsewhere. School counsellors, it has been claimed, do not have the time (Foster, 1984; Golden, 1983, 1986; Young, 1979) or the training (Foster, 1984; Golden, 1986; Willcoxon and Comas, 1987) to work with families. Or, it has been claimed, they do not have the detachment necessary from the school system to avoid being entrapped in the workings of the school system (Fine & Holt, 1983; Foster, 1984).

But we would argue that these limitations have increasingly been shown to be conceptually redundant the more the family therapy literature has moved away from the systems metaphor and towards the narrative or text analogy (Pare, 1995). The issue of time constraints seems related to the dated assumption that the use of family therapy understandings can only be employed in relation to a meeting of whole families.

Rather than a primary concern with the workings of family systems, the narrative approach trafficks in the meanings that are made by people of the problems they face in life. And these meanings are linked to more than the stories that circulate within a particular family. The family's stories are viewed as connected to social oppressions and language patterns that have currency in a community. For young people, the experiences that shape their lives are often powerfully defined within the school community as well as in the family. This

emphasis does not privilege the selection of the family as the therapeutic unit of choice above all others. It does encourage us to think in terms of the community and relational context with which it might be most productive to work. That might just as profitably be a section of the school community as much as the family.

And if the value of neutrality is eschewed (see White, 1994) then the position of the school counsellor within the school system begins to look like a position of advantage. After all problematic issues in students' lives often cross over the boundaries between the institutions of the family and the school. School counsellors need no longer sell themselves short professionally. They are ideally placed to maintain an interest in what happens in both of these crucibles where young people's lives are forged. Moreover at the University of Waikato, we have shown that it is possible to mount a whole counsellor education programme, not just for family counsellors, but also for school counsellors, around a central concern with a narrative approach (Monk & Drewery, 1994).

WORKING WITH THE SCHOOL CONTEXT RATHER THAN JUST WITH THE INDIVIDUAL

In order to look at how school counsellors can apply the family therapy ideas about working with family contexts to working with the wider contexts of school communities let us examine some examples. In a school where I (John) was working, I had gradually become concerned about the negative and defeated tones that I heard even senior and experienced teachers using when it came to dealing with problems of truancy. This seemed to be echoed in the voices I was hearing from the young people who were the objects of the concern.

> When I am at school for three weeks nobody notices or says anything to me. But the minute I take a day off they talk to me like I'm always away.

It seemed to me that the stories that were being told about this issue in the school all ended with a note of hopelessness. I was finding myself being dragged into this hopelessness and had to remind myself that truancy was not a malaise, it was not an illness that took hold of people, it was not an essential feature of anyone's character. Rather, I reasoned, it was a construct of schooling. The word only made sense in a school context. Perhaps it was worth wondering about the usefulness of the stories that everyone was telling about truancy. Was finding the motivation to come to school really that hard? Was someone who hadn't come to school for a couple of weeks really to be written off as ineducable? Were there any restraints in the discourse of the school that were preventing people from dealing effectively with the issue? My hunch was that the problem had assumed huge proportions in the consciousness of both staff and students. Teachers had become convinced that there was little you could do when someone had gone down the truancy road and students who had headed down that road had become convinced that there was little hope of being allowed to retrieve the situation. They might as well continue along the road a little further.

Focussing on attendance rather than truancy

I presented a paper outlining to a meeting of year-level deans how I saw the recursive nature of what was going on and secured their agreement to some experiments. We tried setting up a system in which students who had been truant were noticed and given special attention for several weeks for being at school and in class. After twenty-one school days with no attendance problems it would be ritually recognised that the truancy issue had been dealt with and their slate would be wiped clean. My aim was to invite teachers to respond to aspects of the story of school attendance instead of focusing solely on the problem story of truancy. As this started to happen, I found opportunities to have conversations with students about the restraining forces in their lives that were interfering with attendance at school. On the days when they did come to school I sought to ask them about how they had managed to overcome these restraints. No one was talked about any more in language that assumed them to be a truant by nature or identity.

In the story of Sam's escape from the Wall above, there had been little value evident in involving his mother in a family counselling meeting. Like many other students, Sam did not want his family involved. For many adolescents this can be a statement about wanting to make their own way in the world and discover things about their ability to handle the challenges of life. But for Sam it was also a statement about the resources his family could offer him to deal with the issues in his life. His aim was to establish himself in relation to other people in ways which might offer him new experiences to call on in his family relationships.

Not being able to meet with a family could be seen as a limitation. However, the narrative way of thinking broadens the areas or stories a school counsellor can work with. Seeing the "problem as the problem," rather than the person, gives the school counsellor the freedom to explore and use the many relationships a student has in the school setting to not only understand the impact of the problem, but also to search for alternative stories.

A context for the counterplot

The school was a community where a counterplot to the story of life dominated by The Wall could evolve. Here he could find relationships which offered unique outcomes which freed him from the dominant sense of isolation. Certainly he had been labelled by many because of his difference but he had also had experiences with some teachers who had appreciated him for his uniqueness rather than his difference. In counselling we explored what it was that they experienced and how he was able to show those particular teachers aspects of himself that they valued. Although it took time for Sam to fully believe and experience some trust in these appreciating relationships it was these which often sustained him when the force of The Wall spoke to him about his worthlessness. By working from the assumption that Sam was not a disturbed young man but rather a young man who was oppressed by a problem, I was able to use the school setting as a site for researching , identifying and building on opportunities to escape or challenge the isolation imposed by The Wall. A year later those relationships continue to provide an important audience to the changes Sam has made in his life.

In "trouble" at school

Sometimes of course the problem issue is located squarely in the school domain. There are times when students seek help from counsellors when they are "in trouble" at school. Mark, in the sixth form, made an appointment with me (Aileen) for counselling after he got a strong message from his year level dean that he was close to suspension for "being in trouble." There is an obvious externalisation for the school counsellor to make in such situations. Trouble can be separated from the person and the student can be engaged in a conversation about the effects of trouble in his/her life.

In Mark's case, the very act of coming to counselling seemed to be an important and courageous step against the dominant problem story. It signified the first step in him taking a stand against Trouble wrecking his future and his image of himself.   I was curious about how he had managed to make this step. We also spent time exploring the history of Trouble and its effects on his relationship with his parents, his life at school, his hopes for the future and his valuing of himself. Mark could see what Trouble was doing to his life but its invitation was still very strong as his friends were united in a lifestyle of Trouble and his loyalty to them was strong.

However he now found himself one of the last of his group of friends to be at school and he was now beginning to see himself as having a future that could be different from the "dead-end" future he saw his friends heading towards. I asked him what Trouble had promised him. He replied that it had promised him fun but it was now taking away his future hopes and he was beginning to develop a stronger desire for a future free from Trouble. Further exploration identified not only some areas of his life which were trouble-free but also times when he had been able to turn down invitations from Trouble. We used these to explore Mark's capabilities and resources in shaping his own life rather than having it shaped for him by Trouble. We agreed that it would be helpful for certain teachers to know of his intentions and he was able to enlist their aid. He asked that I assist by "paving the way" and talking with those teachers first. It is important to note here that the potential confrontational exchange in which the teacher controls the language that describes any behavioural changes the student might make is actually subverted. The narrative process introduces a counter-language in which the student has opportunities for agency and teachers are invited into collaboration with the developments that take place as this agency is deployed.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A word of caution is important here though. We believe that school counsellors need to be careful about colluding with oppressive practices in schools when they externalise trouble. Students can be defined as in trouble by teachers. The power of definition carries with it the possibility of the abuse of such power. We believe externalising trouble should be used only in circumstances where the counsellor sees the "trouble" as originating in a recursive pattern of interaction between the teacher(s) and the student, rather than in situations where the teacher is actually abusing power, or where there are other circumstances in the young person's life

for which a more encompassing description can be found. While for Sam there were alternative stories available to him in the school setting that were positive and liberating, for other students school can be experienced as a place of marginalisation. Schools do not always recognise or provide for the needs of all students. Schools can be toxic places for some young people. Defining a problem as trouble may sometimes serve the purpose of obscuring the operation of power relations through schooling and therefore serve to isolate the young person as the location of the problem.

The narrative approach still allows counsellors to recognise this situation and speak about it in ways that avoid internalising blame in young people for what is beyond their control. As we said at the beginning of this article, a narrative perspective offers a philosophical standpoint which translates into linguistic practices. We believe that its effectiveness lies in the disruptions it introduces into dominant thinking patterns and in the deep ethical respect for young people which it engenders in counsellors. It is an approach which takes power relations seriously as they impact on people's lives and which offers ways to challenge and subvert these with a gentle prodding kind of questioning.

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