Digital Narrative Counselling: 
Counselling Children Through Storytelling 

Reneta Angus

Abstract

Digital narrative counselling, an extension of narrative counselling, offers students a communication medium that is natural in today’s world and thus adds a highly motivational component to the narrative therapy programming in schools. The storytelling element is a powerful strategy, as it meets a fundamental human need to tell one’s story. It focuses on how people construct meaning and identity and allows the student to externalize a problem by telling a story. What makes narrative therapy the effective tool for school counsellors is its ability to help students understand that they can be the authors of their own life stories.

Everyone has a story, especially children. Stories bring together our experiences, whether they are empowering or oppressive. Unfortunately, children’s stories often go unheard or are misunderstood. Narrative therapy can be an effective tool in any comprehensive school counsellor’s program with its therapeutic approach of using a child’s narrative to explore ways of dealing with stress in that child’s life. Narrative therapy is a respectful and collaborative approach to counselling which focuses on the stories of people’s lives and the power inherent in each of us to rewrite our personal narrative. What makes narrative therapy an effective tool for school counsellors is its ability to provide students with the understanding that they can be the authors of their own life story.

Today’s youth are naturally gravitating toward digital media, such as You Tube, Twitter, and Facebook, to communicate with others and to express themselves. Digital narrative counselling, an extension of narrative counselling, allows students to access a communication medium that has become most natural to them and thus adds a highly motivational component to the narrative therapy programming in schools. Incorporating digital devices and programs in the school counsellor’s therapeutic approach, aids in building relationship between the school counsellor and the student. The story needs an audience, and this role can be filled by the school counsellor, or a small group of students that are experiencing similar stress or anxiety (Olsen, Korcuska, & Paez, 2007). Students do not feel alienated by a solely traditional approach to therapy, but rather learn that the school counsellor or small group “gets them” and their reality.

Amanda Todd was a 15-year old teenager who committed suicide after posting a video on You Tube in which she used a series of flash cards to tell of her experience of being cyberbullied through the social networking website Facebook (Todd, 2012). People around the world continue to react to the death of this teenage girl who chose a popular tool to communicate her despair. Her decision to end her life, after sharing her story, highlights the urgent need for schools to take proactive measures to equip students in need with tools that may prevent such tragedies. Amanda Todd’s story is a tragic example of a child who may not have had the support to rewrite her personal narrative in such a way that she would have been able to empower herself.

Although Amanda Todd was a junior high school student, her problems did not start there. Elementary children are constantly facing new pressures and stresses caused by changes in our society. Stressful events occur both inside and outside of school. Events such as environmental disasters and exposure to the media (hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, crime, murder, war, etc.), family issues (financial, divorce, death, separation, illness, homelessness, etc.), and school issues (grades, expectations, peer interactions, bullying, etc.) all contribute to the stresses of elementary students. One way to deal with our “over-stressed” students is to reach out to them in their schools. Guidance counsellors and teachers often have more contact
with students each week than parents do. Therefore, school is a logical place to begin helping students acquire the skills needed to deal with stress.

Schools have begun to look at the causes of stress in elementary children, the steps that schools can take to alleviate some of the stress, and the ways schools can teach stress and anxiety-coping skills to students. Stress and negative emotions can interfere with higher-level thinking (Bluestein, 2001). When a student’s ability to process information is compromised, they are unable to process, encode and transfer information properly. Therefore, information that is processed is more likely to become distorted. As anxiety or stress increases, a student’s ability to focus and concentrate decreases, causing a drop in motivation for attending to his or her school work, or even for attending school (Merrell, 2008). The student becomes “trapped” in a cycle of steadily increasing stress, anxiety, and decreased performance. According to the Manitoba School Counsellor’s Association (2012), society is evolving continuously, and “the guidance and counselling programs in our schools need to constantly renew themselves to better respond to changing needs” (para. 1). Therefore, guidance counsellors must use a variety of counselling methods and conflict resolution skills to assist students as they attempt to resolve their problems.

One of the therapeutic approaches available to school counsellors is storytelling, or narrative therapy. Storytelling is a powerful strategy when used in counselling programs, as it meets a fundamental human need to tell his or her story. As people, we always seek to make connections with each other while sharing information. Storytelling is found across all cultures and connects generations by sharing cultural traditions and conveying knowledge (Gladding, & Drake Wallace, 2010). The telling and sharing of stories has the ability to release emotion, open opportunities for insight, and create empowerment and a sense of control over one’s life. The physical act of storytelling allows a person to relive and resolve problems that may prevent healthy emotional growth and development. In solution-based counselling situations, storytelling can be inspiring and give the storyteller the ability to overcome the cause of his or her stress and anxiety.

Narrative therapy is starting to be used in some schools to support students experiencing stress and anxiety. It focuses on the way in which people construct meaning and identity and allows the student to externalize his or her problem through the telling of stories (Finlay, 2008). Narrative counselling is based on the principle that life events and experiences are organized into stories that can be adapted and changed (Eppler, Olsen, & Hidano, 2009). Using narrative counselling in a school setting, allows guidance counsellors to intervene early with at-risk students, helping them turn their problem-oriented stories into personal narratives of success.

The primary goal of narrative counselling is to empower a student in his or her role as character within the story. Guiding the student through an exploration of his or her own personal narrative from the view of author, rather than a character within the story without any control of the story, the student is meant to realize the inherent power of influencing the story line to his or her own liking. Narrative counselling allows students to temporarily develop the distance needed to emotionally detach from the problem until an effective coping strategy has been explored by a fictional character in the story. By viewing one’s own story narrative through a fictional character, a student might be more likely to express emotions such as anger, fear, and sense of intimidation from a safer emotional distance. Once the students have been allowed to express the emotions through a fictional character, they are now ready to explore strategies and methods to effectively deal with scenarios that imitate their own life situations and emotions.

Understanding that they have the power to distance themselves from a real-life situation and rewrite their own personal narrative, students can then create a character able to deal with situations in a variety of different ways, based on coping strategies provided by the school counsellor. Students experience “a sense of empowerment in knowing that, with the guidance of the counsellor, they themselves can redefine or retell their story” (Finlay, 2008, p. 8). Stressful life events become manageable. This control over the story line allows the student to
reconstruct a self-perception that is not overwhelmed by problems, but instead offers a problem-solving approach to successfully managing life events.

An innovative form of narrative counselling currently being explored for helping students deal with stress and anxiety is the use of digital narrative counselling (Sawyer & Willis, 2011). Digital narrative counselling programing connects a generation that is being raised in a technology-rich environment with the therapeutic benefits of storytelling. Children are eager to have an opportunity to use technology. The motivational aspect of the use of technology offers increased opportunities for school counsellors to draw stories out of students who are reluctant to share otherwise. By creating a virtual character, such as an avatar, set in a virtual reality, experiencing a similar life narrative to that of the student, coping strategies could be explored in a safer, “simulated” realm then if the student had to simply talk about his or her own story.

While the more traditional approach of talk-therapy might inhibit students to share their personal narratives, digital narrative therapy offers a secondary level to analyzing and interpreting a student’s problematic situation. The narratives created by students in their digital narrative therapy program include written and visual images, in addition to simply verbal recordings and notes made by the school counsellor. By allowing students to create their own words, narrations, and visual images describing their personal and often very emotional stories, school counsellors have three rather than one source of information for the purpose of analysis and therapy development. As the usual method of “surface listening” involves listening for facts, adding the visual encourages the listener to go beyond the surface of the spoken word (Bissonnette, 2007). The school counsellor is able to focus in on specific and pertinent information and images rather than forming an immediate verbal response.

An additional benefit to using digital therapy is its ability to break down language barriers between the EAL students and English-speaking counsellors, as digital projects can be transferred to any language. With school populations becoming more ethnically and racially diverse, school counsellors need to experiment with a range of tools to assist EAL students (Westwood, & Ewasiw, 2001). Visual imagery created through digital therapy is enough to give EAL students support with identifying and developing positive social and behavioural skills (Sawyer, & Willis, 2011). Students, no matter what language they speak, need to learn ways to cope with stressful situations and feelings of anxiety. EAL students often need additional support. Factors such as, a limited knowledge of the English language and the traditional cultural expectations of an ethnic group may conflict with the culture within a school setting. Digital stories can be told using the student’s native language, which allows the student the opportunity to share greater clarity and a deeper level of emotion than would not necessarily be possible with traditional counselling methods.

Finally, digital narrative therapy offers school counsellors a tool that encompasses the entire palette of student’s intelligences. With the vastness of images, programs, and applications, available in the digital world, school counsellors can offer students strategies that address all of the multiple intelligences as identified by Howard Gardner (Smith, 2008). In this digital era, school counsellors, even when faced with students with limited verbal or artistic abilities, can help the students find the means to communicate their story, even if it is simply by finding and identifying with digital images or stories found on the web, or using voice-generated word processing devices.

In conclusion, the greatest asset to using digital narrative therapy in schools is its ability to empower students in their role as author of their own life narrative. Amanda Todd’s digital diary resonates around the world, striking powerful emotion in people of all ages. In Amanda’s case, there may not have been an opportunity for transformation, only a tragic ending. Her actions exemplify how emotional memories can trigger behaviour, and in some cases, end with fatal consequences. Guidance counsellors can not take memories away. By implementing digital narrative counselling, they can provide children with effective ways of dealing with these memories in such a way, that the memories or experiences do not control the student or render them helpless. She felt helpless and did not see a way out of her difficult life situation. Amanda
Todd tried to reach out through a digital medium telling her story, but may not have had the resources she required to resolve the conflicts within her personal narrative. There is no way of knowing for sure, yet, digital narrative therapy may have been just the resource needed to have changed the ending of Amanda’s story.

References


About the Author

Reneta Angus is a guidance counsellor at Lt. Colonel Barker V.C. School in Dauphin, MB. She is currently working on her graduate diploma in guidance and counselling at BU. Reneta travels extensively throughout Canada by train with her husband and four children. She hosts exchange students from Colombia and Korea during the school year.