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Using stories in elementary school counseling: Brief, narrative techniques.

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**Using Stories in Elementary School Counseling: Brief, Narrative Techniques**

This article describes using stories and story-telling techniques so that elementary professional school counselors can facilitate brief, narrative counseling. These approaches help counselors and students build rapport while assisting in understanding and externalizing the problem. Additionally, these interventions may help generate ideas for unique and positive academic, personal/social, and career outcomes. This article will address four story-based techniques for use in elementary school counseling: biblionarrative. displaced communication, bibliocounseling. and using movie clips.

Narrative counseling is based on the principle that life events and experiences are organized into stories that can adapt and change. Telling and retelling life stories within a supportive context helps students create more choices for positive behavior while bolstering students' self-perceptions (Dagirmomjian, Eton, & Lund, 2007; Eron & Lund, 1996; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997; White & Epston, 1990). In the school setting, professional school counselors may use narrative techniques in large-group guidance, small groups, and individual counseling to help turn students' problem-oriented stories into self-narratives of success, solutions, and hope (Eschenauer & Chen-Hayes, 2005; Wiest, Wong, Brotherton, & Cervantes, 2001; Winslade & Monk, 2007) in order to promote academic, career, and personal/social success (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2005).

Students often create, read, or listen to stories in their academic curriculum; integrating brief, narrative techniques builds upon that academic structure. There are many possible benefits to using stories in the school setting. Interacting with students using stones encourages rapport building with children because the children's own choices of words are used and the counselor is in a collaborative role (Eron & Lund; Freedman & Combs; Parry & Doan, 1994; White & Epston; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). This type of personal relationship building is important when serving students from all backgrounds. Using stories that the child creates, using published literature, and using stones that the counselor co creates with the Student can help students process thoughts, feelings, and actions that they may not be able to verbalize.

Some forms of using stories with students haw been documented in school counseling literature (Gladding & Gladding, 1991; Thompson & Henderson, 2007; Wiest et al., 2001; Winslade & Monk, 2007). This article focuses on our efforts as school counselors to be intentional about using stories and story-telling techniques within the frame work of a narrative theory, Intentional integration of theory and practice fits with the core competencies of the ASCA National Model® (2005) that call for school counselors to utilize effective theory based counseling techniques. Although there are many ways to use stories in a school setting, this article will address tour story based techniques within a narrative school counseling approach that may be used in the elementary school setting: biblionarrative, displaced communication, bibliocounseling, and using movie clips. An amalgamation of case studies from our experiences in the elementary schools will Illustrate these narrative techniques.

[BIBLIONARRATIVE](http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.wwu.edu/ehost/delivery?sid=a7570b31-f9b3-43e9-8572-20bf776657ee%40sessionmgr12&vid=30&hid=8#toc)

A student may not be able to create a rich story with new choices for behavior, or unique and positive outcomes, by just talking. With these students, it may be helpful to create a biblionarrative, which consists of a combination of oral and written story from a narrative counseling perspective (Eppler & Carolan, 2006). A school counselor would begin by asking the student to talk briefly about important life events as they relate to the presenting issue. For example, the counselor could ask when the student noticed the difficulty, what the child did to try to solve it, and why the student believes he or she is in the counseling office. This assists in narrative counseling by mapping the problem and creating unique solutions (White & Epston, 1990). During this time, the school counselor could ask about and emphasize the strengths of a child from both the child's perspective and what the counselor sees as strengths in the student.

After the student tells the oral story, the counselor transitions into having the student write a part of the story as text. Different or expanded themes may emerge when students are offered the chance to write instead of talk; this is important in narrative work to create a thicker story in which the student both understands the situation and creates solutions. For example, when the school counselor met with a fifth-grade boy, the student did not want to talk about the recent death of his father. When given the chance to write about what happened, he jotted notes about the time he found out that his uncle had committed suicide. This story revealed to the counselor the more complex story of grief within the student's family. It is important to note that this technique links the process of counseling to a district's academic goals. For example, Washington state's Essential Academic Learning Requirements, or state standards, includes writing for different purposes, writing in a variety of forms, developing ideas, and organizing writing (Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.). The learning goals could be adapted for the students' grade-level requirements.

In order to help students create a biblionarrative, it is important to have pen, pencils, and/or colored pencils for them to use. Next, the school counselor could give the students their own special notebook and a template to write the story. The template may include visual prompts (e.g., sheets of paper or poster board) with phrases such as "What happened before …," "When did you find out about …," or "What do you think will happen next …?" The text may be in book form or can be adapted to stories that a student prefers. For example, if a student enjoys reading comic books, the template could be adjusted to look like the boxes in graphic novels. The student and counselor could decorate the notebook while the counselor tells the child that this is a special book that does not have "right or wrong" answers like many other assignments in school. Then, the counselor and the student would spend time writing the story together. Because of the time constraints in the school setting, this process can be done briefly in one meeting, or spread across several meetings with one student or a group of students. Younger students may only be able to write a word or a phrase. Older elementary students tend to write about one paragraph per template page. Except for encouragement, there is little direction from the counselor with helping the child write the Story. Students are informed that they can take several minutes to write each section of the story. If the child appears stuck (as evidenced by not writing for one or more minutes), the counselor could prompt the story development with additional questions such as "What happened next?" or "Who else was involved?"

After the child finishes writing about the last tern plate cue, the school counselor may ask if then' is anything that the child would like to add to the book. It is then important to debrief the Story with the student, using the combined verbal and written story to help understand the problem and the solutions. The counselor could consider the following: What is different in the written story from what the student has said? What are some hints of successes or strengths in the oral and written stories? What may be important for the child to learn, know, or try in order to create more unique and positive personal, social, and academic outcomes in the student's life? The counselor and the student could periodically revise and build on the story throughout the academic year.

After two brief sessions of writing a biblionarrative with the grieving fifth-grade boy, the school counselor noticed that the student was more open during brief check-ins to talking about the sadness that he and his family experienced after the death of the student's uncle and his father. The counselor was able to refer the student to a changing families group that met at a nearby community center. Additionally, the counselor used the information found in the oral and written stories to encourage the student during stressful times such as Father's Day and other holidays.

[DISPLACED COMMUNICATION](http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.wwu.edu/ehost/delivery?sid=a7570b31-f9b3-43e9-8572-20bf776657ee%40sessionmgr12&vid=30&hid=8#toc)

Because it may be challenging for some students to either verbalize or write about personal situations, counselors can have elementary students talk through characters in a story. This process is called displaced communication (Kalter, 1990) and has been used in play therapy (Drewes, Carey, & Schaefer, 2001; Gil, 1994). Telling a brief story through displaced communication allows students to focus on activities and materials with which they are comfortable (drawing, action figures, doll houses, etc.) and engages the student in non direct com munication. Students learn more about their thoughts, feelings, behaviors, attitudes, and problem-solving skills through the nonpersonalized characters of the story. This aids in the narrative goals of creating a richer story, externalizing the problem, and finding unique outcomes.

Displaced communication may be used in many forms in the elementary school setting. In large-group guidance, school counselors can bring puppets to class for students to hold. If a student becomes distracted during the lesson, the counselor can ask to see the puppet's eyes instead of directly asking the child to pay attention. Additionally, the counselor can ask the students it characters from a story the class had read recently would have any answers to the problems the class was discussing with the counselor,

In individual, small group, and large-group counseling, school counselors can use a character to externalize the problem while co-creating a story with unique outcomes through displaced communication. Vera, a second grade student, was referred to the school counselor because her teacher observed her spending recess alone for several weeks. When the counselor met with Vera, she was shy and did not speak much. After this brief session with Vera, the counselor decided to use a systemic intervention by presenting a large-group guidance lesson in Vera's class. After the lesson, the counselor met with the class and asked them if they could help tell a story. Next, the counselor got out a blue sheet of paper and a small plastic duck. The counselor told the class that the duck liked to play on the side of the pond where there was just water and tall grass. This duck saw other ducks playing in the middle of the pond, but the counselor did not know what happened next. The counselor and the students talked about what kept the duck on the grassy side of the pond, what it may be like if the duck were to swim toward the other ducks, and what fears the duck may have. The counselor let the class direct the duck Story, but added some suggestions so Vera and her classmates would ha\e unique outcomes for interacting with Others during recess.

For this brief session, the school counselor did not discuss with the class literal meanings of the duck story. However, to see if the intervention had any impact, the counselor met briefly again with Vera to see what was happening at recess. Vera reported that she was using some of the skills that the duck had learned, and that she noticed her classmates were asking her to play games just as the other ducks had asked the lonely duck to play.

[BIBLIOCOUNSELING](http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.wwu.edu/ehost/delivery?sid=a7570b31-f9b3-43e9-8572-20bf776657ee%40sessionmgr12&vid=30&hid=8#toc)

Using published children's literature books is a valuable counseling tool that allows students to process problems and learn solutions (Cook, Earles-Vollrath, & Ganz, 2006; Gladding, 1997; Gladding & Gladding, 1991; Orton, 1997). The characters in the story, and the storyline itself, may assist students to recognize feelings, to understand their behaviors, and to see new ways of solving problems (Gladding & Gladding). Using books in counseling encourages expression of problems and concerns that children may not otherwise express openly (Orton). Moreover, using literature may help school counselors to integrate district requirements for reading into the counseling practice. The use of stories in counseling promotes reading skills while creating discussion on topics such as social skills, problem solving, and career exploration.

Although reading is important, there arc many caveats to using bibliocounseling. Students may fail to identify with a character, refuse to discuss uncomfortable topics, or continue to apply inadequate solutions to problematic events (Gladding & Gladding, 1991). Professional school counselors need to build rapport with the student and select literature appropriate for the student's age, developmental level, and reading level before introducing books into a session. Further, it is important to consider a student's readiness to hear a story, both emotionally and developmentally (Cook et al., 2006). The length of the book must be considered in order to keep students' attention and focus; it may be appropriate to not use a whole book, but to draw from one or two pages that are germane to the presenting problem. Professional school counselors could collaborate with school librarians and other reading specialists regarding the choices of books for bibiocounseling collections.

Following the reading of the book, or the selected pages in a book, a discussion about themes, characters, and plot may help the student integrate suggestions gleaned from the book into the student's life. Instead of asking the student, "How might this story be related to your situation?" the counselor might ask, "What do you think the character is feeling?" This conversation could support a student's understanding of his or her feelings, in turn creating a richer narrative. Additionally, the counselor may ask, "What do you think should happen next?" or "What would you try in that situation?" These questions promote consideration of unique outcomes that students can try in order to create positive life-stories.

A school counselor collaborated and consulted with an English-language-learner teacher on an effective way to present an identifying feelings lesson. After the counselor's introduction and some icebreaker questions, the counselor took out a picture book and showed the illustrations to the students. These visual cues engaged the learners, helping to convey concepts about emotions without solely using words. This also helped the students build their vocabulary. The teacher reported that the students enjoyed the lesson and were able to use feeling words during a class discussion that occurred later in the week.

[USING MOVIE CLIPS](http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.wwu.edu/ehost/delivery?sid=a7570b31-f9b3-43e9-8572-20bf776657ee%40sessionmgr12&vid=30&hid=8#toc)

The use of movies in counseling, also known as cinemacounseling, also may help students with their presenting problems. Similar to displaced communication, movies offer an indirect approach in helping students reach their goals while helping connect students and counselors via pop culture (Dermer & Hutchings, 2000; Eppler & Latty, 2007; Wedding & Niemiec, 2003). Possible benefits of using movies to facilitate change include normalizing a situation, giving children a deeper insight into their problem, providing role models, reinforcing internal strengths, and externalizing and reframing problems.

The film My Girl (Zieff & Elehwany, 1991), for example, serves as a medium through which the school counselor and students can address significant family changes. In this film, a young girl shows frustration and confusion when her widowed father decides to remarry. When working with students with changing families in a small-group setting, a school counselor can show the scene in which the father and mother-to-be disclose their upcoming marriage. This could create a conversation about the formation of a blended family. The counselor can help students externalize feelings (e.g., loyalty, confusion, and hope) about the new family structure by talking about what it is like for the girl in the film and what it may be like for the students. The counselor and students also can explore unique outcomes such as whom the students can talk to for support at home and at school when negative thoughts of the remarriage occur.

With the time constraints in a school setting, elementary school counselors will most likely have to use short clips that will quickly get to the core of the issue. Thus, previewing the movie in its entirety and assessing it for appropriateness will help prepare the counselor to show movie clips that are beneficial to elementary-aged students. It is important to keep in mind that not all students may benefit from or be able to watch films. School counselors should be aware of cultural and spiritual values regarding movies.

[CONCLUSION](http://web.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.library.wwu.edu/ehost/delivery?sid=a7570b31-f9b3-43e9-8572-20bf776657ee%40sessionmgr12&vid=30&hid=8#toc)

Brief, narrative approaches and techniques allow elementary school counselors to build on students' strengths (Galassi & Akos, 2007) in order to facilitate unique personal, social, and academic outcomes within the time constraints of a school setting. The use of stories can enhance collaboration with teachers, librarians, and school administration by helping show how large-group guidance lessons, small-group counseling, and individual sessions relate to grade-level education requirements. Aligning narrative interventions with state standards assists school counselors to move toward data-driven services (Eschenauer & Chen-Hayes, 2005). Moreover, stories can help counselors conned with students and others within their systems.

Telling and retelling life stories within a supportive context helps students create more choices for positive behavior while bolstering students' self-perceptions.

Using stories that the child creates, using published literature, and using stories that the counselor co-creates with the student can help students process thoughts, feelings, and actions that they may not be able to verbalize.

It is important for school counselors to continue to explore how students can create rich narratives with many choices and outcomes in order to promote healthy academic, career, and personal/social success.

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