The knight with the magic sword: how a therapeutic story provided a connection point for child, family, school, human service agencies & community.

Stories deal with powerful realities… realities that cannot be dealt with in other ways.

(Kornberger 2006)

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‘Excessive labelling disorder’? (McNeilly,ND)

Current ways of supporting children and young people who challenge education systems through their emotional/health/learning needs and behaviours often do not sufficiently include the voices of the children themselves or the family, and tend to focus excessively on existing child and family strengths and interests as resources.

(Selekman,1997)
• This paper shows how a therapeutic story helped to create a culture of collaboration by acting as a connection point between the child, his family, school and a wide variety of community agencies and organisations.

• The most important feature of the intervention however, appears not to be the use of the story itself, but rather is the way the child’s individuality and uniqueness was observed and utilised in order to design an effective intervention.

• The intervention described here forms part of a larger heuristic inquiry into the potential of an holistic approach to assist educators and other professionals to support children at risk and their families in less deficit and label-oriented ways that can lead to greater communication and understanding across different systems and sectors.

An aim of this presentation

To share with educators and other professions a way of working that challenges us to enhance our own ability to observe and work with the existing resources in children and families as a way to make individual, family and community connections.
A wide range of professionals can be involved in supporting a child and his or her family but there may be little communication between the education, health and welfare sectors, leading to duplication of assessments, lack of information sharing, and a limited awareness of the potential for generating solutions through a more collaborative approach (Bronsteiner, 2003).

‘Taylor’s story

- Taylor is 11, with multiple cultural backgrounds
- Has medical (epilepsy), psychological, language difficulties – also on the autism spectrum
- Has experienced multiple traumas
- Has not attended school for more than 7 hours per week in recent years
- Started pre-school at 3.5 years due to language difficulties
- Siblings with disabilities
- Family experience of trauma (mother, sister, father)
- Depression diagnosed in both parents
• A child who had not been attending school for more than an hour and a half a day for years
• This child worked with an SSO on his own
• Wanted to be with other children
• Extreme behavioural issues
• Lots of professional input previously
• His parents hopes’ & dreams: parent teacher night, birthday celebration, report card.
• Seemingly insurmountable obstacles
• A situation of crisis proportions

• Asked to provide a fresh look
• Meeting with child – quickly aware of trauma
• ‘We had never thought of him as being traumatised’
• Treated as behaviour issue- much advice
• Boundaries/consequences/punishments?
• Identified as traumatised
So what could be done?

- What is this child’s predicament? – trawl the history for clues not symptoms
- Talking to child, family, professionals
- Observing
- Gathering information
- Sleeping on it
- Connecting communication across boundaries

A professional will be most useful to the child and his or her family when she uses her own imagination to help make sense of why this child presents with this pattern of behaviour at this time (Jureidini, 2007).

Looking for existing strengths & resources

- Jureidini has suggested that the professional will be of most use to the child and family when she can use her imagination to solve problems (2005, unpublished paper).
- With this in mind, I looked out for ways I could creatively engage the family as a way to connect both with me and with each other and to begin to generate the capacity for more optimistic thinking and greater self efficacy.
- As I communicated more with his mother I began to see how willing she was to collaborate with me in finding new ways of reaching her child.
A therapeutic story for Taylor

- Processes – writing, drawing, sharing
- Metaphoric story written one Sunday afternoon
- During holidays – two weeks of illustration
- Favourite part
- Dream
- Game
- Song
- Sandtray
- Printing
- Sharing - family, agencies, carers

The story became an authentically co-constructed artefact that would eventually be professionally printed, launched in the community by a local historian/writer and distributed as a gift to extended family members, education department managers at the central level, principals, teachers, ex-teachers, social workers, lawyer and advocate, police officers, pastor, after school care and domestic violence workers and the local doctor.
Baba Yaga

Max and the Knight.
Generating a story as a symbol of the quiet place within

- Use of art and play therapy to provide a safe climate for children to play out their conflicts and use the relationship for healing
- Use of metaphor – of course you can do it!
- Visualisation – relaxation
- Empowerment from within
- Protection from without
- A knight goes to school! – transitional object
- Jureidini’s advice about play and art – most important for children who have experienced trauma

- Creative
- Healing
- Co-constructed
- Not a quick fix but stays fixed - sustainable
- Dialoguing approach
- Uses existing strengths and resources in child and family
- Inclusive
- Tying emotional and spiritual wellbeing into therapeutic ways of working
- Use oral traditions
- Come at things sideways
The book launch

…..an audience of friends, relatives, and significant others in the identified child client’s life to bear witness to his or her competencies…. The telling and retelling of the child’s new evolving story of competency is empowering and can create possibilities (Selekman, 1997, p21)

Family work

• Child’s problems need to be viewed through a broader lens.
• The child’s symptoms may serve a function in the family. (Selekman, 1994)
• Constraining beliefs
• Dominant oppressive stories (White and Epston, 1990)
• Focus on changing outmoded beliefs about the child
• Sometimes children’s art creations can serve as the catalyst for changing and healing their parents (Selekman, 1994).
• Family play and art therapy tasks take the sting out of presenting problems
• Alter the family dynamic in which the problem is embedded
• Relaxed context
• Reduced stress levels
Community/Systems

- Shared meanings – school/home/agencies/community
- Leading to a new interconnected web of support – extending the learning environment
- Use of an audience of friends, relatives and significant others in the child’s life to bear witness to his or her competencies
- Telling and retelling of the child’s new evolving story of competency (White and Epston 1996)
- Helping him to become a master of his own life conveying an optimistic attitude, building on strengths and respecting his defences
- Look at what is going right, not deficits

In conclusion

Perhaps we can all learn something from Erickson, who apparently almost never met a problem he could not solve and was able to ‘ferret out strengths and abilities in the midst of seemingly intractable pathologies’ (O’Hanlon, 2003).

The story of how a child was reconnected with his family, his school, and community and they were more closely linked with one another as well can give us a sense of optimism and some hints about how we might next approach working with a child who severely challenges a system to provide for his learning and emotional needs, but no formula… although people have been heard asking for their own knight!
References

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