

Narrative Means to Educational Ends: Introducing the Narrative Approach to Hong Kong Schools

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Narrative therapy is introduced as a postmodern form of practice suitable for the integration of contrasting orientations of guidance and discipline practices in Hong Kong schools, where guidance and counseling programs and activities under the whole school approach are suggested as viable means to promote student whole-person development. While the narrative approach as a mode of school counseling might have a direct impact, more importantly, the approach as an attitude and a way of life in the school setting could offer new ways of providing psychoeducational services and promoting student growth and development. The need for research in narrative practice in Hong Kong schools is emphasized and discussed.

Key words: narrative therapy; guidance and counseling; Hong Kong

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Riding the waves of the recent Hong Kong education reform does bring into sharp focus at least one important concern. That is, in order to provide successful educational experiences for students, reform efforts need to go beyond addressing their academic achievement gaps (Education Commission, 2000). To this end, schools should have an abiding interest not only in promoting student interests in school subjects and academic disciplines, but also in meeting student emotional needs in personal and social development. Ironically, despite the recognition of the importance of students' all-round or whole-person development in, among others, ethical, intellectual, physical, social, and esthetic (*de, zhi, ti, qun, and mei*) domains, students' development in nonacademic or noncognitive domains has often been and still is underemphasized or marginalized (Curriculum Development Council, 2001).

The Whole School Approach to Guidance

For a variety of reasons, including those that have to do with a departure from an elitist education system in recent years, and the increasing recognition that schools have to deal with diverse behavior and motivation problems of students to enhance learning and performance (Chan, 1992, 2000), guidance programs and activities in schools have been recruited as one viable option in confronting student problems and in facilitating student growth and development by focusing on students' individual uniqueness and special qualities. In Hong Kong, the whole school approach to guidance, as reflected in government policy documents, has been forged for a number of years (Hui, 1994, 2000). This whole school approach is in line with the development of guidance programs and activities with a developmental or preventive rather than a remedial orientation in different parts of the world. This orientation, broadly focused on helping all students enjoy healthy personal and social development in addition to achieving academic success, has been considered under diverse names, including comprehensive guidance program (United States), pastoral care and personal-social education

(England and Wales), life skills education, and civic education (see Gysbers & Henderson, 2001; Watkins, 2001).

The endorsement of the whole school approach to guidance with a developmental orientation starting in the 1990s in Hong Kong (Education Commission, 1990) has provided a central organizing structure for school counselors or guidance teachers to reframe their work, and for schools to create a culture that promotes whole-person development in students. However, despite that this approach encourages in all schools the expansion of the roles and functions of frontline teachers in guidance activities, to be supported by specialists in remedial work and crisis intervention, and asserts the necessity of involvement of all teachers and participation of the whole student population, important differences in implementation remain at the school level where the co-existence of separate guidance and discipline teams of teachers might advocate contrasting ways of managing and helping students with problems. Thus, educational research and reform efforts should perhaps be directed at exploring how school guidance and counseling activities under the whole school approach can be developed and integrated to serve the aim of promoting student whole-person development. In this connection, it is of great relevance to consider the development of school guidance and counseling in the postmodern era.

The Postmodern Development in School Guidance and Counseling

At the turn of the century, in commenting on the changing roles of school counselors, Green and Keys (2001) believed that school guidance and counseling in the new millennium should evolve beyond its reliance on traditional developmental theories to encompass a synthesis between developmental models and the ecological-systemic approach. Along the same line, Sink (2002) maintained that social constructionism could augment the ecological model of development. Specifically, the

constructionist practice of guidance and counseling in schools could be conceptualized as representing the movement of a paradigm shift from modernism to postmodernism, which is characterized by an erosion of the foundations for objective knowledge and an awareness of multiple perspectives (Forster, 1997). Thus, operating within this social constructionist framework, educators encourage multiple beliefs about the nature of reality and acknowledge that educational “truths” cannot be separated from its sociocultural and communal contexts (e.g., Steffe & Gale, 1995). In this regard, giftedness and talents, for example, defined as such by specific groups of people in particular societal or cultural contexts might not be so considered by other groups of people in other contexts. Thus, rather than helping students discover their talents or interests, and environments compatible with their qualities, guidance teachers and school counselors, working within the constructionist approach, might strive to help students become aware of their talents and competencies unappreciated by others, and facilitate their articulation of personal meanings through negotiation with others. Consequently, in reframing guidance and counseling in schools for constructionist practice, Forster (1997) argued that the constructionist assumption that realities and meanings are open to reinterpretation has the profound implication of enhancing students’ ability to adapt and change based on the possibility of reconstructing one’s personal realities.

With signs that the counseling and guidance profession was influenced by this paradigm shift, school guidance and counseling practices in Hong Kong, which were developed in the modernist era, might well be regarded as incongruent and outdated in the postmodern era. Current practices organized under the whole school approach also highlight the need to integrate the somewhat contrasting orientations of guidance and discipline in schools. Interestingly, guidance practices in Hong Kong have been heavily influenced by the person-centered orientation originated by Rogers (1951, 1961).

In contrast, discipline practices in Hong Kong have been more eclectic (see Chan, 1996), focusing more on social control and borrowing substantially from behavior modification (Martin & Pear, 1999), blended with Glasser's choice theory and reality therapy (Glasser, 1969, 1990), and Dreikurs' theory of goals of misbehavior (Dreikurs, Grunwald, & Pepper, 1982). Despite that various efforts have been made at the school level to strike a balance between guidance and discipline practices through varying degrees of collaboration between respective teams of teachers, such efforts remain somewhat technically eclectic rather than theoretically integrative. Evidently, to seek some forms of practice that integrates the opposing views of self-actualization and social control is no easy task.

However, the postmodern or constructionist turn in counseling and guidance and the more recent emphasis on positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) have combined to provide new insights into viable ways of integrating guidance and discipline practices in Hong Kong schools. More specifically, the narrative approach within the social constructionist framework seems particularly well suited for promoting individual goals while taking into account different perspectives that include social control, thus emphasizing the construction of personal preferred realities in the context of negotiating shared meanings with others. Thus, narrative therapy should have a direct impact on the evolution of counseling practice for students in Hong Kong schools. The original description of this approach is in White and Epston (1990), now regarded as a classic in the field. Other introductory accounts of narrative therapy can be found in Besley (2002), Freedman and Combs (1996), Monk, Winslade, Crocket, and Epston (1997), Payne (2000), Smith and Nylund (1997), Winslade and Monk (1999), and Zimmerman and Dickerson (1996). Based on these sources, an overview of narrative therapy is presented below, followed by other considerations regarding the applications of the narrative approach in Hong Kong schools.

A Brief Overview of Narrative Therapy

Narrative therapy was initially developed in 1989 by Michael White of Adelaide, Australia and David Epston of Auckland, New Zealand as a form of family therapy. White and Epston (1989, 1990) integrated ideas and themes developed by scholars from different fields, including Edward Bruner (ethnographer), Jerome Bruner (psychologist), Michel Foucault (French historian of systems of thought), and Gregory Bateson (biologist and systems theorist). On this basis, the two practitioners pioneered a coherent approach that has a great impact on family therapy as well as on individual psychotherapy and counseling.

Briefly, narrative therapy is founded in postmodern thinking, using narrative as a guiding metaphor within the framework of social constructionism (see Gergen, 1985; Goncalves, 1994; Russell, 1991). The basic assumption is that objective reality is not directly knowable, that all knowing requires an act of interpretation, and that knowledge is socially or consensually constructed. Consequently, people make sense of their lives through the narratives they (together with significant others) construct about their lives. However, a narrative emphasizes certain experiences at the expense of others so that the coherence of the narrative can be maintained. The ignored lived experiences go unstoried, and the events unnoticed. The choices people make about what life events are storied and how they should be storied are powerfully shaped by dominant discourses that are sustained by taken-for-granted assumptions and shared viewpoints. Nonetheless, even though these narratives do not encompass the full richness or totality of people's lived experiences, these narratives do have real effects in shaping people's lives (White & Epston, 1990).

Accepting the notion that narratives are socially constructed, White and Epston (1990) argue that problems are produced in social, cultural, and political contexts that serve as the basis for life stories that people construct and tell about themselves. People experience problems when their lived experiences are not sufficiently represented by the dominant narratives, or

important aspects of their lived experiences contradict these dominant narratives. Thus, the goal of narrative therapy is to help people reclaim the remnants of unstoried yet favored experiences in their lives such that alternative stories as opposed to dominant stories can be generated, and people may choose to re-author their stories, which they will experience as more helpful (Winslade & Monk, 1999).

To achieve the goal of re-authoring life stories, the narrative therapist engages the client in therapeutic conversations to understand the client's problem-saturated life story using a curious and respectful stance. Then the narrative therapist utilizes deconstruction to externalize the problem, listening for hidden meanings, spaces or gaps, and elements that contradict the problematic story (White, 1993). Specifically, through externalizing conversations, the problem is separated from the person through a subtle shift in language, allowing the client to experience the problem as an external entity that can be named and tackled. The narrative therapist then asks mapping-the-influence questions to explore the relative strength of the problem and the client, that is, the influence of the problem on the client and the influence of the client on the problem. In the process, the client is helped to identify "unique outcomes" or enabling experiences that stand apart from the problem story. By further developing explanations of the significance of these experiences, the client is enabled to experience a sense of personal agency through repositioning or reclaiming his or her voice in developing a counterplot or a plot of the alternative story, and to make a choice between continuing to live by the problem-saturated story or changing to live by the alternative story.

Finally, to enhance personal agency and the survival of alternative stories, persons significant to the client are recruited as an appreciative audience to witness the client's performance of the alternative story. Apart from the feedback from the audience, the use of therapeutic documents, which might include visual elements, letters, statements, certificates and creative writing, will all help bear witness to the emergence of the client's preferred description of new identity (see Payne, 2000; White & Epston, 1990).

The Narrative Approach to Integrating Guidance and Discipline Practices in Schools

Narrative therapy as described above is thus a nontraditional form of therapy or counseling, but it can be readily incorporated into practices in the school setting. Evidently, narrative therapy can be applied directly in counseling students, but it can also be applied to school practices in domains outside counseling. More specifically, the narrative approach may provide a foundation on which guidance and discipline practices can be integrated for psychoeducational services in Hong Kong schools. For the present purposes, therapy and counseling are used interchangeably.

The Narrative Approach to Guidance Practices

School guidance and counseling practices in Hong Kong generally adopt the humanistic orientation or more specifically the Rogerian person-centered approach (Rogers, 1951). This approach focuses on the student, and the student's assets or strengths rather than deficits or weaknesses. In counseling students, it values the student-teacher relationship as therapeutic in facilitating the process of exploration, understanding, and action, emphasizing the counselor qualities of empathy, congruence and positive regard as important in relating to students (see Egan, 2002).

The narrative approach is in complete agreement with the person-centered approach in that both are student-centered. In the narrative approach, rather than assuming that teachers know better, teachers are genuinely interested in learning from students, taking seriously their voices and respecting their knowledge for the expertise it offers. Thus, the narrative counselor, like the person-centered counselor, uses core Rogerian qualities of empathy, congruence, and positive regard, and adopts a not-knowing, curious, and respectful stance. However, unlike the person-centered counselor, the narrative counselor is more directive and is influential in their use of questioning in bringing into focus students' easily discounted or overlooked details of competence and accomplishments. In so doing, counselors

may help students engage in positive asset search (Ivey & Ivey, 2003), and students are empowered to find their own voice (Speedy, 2000; Winslade & Monk, 1999).

There are also other marked differences between the narrative approach and the person-centered approach in school counseling. The narrative counselor would argue that the Rogerian orientation is implicitly associated with the deficit view that locates the problem within the person, since the student needs to grow, change, develop and improve to enable the true self to emerge at some future point. Further, in the person-centered orientation, growth conceptualized as the development of the student's inner potential is promoted through a therapeutic relationship that is warm, empathic, genuine, and showing positive regard, allowing the student to explore his or her problems, feelings, and inner self (see Rogers, 1961). It is precisely on the therapeutic relationship that the narrative counselor would take issue, considering that the person-centered counselor would regard this relationship as primary and all-important, and elevate it above other relationships in the student's life, thus excluding and marginalizing the contribution of the student's other relationships in overcoming his or her problems (Payne, 2000). Despite these differences, the narrative approach can be regarded as a more broad-based postmodern form of practice under which the person-centered approach may subsume.

The Narrative Approach to Discipline Practices

Unlike school guidance practices, school discipline practices in Hong Kong are relatively more eclectic, but the focus has often been on issues of conformity to norms and regulations, and subjecting students to social control (see Chan, 1996). Discipline teachers using the behavior therapy approach, for example, might focus on considering how student behavioral problems can be reduced or brought under control in school through restructuring the school environment, changing the problem behaviors, or maneuvering the consequences. Discipline teachers using the cognitive-behavioral therapy approach or the reality therapy approach, on the other hand, might go fur-

ther in defining for the students who exhibit problem behaviors the ultimate goal of being able to consciously exercise choices in self-regulation or self-control. In contrast, teachers in the narrative approach would first discard the notion that students have deficits or behavioral problems that need to be controlled. Instead, by deconstructing or externalizing disciplinary problems, students would be enabled to separate their identities from the problems, thus reducing their sense of blame and embarrassment and empowering them to control or influence their relationships with the problems.

Apart from externalizing the disciplinary problem, teachers using the narrative approach would also consider disciplinary problems as issues of power and power relation. Paradoxically, according to the narrative approach, neither teachers nor students solely possess or exercise power, and power is part of what students and teachers negotiate in their social and interpersonal relationships. In general, power is about positioning in relation to discourse, which in turn determines whether the student or the teacher can speak, what is sayable, and whether the account of the student or the teacher is listened to. Teachers in the narrative approach emphasize accepting the equal validity of the knowledge and voice of both teachers and students. However, they also acknowledge that some voices, such as those of the teachers or the school, might have more meaning-making power than others, such as those of the students (Speedy, 2000). Thus, teachers must assume that they always participate in domains of power and knowledge, and are often involved in questions of social control.

Nonetheless, when dealing with disciplinary problems under the narrative approach, on the one hand, teachers should not tolerate student misbehaviors as the result of power operating, and on the other hand, they should also refrain from subjecting students to repressive disciplinary regimes that may inadvertently support social control. In summary, the beliefs under the narrative approach in not privileging particular voices as well as in the power-sharing relationships allow teachers to solve disciplinary problems. Thus, discipline practices using externalization, negotiation and mediation (e.g., Winslade & Monk, 2000), and enlisting support of an ap-

preciative audience for the student's reauthored story free from the disciplinary problems can also be viewed as an extension of guidance practices under the narrative approach.

Beyond Guidance and Discipline: Applications of the Narrative Approach in Schools

The applications of the narrative approach in schools have major implications beyond the integration of guidance and discipline practices. In general, the principles of narrative therapy such as respectful conversations and power sharing in relationships endorsed in school as an attitude and a way of life can have a positive influence on the culture of the school in promoting student personal and social development.

From the narrative point of view, very often, dominant discourses in school are heavily influenced by psychological discourses that tend to use deficit-based descriptions of students (Gergen, 1990, 1991). Thus, students are commonly described by their underachievement, learning disabilities, attention deficits, hyperactivity, dyslexia, maladjustment, emotional disturbances, and conduct problems (Winslade & Monk, 1999). Apart from these pathology discourses, other common dominant discourses in Hong Kong schools could be related to academic achievement and examination. Accordingly, achievement is restricted to the linguistic and mathematical domains, thus silencing voices that represent talents from musical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist domains (see Gardner, 1983, 1999). Worse still, learning for performance and emphasis on knowing the right answer are valued, but learning for understanding and emphasis on creative and divergent thinking are marginalized.

Thus, teachers, working within the narrative approach, will be more sensitive to these psychological discourses as well as cultural discourses about ethnicity, gender, and class, and the power of discourses in affecting the way students experience school. Consequently, teachers will avoid speak-

ing about students as well as their families in ways that are totalizing or pathologizing. Thus, their reports and descriptions of students will be more tentative, focusing less on diagnosing deficits or problems and more on appreciating talents, competencies, and divergent thinking.

From the student perspective, when students realize that discourses are culturally produced and the stories they tell are only partial stories, students learn more about themselves. They also understand why they think and act the way they do through questioning the sources of their own voices in making sense of their schooling. In challenging the way discourses and disciplinary practices limit the sense they make of their lives, and deconstructing these dominant discourses, students may begin to open spaces for restorying their lived experiences in school. In addition, students are more empowered to take responsibility for combating the externalized problems, for constructing their life narratives, and for their choices in reauthoring.

The social constructionist view also gives relevance and meaning to the importance of the whole school approach in Hong Kong schools. Inevitably, students and teachers of the same school co-construct their stories based on their shared lived experiences in school. Thus, in recruiting an appreciative audience for students, the narrative approach encourages the development of school-wide support groups to combat, among others, truancy, suspension, bullying, eating problems, and mood problems, and to validate students' reauthored stories and support these students in changes they have made and wish to maintain. Further, in supporting students for positive changes, the conventional use of certificates and letters, and other means of communication among students and teachers, can often be a powerful means of affirming students' moves to deal with their guidance and disciplinary problems in their school lives (Payne, 2000; White & Epston, 1990).

In summary, the narrative approach opens up fresh ways to talk about the intimate and daily struggles of students and teachers to create meaningful and satisfying school lives in the midst of individual goals, institutional demands, and pervasive social forces. More importantly, it provides a means

for integrating current guidance and discipline practices in Hong Kong schools under the whole school approach, and it sheds further light on ways to put into effective practice the notion of whole-person development in students. Nonetheless, the extent to which our educational ends in Hong Kong schools can be accomplished through the narrative means as suggested has to await further evaluation studies and long-term programmatic research in the years to come.

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