

Documenting Children's Stories

Andy Gollop and Cass Pulley are Outreach Workers working for the Roskear Outreach Service, part of Services for Children, Young People and Families within Cornwall. The Roskear Outreach Service offers support to children aged 6 – 11 years old and their families who are experiencing emotional and behavioural difficulties. Both have undertaken the Level One Narrative Therapy training with Hugh Fox. This article describes how the Narrative conversations they have with children are documented.

Matthew and Andy

As a service which actively finds ways to record and document children's work with us, it seemed only natural (although having completed the Level 1 course with Hugh Fox I now know that 'natural' is a structuralist construct and so does not fit with the non-structuralist viewpoint consistent with the narrative approach...) to find a way to document the narrative conversations that we were having with children.

The approach I took was to record conversations as verbatim as possible on big, colourful pieces of paper, with the intention of 'ghost writing' a story using as many of the child's actual words as possible (Ingram and Perlez 2004); the children appear to enjoy watching the conversation unfold on the page in front of them, and the idea of having a 'book' at the end seems to provide additional motivation.

One particular young boy I used this approach with was Matthew. Matthew was a bright and articulate eight year old with a cheeky sense of humour and time spent with him was always enjoyable. At the time Matthew was not receiving any education within school as a result of two permanent exclusions, following aggressive outbursts due to difficulties in dealing with angry feelings.

I had known Matthew for about fourteen months, having used Cognitive-Behavioural ideas in our work together to date before deciding to take a Narrative approach. We externalised The Anger, and Matthew created a character named Smasher who used his 'Smash Stick' to give Matthew 'The Angry Strength':

"The Angry Strength goes to the end of the stick and shoots out towards Matthew's heart. Matthew's heart has metal doors on it, and when these doors are locked, The Angry Strength can not get into his heart, but these doors are stiff and Matthew does not feel that he has the strength to be able to close these doors by himself. When the doors are open, The Angry Strength gets through and gives Matthew's heart more strength, making it beat faster, and this strength goes to the rest of his body. "

This Angry Strength would make Matthew hurt people which he was not happy about, and Matthew's difficulties with Smasher were compounded by

Smasher's relationship with The Lonely Man, Mr Worry, and The Unhappy Man.

As his story progressed, Matthew spoke of many times when Smasher tried to give him The Angry Strength but was not able to as Matthew had closed the metal doors on his heart in time. This caused Smasher great concern:

"Smasher thinks, 'Matthew is strong, stronger than me! I'm not sure if The Angry Strength will get past the metal doors on his heart anymore!!' Matthew has stopped Smasher so many times that Smasher is now very, very weak."

As we know, all good stories need a hero (Matthew in this case) and all good heroes need allies. In "The Story of How Matthew Took Control of Smasher" a very important ally of Matthew's was Mr Happy.

"Mr Happy is on Matthew's side to help him to stop Smasher. When Matthew feels happy, Mr Happy is strong, and this helps Matthew to be strong."

In what felt like a suitably optimistic end to his story, Matthew talked about the many ways that he can make Mr Happy feel strong, and we recognised the part that his family have to play:

"Cuddles also make Mr Happy strong, and Mum, Dad, John, Jasmine, Nanny, Grandma and Granddad all make Mr Happy strong with their cuddles; these cuddles make Mr Happy strong because they are nice and when people cuddle Matthew, it makes him think that he is a nice person. Which he is!"

Not having the confidence at that point in my relationship with Narrative to actually include family members in my sessions with Matthew (and having little idea of Outsider Witness practice back then) I decided to involve Matthew's family in his story by writing to them and asking them to contribute to the story by giving examples of times when they had observed Matthew 'stop Smasher'; their responses were written into his story, so he had one chapter that instead of being a record of our conversations together, was actually based on the words of his family and so the content was to all intents and purposes a surprise; one that proved worthwhile I believe.

"Matthew's mum Yvette noticed Matthew take control of Smasher one day in June 2006. Matthew was feeding Tinkerbelle the cat. Tinkerbelle is known as Tinks and is a mischievous cat who always tries to escape from the house. As Matthew was putting Tinkerbelle's food into her bowl, he spilt all of her biscuits. Matthew seemed as if he might be feeling The Anger, and Yvette wondered if maybe Smasher was trying to give him The Angry Strength, but Matthew took control and did not let Smasher make him do something that would get him into trouble. Matthew stopped and asked for a dustpan and brush to clean up the biscuits. Yvette thought that the way Matthew took control of this situation showed how he is getting better at dealing with The Anger."

The end product was fifty typed A4 pages colourfully illustrated with Matthew's drawings, with a front cover, contents page and blurb like all good books (fortunately, as a service we are able to maintain our case loads at a level that enables us to find the time to put together such a document). My hope was that Matthew would read his story from time to time to remind himself of how he keeps the metal doors on his heart closed to The Angry Strength, and also that by proudly sharing his story with his family, a shared understanding and appreciation of Matthew's efforts to control The Anger could be developed.

In advance of writing this article, I spoke briefly with Matthew and we had the following conversation:

What did you think about having the book at the end of our conversations together?

It was good. It had all the stuff that we did in it. I could look at it and think 'Why am I letting Smasher get to me?' and instead think happy thoughts to make Mr Happy strong so he could get there faster with the key to shut the gates [the 'metal doors' on Matthew's heart].

What did you do with the book after I gave it to you?

First I showed it to Mum; then Grandma and Granddad; then Nan; then Dad. Then I read it again.

What did your family think about your story?

Mum said it was a really good book, and Nan said it was very good, so did Dad. Grandma and Granddad gave me a hug and said it helped them understand why I get angry and how I control The Anger.

What was your favourite part of the story?

When Mr Happy came into it, it was good and he helped me control The Anger. Mr Happy is important in the book and in my life. I think about happy times to keep Mr Happy strong.

N.B: When I last had contact with the family, Matthew was working two afternoons a week in a new school, and multi-agency meetings that were once full of despair had been filled with hope, which is testament to Matthew's hard work and commitment to *'be able to go to school and for Smasher to not cause any trouble.'*

Mark and Cass

I choose to use a Narrative approach in my work with Mark (pseudonym). Mark was an active, intelligent and charming ten year old with a great sense of humour. He was very keen to engage with us and was pleased to have the opportunity to talk to someone about some of the difficulties in his life. At the

time Mark was experiencing difficulties in school and had undergone several temporary exclusions due to staff finding his aggressive outbursts and controlling behaviours very difficult to manage. The Narrative work was preceded by a six week piece of work focussing on his thoughts and feelings around his parent's separation and continued acrimonious relationship.

As with the work with Matthew I also chose to record the conversations with Mark during each session, verbatim, on large pieces of paper, with the intention of writing a story, as far as possible, in his own words. The story took the form of a retelling of our sessions. After each session I would extend the story and at the beginning of each session would read the updated version to Mark and check that the account was accurate. When we had externalised them Mark drew pictures of the problems. These pictures were included in the final version of his story.

Mark and I began by talking about some of the feelings that he was finding difficult to manage. We then went on to externalise and explore each of these feelings in the following sessions. The name Mark gave to his angry feelings was Goggles and he enjoyed exploring Goggles' character and the effects he had on his life.

“When something made Mark angry Goggles would whisper to Mark, in a Cornish accent, that he should kick, punch, throw things and/or annoy people. Goggles was mainly invisible, if you saw him all that you would see would be his eyes and a mask around his eyes. This was useful for Goggles as it meant he could creep up on Mark and make him do things that would get Mark into trouble and make him unhappy. For example if Mark was expecting to go in goal at lunch time and then suddenly discovered that someone else was doing it, Goggles would appear and make Mark act in an angry way.”

After spending some time exploring the effects of the problems on Mark's life we were able to look at how he was already managing these problems and how he could draw on these skills to better deal with them.

“Mark and Cass decided that The Happiness, which Mark named Jolly George, would be able to help Mark to talk to Goggles and Shadow (The Jealousy) and persuade them that the way they were getting him to behave was not what Mark wanted and was not making him happy.”

We used “The Landscape of Action and Identity” (Re-authoring conversations map) and Hugh Fox's “Ladder of Intentional State Identity Categories” to find out what was really important to Mark.

“Cass and Mark continued to explore what was most important to Mark and to collect evidence for Jolly George to use when challenged by Goggles or Shadow. They found out that Mark was continuing to show that his friendships were very important to him. He chose to behave in ways that demonstrated that he enjoyed being with his friends and did not want to let them down or get them into trouble.”

The work Mark and I were doing was fed back to his mother and some of the staff at his school at our six weekly review meetings. As well as an explanation of the work I read out the updated versions of the story and provided them with a copy. This appeared to be an effective way of helping them to understand how Mark was thinking and feeling and how he was trying to manage the difficulties.

When the work was complete I asked Mark whether providing school with copies of the story had been useful. He said it had been helpful as it meant that they knew what he was trying to do and attempted to support him by referring to the story. However both school and Mark's mother reported that when they tried to help him by talking about the story he was not interested. I am not sure why this was. It could have been that I had not explained the Narrative approach well enough and therefore maybe the way it was used was not helpful to Mark.

In order to further involve Mark's mother and the school in the work I conducted an Outsider Witness session involving Mark, his mother, his teacher, a teaching assistant and the Senior Outreach Worker on the case.

"After listening to Mark and Cass talk, Mark's mum, Carol and Emma spoke about the words that had stood out for them and why.....Mark listened to everything that was said and then talked about what had stood out for him and how this may affect his thoughts and behaviour in the future. He liked his mum's image of a tower of blocks and adapted this to a pyramid of blocks that he is climbing up to achieve his goals. We talked about each block representing some knowledge or a skill that Mark is using."

After presenting Mark and his mother with the finished version of the story I asked them a few questions about how useful it had been along the way and how they might use it in the future. His mother had been concerned, at first, that Mark was just making up a story however she found the beginning of the story very enlightening and had been very impressed by how well he had been able to understand and evaluate where his difficulties may have stemmed from.

"Mark first remembered Goggles causing trouble for him when he was in Year 3 at St Martin's School. There was an incident when he and some other children were being rude, hiding under chairs, answering back and throwing pencils and chairs. The teacher sent them out of the room and a short while after Mark saw that the teacher was crying. Goggles was satisfied by this as he was friends with The Sadness who wanted other people to be sad. Mark thought that The Sadness may have been having quite an influence on him at that time because he would have been old enough to understand about his parent's separation. His parents separated when he was about 4 years old but he thought it would have taken until Year 3 for him to really understand what was happening."

Mark's mother reported that it had been useful to have the updated copies of the story as it was available to read and remind them of the work. Mark said that he had felt listened to and it was good to see his story in print.

Both Mark and his mother thought that they would use the story in the future as a reminder if Mark began struggling to manage his feelings. Mark said he would keep the story under his bed as then he would know where it was if he needed it.

Mark's mother recognised the effort that had it had taken Mark to complete the story and was proud of him.

The next step is for the story to be shared with members of staff at the secondary school that Mark will begin in September. I will also meet with Mark on a few occasions and use his story to support him with this transition. I hope that it will help him to keep focussed on the things that are important to him and how to achieve these.

References:

Ingram, C. & Parlez, A. 2004: 'The getting of wisdoms.' *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, No 2.