

Contextual and Transformative Narrative Practice in School Communities

Linda van Duuren and Helene Schoeman

presented with

Chulaine Afrika, Luqmaan Rakiep and Yasmina Abdurahman

Schools as learning and teaching communities face many challenges, limitations and possibilities. Several programmes have been designed and implemented to assist teaching staff, parents and learners to navigate these. In our presentation we illustrate how Narrative Practice supports a **flexibility of responses** to the problems that children, parents, teachers and others face in the day to day learning and living of life. In the presentation we will demonstrate how contextual, transformative Narrative Practice is translated to working in a school context in South Africa. We will include examples of our narrative and teaching practices and briefly situate these in the theory that sustains these practices.

We were privileged to co-present with three teachers from Mitchell's Plain, Cape Town, who three years ago, took up an invitation to participate in co-authoring the development of Narrative Practices in school settings in South Africa. The text of that presentation is unavailable in this document, as it has been taken from an article currently under review.

The Narrative Practice project has grown and has now been carefully crafted for over 90 participants in 14 schools in and around Cape Town. We show how we have used and shaped Narrative Practices to support our belief that teacher professional development is best served by working with and alongside teachers within the context of their everyday experiences, calling on their local expertise.

Contextual, transformative Narrative Practice with teachers in schools requires co-participation, a focus on local knowledge, the co-construction of preferred possibilities and a commitment to responding to the opportunities for care and support that occur in the everyday. This is in line with our intention of finding ways to support teachers in their efforts of making a difference in the communities they serve.

Linda van Duuren has taught in formal and informal educational settings including early childhood, primary, secondary, specialised, as well as adult education. For the past ten years she has worked with children experiencing learning difficulties and other barriers to learning at St George's Grammar School, Cape Town, SA. She also runs a private Consulting practice, consulting with families, adults and children about concerns and possibilities they hold for their lives. Her focus is working alongside teachers, parents, facilitators and therapists in such a way as to support their contributions to the lives of the children in their care. In 2002 Linda completed an MTh in Pastoral Therapy, with a specialisation in Narrative Therapy. **Her dream** is

for teachers, parents and other carers to benefit from the possibilities made available when co-authoring in the narrative metaphor.

Helene Schoeman has served in a variety of teaching and lecturing positions for the past 27 years. The bulk of her work has been in the foundation phase and she currently teaches Grade 1 learners at The Grove Primary School, Cape Town, SA. In 2002 Helene completed an MTh in Pastoral Therapy, with a specialisation in Narrative Therapy which she applies in her daily classroom practices. She also runs a small private practice. She has a particular interest in supporting teachers who work in challenging contexts. Helene has a passion for finding ways for children to experience possibilities of who they can be, outside of the taken for granted measures of what qualifies as “success” in education.

Schools as learning and teaching communities face many challenges, limitations and difficulties in current times. Being educators and support practitioners in South Africa in the year 2009 involves, among many other things, having to face the daily reality of working with children of all ages who have suffered distressing events that have had a significant impact on the lives of these children and their families. School communities, such as the ones we work in, reflect the greater narratives of the happenings in our country today. Many of these narratives threaten to rob us of hope – that despite living in the world’s most celebrated democracy, the daily experiences of many of the children, families, teachers and other caregivers are often too difficult and too challenging. At times it would seem that the pressures of living in South Africa in 2009 could serve to shatter the fabric of a country that stepped into Hope in 1994.

Given this daily reality, which is unpredictable and ever-changing, teachers are constantly being expected to stretch beyond what is traditionally regarded as being within the range of their professional training and scope. Much of what is required of teachers is not evident in their job description, but is included into what is commonly referred to as the “hidden curriculum”. The “hidden curriculum” refers to the unwritten and unspoken hidden expectations of the variety of commitments teachers attend to within their working days. We will look briefly at some of the hidden demands placed on teachers in RSA today, namely the teaching hidden curriculum, the pastoral care hidden curriculum, the professional practice hidden curriculum.

The teaching hidden-curriculum

When considering the professional implications, we are looking at the pressure of delivering a relatively new and unsettled curriculum. In addition, there are the requirements of being able to offer quality teaching and learning support in increasingly inclusive classrooms, frequently without sufficient support and resources. With globalisation, there is the increasing urgency of keeping up with “international standards” – with expectations of offering “quality education” that is

innovative, or at the “cutting edge”. This often translates into information overload with little opportunity for integration into daily practices.

The pastoral care hidden-curriculum

Whilst basic teacher training offers some introductory counselling training, teaching practice necessitates emotional support for children, parents and colleagues in a variety of areas. Such areas are those which would often be seen as areas for specialist intervention, for example: trauma debriefing, divorce counselling, bereavement and loss counselling, conflict mediation, inclusive education, learning difficulties, sexuality, racism, sexism. Many of these situations are accompanied by a sense of insurmountable fear and grief, leaving people with a sense of hopelessness. This means that teachers find themselves at the trying to integrate disjointed bits of theoretical knowledge with daily practices in an effort to help, fix or heal.

The professional hidden-curriculum

Professionally qualified teachers, who have entered this profession for love of subject or children, find themselves navigating their way through a number of hazardous situations. These include

- Staff relationships carrying heavy burdens and difficulties within hierarchies of power and influence.
- Working under “the gaze” - expectations of “best practice”, performance assessments, IQMS ratings and ideas of the right/wrong ways of doing things
- Having interactions with parents who feel they “employ” the teachers on the one hand, or parents finding themselves positioned by hardship as being unable to offer any support at all ... on the other.

Many teachers will agree that there is the frustration of being viewed by the greater community as incompetent and lesser-professionals, often referring to their status by saying, “I am only a teacher”.

Limiting ideas

We notice the effects of the hidden curricula in a number of ways. Ideas that only certain people hold ‘expert knowledge’ and ‘professional qualification’ seem to have the effect of limiting teachers’ sense of competence in dealing with daily social, emotional and spiritual needs. Teachers query whether they have sufficient ‘expert knowledge’ about matters surrounding difficult situations that face children, families

and teachers today. Many, therefore, take little action in response or some avoid taking any action at all.

Narratives of Hopelessness

School communities, such as the ones we work in, reflect the greater narratives of the happenings in our country today. Many of these narratives threaten to rob communities of hope – that despite living in the world’s most celebrated democracy, the daily experiences of many of the children, families, teachers and other caregivers are often too difficult and too challenging. At times it would seem that the pressures of living in South Africa in 2009 could serve to shatter the fabric of a country that stepped into Hope in 1994. This leaves us with an escalating sense of a “generalized anarchy.”

Truth recipes and remedies

In response to these academic, social and emotional needs in school communities, many programmes have been developed and are on offer to assist people in regaining a sense of control. They offer tools and skills as solutions to be implemented and offer a range of useful advice. It is our contention that whilst there is often an initial sense of relief on the part of teachers and parents, who leave such courses feeling better equipped to “deal with” things, that such skills and tools are not sustainable unless they are embedded in a broader philosophical position, vision or direction. We believe that solutions developed in isolation, whilst often useful to inform thinking, run the risk of becoming imported Truth-Recipes and Remedies that powerfully exclude and disqualify local wisdom.

We believe that Narrative Practices stemming from Narrative Therapy (White, Epston, Freedman and Combs) ideas have been greatly supportive of our developing a broader philosophical base from which to practice. We illustrate how Narrative Practice supports a **flexibility of response** to the problems and concerns that children, parents, teachers and others face in the day to day learning and living of life. This flexibility of response invites people to move away from a one-size-fits-all approach to difficulties and challenges. We demonstrate how contextual, transformative Narrative Practice is translated to working in various school contexts.

We have used and shaped Narrative Practices to support our belief that teacher professional development is best served by working with and alongside teachers within the context of their everyday experiences, calling on their local expertise.

Our intention is that of finding ways to support teachers (and other carers) in their efforts of making a difference in the communities they serve. By other carers, we

include...children, teachers, facilitators, ground staff, parents, management, and therapists.

Our challenge is that of inviting teachers into searching for a flexibility of response to the concerns that children, parents and others face in the day to day learning and living of life.

Our ethical position is that of finding ways for co-participation with teachers by supporting them within the communities they serve. We do this by

- finding ways to focus on and witness local knowledge
- actively seeking ways to emphasise the hope and healing being storied in the co-construction of preferred possibilities
- actively resisting “Truths” that support marginalisation, devaluing and dismissal of local wisdom

We hold a commitment to responding to opportunities for care and support that occur in the everyday and making our therapy wisdoms visible in our everyday practices and interactions.

Our context

We speak from our personal contexts as teacher/counsellor practitioners, working in school environments on a daily basis where we engage with people in the everyday. We are committed to what Stephen Madigan calls a “therapy of compassion and love” (Stephen Madigan, Narrative Therapy with Children) and see our work as being that which is inclusive of all people in the school community. We have found this work to have relevance in preschools, primary schools, high schools, NGO’s and in adult education.

Who is the school community?

We view school as an Inclusive Community made up of children, teachers, parents, facilitators, support services, therapists, ground staff and management. It is, for us, a community filled with resource and possibility. It is, for us, the Village that Raises the Child.

The teachers’ landscape

The landscape for teachers we know, therefore, is working within a diverse community of people and attending to the unpredictable daily menu on school campuses, juggling with the official teaching curriculum whilst coping with the hidden

curricula of pastoral care and appropriate professional practice. This, even in well-resourced schools, translates into living with an unrelenting onslaught of demand, (many times including shock and trauma), whilst often receiving negligible support and care.

Life and love and care

We marvel at the resourcefulness and compassion with which teachers deal with the daily realities of the children in their care, over and above their daily planned-for lessons.

Our collective reality

We acknowledge and are deeply concerned about the effects of living in RSA in 2009...and being daily witness to the Conflict brought from home, in classrooms, in staffrooms, on playgrounds. We hold in conscious awareness the risks for teachers, who are daily witnesses to the lives of others, whilst navigating their own lives. Hearing of trauma, witnessing trauma, experiencing trauma and receiving little care or witness of what they are daily witness to. Kaethe Weingarten in her book *Common Shock* (2003: 6) speaks of Common Shock as the result of 'Witnessing violence and violation'; when we 'routinely, ...experience events and exchanges that disturb us' and how 'we must metabolize daily jolts'. She says that 'few people are aware of the chronic, debilitating effects of common shock, know how to deal with it themselves or, crucially, help children to do so. We find that her work closely reflects our personal lived experiences as well as that of the many teachers we have come to know.

The effects on teachers

The effect of such lived experience is voiced by many who leave the teaching profession. There are many who remain who feel frustrated, overwhelmed, helpless and disqualified to help....even frightened of stepping into what can be claimed as the territory of psychologists, social workers, pastoral therapists and other practitioners positioned as experts in their field. In the fact of these challenges displayed in our communities, professionals are invited into positions of hierarchy and solutions. They may step into exercising power and control as ways of showing or acting care. The high level of need invites these actions as solutions. However, recipients of these actions, programmes and solutions are often experienced as being acted upon rather than consulted as collaborators or co-writers of these actions and solutions.

In many school communities, the response is talking “the truth” about children and families. These ‘truths’ are circulated and result in a pathologising that is all too familiar, seemingly benign ‘diagnoses’ and ‘prognoses’ about children prevail. Their perceived weaknesses are fore-grounded and speculation on the origins and causes of their problems are considered part of ‘professional teaching practice’. Meetings about children and families are regular and expected practice in many schools. Notes are written, files are kept and **institutionalised narratives** are generated about children’s lives and develop a powerful life of their own. These Narratives become the lenses through which children and their families are seen, resulting in some being measured as passing acceptable standards, and others failing. Many times these people experience themselves as judged, excluded and problematic.

But whose narratives are they?

- Who tells these narratives and how are they told?
- Who helps to construct the meanings made of the events that happen in children’s lives?
- Do these constructions serve them or do they limit them to living their lives in self-doubting ways?
- What are the effects of fixed and limiting narratives?
- How often are the children consulted about these narratives, or their parents for that matter? How would children’s lives be different if they were able to reconstruct the limiting narratives in ways that helped them to live in self-love, wonderment and hope.

Our response

Our response has been that of challenging fixed ideas that wish to confine therapeutic/counselling practice to limited spaces and by taking up the position that Narrative Practices do not belong solely in the realm of specialist therapists, but belong in the broader school communities too.

We believe that as Narrative Therapists, we are in the position to make a difference by translating some of our training into a resource for the lived experience of the people with whom we work (children, teachers, facilitators, parents, therapists)

We have concentrated on developing a series of Narrative Practices: Co-authoring Workshops that have been specifically designed for teachers, professionals and caregivers working in the area of child care. The workshops introduce participants to selected practices of Narrative Therapy (Morgan; Sliep and Kotzé) with the purpose of supporting the position of teachers who engage with students as counselling practitioners in their school context.

Narrative Practices: Co-authoring workshops

We held our first workshop in 2004 and the interest in our work has grown to include over 100 participants in 14 schools and NGOs in and around Cape Town. We have also recently been invited to participate in the training of facilitators on the visionary Umthombo Wesizwe (CDI) project. We are excited to be included in this work that is designed to nurture future leaders of South Africa through a diversity lense, harnessing diversity as a critical leadership style for a global village.

In conclusion

Contextual, transformative Narrative Practice with teachers in schools requires co-participation, a focus on local knowledge, the co-construction of preferred possibilities and a commitment to responding to the opportunities for care and support that occur in the everyday. This is in line with our intention of finding ways to support teachers in their efforts of making a difference in the communities they serve.

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