

## Thinking about Stories and their Use in Education and Therapy

Ron Best

I have been thinking a great deal about stories lately. This is partly because I had to read up on something called *narrative therapy* for some lectures I was doing for teachers and others with pastoral care duties in Greek schools earlier this year; partly because I have been reading Rob Parkinson's book *Transforming Tales: How Stories Can Change People* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2009) to review for a journal; and partly because I examined a PhD thesis in July which reported on a programme of collaborative writing used with children having difficulties with their reading.

All this reminded me of a course I designed for university students a few years back, which I called 'Educational Narratives'. This engaged students in what is called 'creative non-fiction' - all the literary devices of fiction could be used but the stories had to be true - and required that they write a short narrative about some aspect of their own experience of school and another about someone else whose school experience had been very different. They then had to discuss some of the educational issues raised in these contrasting narratives. I was bowled over by the quality of students' work when they became absorbed in telling their stories in print. Not only could I clearly detect their growing awareness of key experiences that shaped their attitudes to schooling, but it seemed certain that the very telling of them was a means of healing which surely helped them face life (and the demands of a university course in Education) with greater resilience and self-understanding.

This will come as no surprise to teachers and counsellors who are aware of the place of stories in a variety of therapies. Whenever a counsellor asks a client to talk about a problem in their lives, they begin to tell their story. A key idea is that we 'compose' and live out our lives according to patterns or 'scripts' which we have learned from our earliest years, principally from what we see in the lives of our parents and carers. (This is perhaps why we so often repeat their mistakes!)

In narrative therapy in schools, the therapist works with the child *to re-script* their perceptions of their classroom experience and behaviour by distancing themselves from the situation, such that they see themselves not as 'the problem', but as struggling with or against the problem much as the hero struggles with an adversary in an adventure story. Thus, the child who is labelled 'trouble' by their teachers, is helped to see 'Trouble' as an enemy to be overcome (with the help and support of sensitive teachers who are able to grasp the distinction!), rather than as a personal deficiency or pathology. In play therapy, kids use toys in a sand tray to act out (subconsciously) the very situations which are causing them distress in their own lives and impeding their learning in the process. Tricia Waters, an educational psychotherapist and teacher at Chichester University, uses a collaborative writing approach in which a poor reader, their teacher (or classroom assistant) and a parent work together to compose a story which becomes the text for the child to read as part of their reading development<sup>1</sup>. Clearly, this is not just an educational exercise but also

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on this project and related work, visit [www.therapeuticstorywriting.com](http://www.therapeuticstorywriting.com) and [www.storylinkstraining.co.uk](http://www.storylinkstraining.co.uk)

a therapeutic one, and one which brings much needed change to the relationships between the three participants.

So: telling and listening to stories is as much a serious business as it is fun. To be human is to be a member of a story-telling species; our lives are stories and they are part of the great, unfolding story of human history. But while we may make good use of story in teaching history, literacy and literature (and, no doubt, in many other subjects), the use of story in supporting young people with problems of a personal, social and emotional nature is surely an under-used resource.

I would be interested to hear from anyone currently using story in their pastoral work in schools, colleges or universities, or who would like to know more about the books I have been reading. I can be e-mailed at [ron@profronbest.co.uk](mailto:ron@profronbest.co.uk)

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