

Using letters in school counselling

by

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This paper explores the creative use of therapeutic letters in a school counselling context. A number of different types of therapeutic documents are described including letters of introduction and invitation, letters of reflection, letters to keep contact, and letters to summarise co-research.

Keywords: *therapeutic letters, therapeutic documents, school counselling, narrative therapy.*

I began school counselling in the NSW Department of Education last year and quickly found myself in an exciting and challenging new job. School counsellors in this system are required to have teaching experience and a psychology degree, as the work involves both educational assessment and counselling. My psychology training had been very structuralist but my understanding of the world had been previously shaped by an art school education – a context in which I was exposed to poststructuralist ideas. I chose narrative practice as my preferred approach to my new career and sought narrative-based training prior to beginning as a school counsellor.

And just as well too! Otherwise I would not have known about the use of letters in therapeutic practice (thanks particularly to Carolyn Markey at the Dulwich Centre). I have found this strategy helpful in supporting students in the development of preferred stories and identities. The use of letters in narrative practice has been well-documented (Epston 1998; Freedman & Combs 1996; Freeman, Epston & Lobovits 1997; Madigan 1997; Morgan 2000; Sax 1997; White & Epston 1990; Winslade & Smith 1997; Wixson 2000). The opportunities to put these ideas into practice seemed plentiful in my new work setting. Letters are generally communications *to* people, rather than communications *about* people – perhaps that is an important factor in their usefulness. Here are some of the ways in which I've used letters in my work with students. The examples of letters that follow are composites of those I have written and real names have not been used.

Introductions and invitations

While most of the students I work with in high schools are self-referrals, the work I do in primary school settings comprises mostly of referrals from teachers. Referral forms generally outline the areas of concern and sometimes tell me about qualities or special strengths the teacher has noticed in the child. When I contact parents and caregivers, I make sure that, as well as checking out their concerns, I enquire about the child's interests and what the carer appreciates about their child. This information-gathering exercise tells me not only about adults' ideas about problems, but also about acknowledged skills and knowledges – those which already have an existence in the social construction of the student's identity.

One student with whom I worked last year was Tim, a Year 2 student. Tim's father, John, was concerned about Tim's progress at school. Tim often found schoolwork challenging but had been 'assessed' by a school counsellor and was found not to satisfy the criteria for extra support funding². It was suggested by the teacher that Tim lacked self-confidence. By unpacking this idea a bit we discovered that Tim appeared to be a cautious child and that this quality might have some merit. After meeting with John, I sent an invitation to Tim to meet with me. This was in the form of a letter, in which I expressed some knowledge (supplied by John and Tim's teacher) of qualities he was demonstrating, and also of my curiosity about Tim. Here is the letter.

Dear Tim,

Hi! My name is Katy.

I met your Dad last week and he told me some very interesting things about you. He told me you were a very sensible and well-mannered boy! When he said this, I thought, 'I would like to meet Tim. He sounds like a person I'd like to get to know'. He also told me you have a playmate, Al, and a parrot called Josie. I would love to know more about them. He also said that you like to play with your Gameboy. Is it fun?

I also met Mr Arnold, your teacher. He told me you are a person who thinks carefully before acting and who waits until he is sure of something before starting it. He also told me that he gave you a Chartbuster. What's that? I didn't know what he meant. Maybe you could help me understand what it is.

If you like, we could meet after recess to get to know each other. I think we could have some interesting things to talk about.

I have two dogs and a cat. Snooky is a small, one-eyed dog and Tiger is a shaggy, shy dog. My cat's name is Mr Kovac. He is a very old. Mr Kovac is a very good friend to me.

If you would like, I will come to your classroom after recess and, if Mr Arnold says it's okay, we could spend some time together. What do you think?

Best wishes from Katy.

I met with Tim once a month over three terms. The Chartbuster turned out to be a merit award for staying on task. When Tim drew me a picture of himself getting the Chartbuster, he represented himself wearing a huge smile!

Using Tim's knowledges and skills about what helped him stay on task and what got in the way of staying on task, we started a *How to stay on task*³ archive, copies of which were made for each classroom in the school and one which Tim kept for himself. This way, we spread the news about Tim's knowledges and skills in the practice of staying on task, an important one in managing school expectations and one with which many of us experience difficulties, even after we finish school!

When I write a letter to a primary school student, I sometimes meet with them and ask them if they would like to share the letter with their teacher and/or parent/s/caregiver/s, or if they would prefer to keep it as private correspondence. Generally, I find that children prefer to keep these letters private. Speaking later with parents of children who choose to keep their letters private, they sometimes tell me that their children mention the letter to them with considerable excitement.

By the time I see students who are referred, their parents have often already had contact with the school and have heard about the school's frustrating experiences with their child. The problem usually stands tall in such contact. Letters to parent/s/caregiver/s can be useful invitations to respectful ways of thinking about the problem and the student before we meet. Letters can open up positive contacts that recognise the challenges faced by the family, and can talk about working together against the problem rather than against the child. I find that people respond very positively to informal, handwritten letters, which suggest such possibilities. Sometimes, there is a sense of relief expressed when I meet with people, that someone recognises the difference between a child and a problem. This provides a good basis for our meetings and an opening for preferred stories to be told.

Reflections

Sometimes, when I am reflecting on my conversations with children and young people, resonance comes in the form of a metaphor, which may (or may not) be an experience-near⁴ description of the situation for them. This can prompt me to write the student a letter while the idea is still clear in my head. I then make sure that they receive the letter before I meet with them again, at which time I can check out to see if the metaphor resonates for them.

When I was working with Meya, such a metaphor-letter turned out to be useful. Meya was a young person experiencing the effects of stress and isolation. One day after meeting with her, I was pondering the situation in which she found herself, when I remembered a metaphor evoked in community work in Malawi, Africa, of a 'bundle of sticks'. Here is the letter I wrote to Meya.

Dear Meya,

I was thinking about what you've told me about the challenges in your life and how you feel you are standing alone with this. Is that right?

For some reason, I remembered the following writing, which was from a group of people who joined together to overcome some serious challenges in their community:

*One stick on its own is easily broken
But if you put sticks in a bundle that bundle becomes
very strong,
so strong that you cannot break it.
A spirit on its own can easily be broken.
But bundled together we will not break.
That is our power and our strength⁵*

I think perhaps sometimes people are like the sticks – we can bundle them together to build strong support. Sometimes good thoughts could be like sticks too. Maybe there are other good things that bundled together make us stronger so we cannot be easily broken. What do you think? Do you have some thoughts about people, ideas, events or other things that would make a bundle of power and strength for you? I would be interested to hear your ideas about this when we meet again.

*Best wishes,
Katy Batha,
School Counsellor.*

When we met again, Meya expressed her ideas about the bundle of sticks and was able to re-member⁶ ways in which various members of her family and friends supported her across time. Meya made a bundle, which was not static and to which she could always add. It helped describe an alternative story of care and support.

Although I generally work in isolation, I meet with a team fortnightly and I have used this situation to gather outsider witness⁷ accounts from other counsellors. William, a Year 3 student, was referred because of concerns with his

maths. Through co-research, we had mapped the parameters of what he named *The Slippery Numbers*. I obtained the permission of William and his mum, Jane, to videotape a session with William, in which we discussed what we had discovered in order to co-write a report for Jane, and for Mary's teacher. I also gained permission to share this tape with my fellow-counsellors. Before showing them a segment of the tape, I gave each a set of reflecting questions and asked them to respond in writing to William after they had seen the videotape. I then shared these letters with William when we next met. This provided him with a re-telling of his alternative story in which he tricked *The Slippery Numbers* by making it known that he knew some of their tricks! The counsellors were able to acknowledge William's agency and speculate on what effect this agency might mean for William, thus recognising an identity of William as a person who could shrink the effects of *The Slippery Numbers*.

Keeping contact

Often I find that I can't meet with all the students I hope to in a given week. Also, the vagaries of high school life mean that I make many more appointments with self-referred high school students than are kept. I have found that keeping in contact by letter leaves the door open to students who haven't made it back to my office or have been at the bottom of the long list I haven't managed to get through. If we have met before, I will have been thinking about them and so offer some reflection in a letter. Here is one I wrote to Sia, a young woman whose life situation presented her with poverty, distress and the effects of Sadness.

Hi Sia!

I'm sorry I didn't get to see you this week and have found myself wondering about some things.

You talked about The Sadness that fills a lot of space in your life. What ideas do you have about the effect The Sadness has on you? Does it get in the road of your relationships with friends or your schoolwork? What does it say to you about yourself and others? How does it have you acting in various situations and at different times?

I was also struck by your hope for Joy in your family. I was reminded for some reason of the story about an archaeologist called Heinrich Schliemann who uncovered the site and treasure of the Ancient Greek city of Troy.

Everyone believed Troy was merely a mythical city, that it had never really existed, that it only lived in stories. But Mr Schliemann found a tiny bit of evidence that convinced him of the existence of Troy and bit by bit, he revealed its location and showed that it was not just a myth. Troy is now marked on all the maps of Greece and many people go to visit it. I have seen it myself.

If you were a Joy archaeologist, what clues would you look for to be watching out for the existence of Joy in your family? What would Joy look like, do you think? How would you recognise it? Is there any possibility bits of Joy are buried in the house somewhere but The Sadness and maybe other things are covering them up? Who in your family would be most likely to notice Joy first, if some evidence of it was uncovered, do you think?

Please excuse all the questions but you've really got me wondering. Does any of this sound like it would be interesting to talk about at our next meeting, or would there be something else you would prefer to talk about?

I look forward to our conversation next week.

Kind regards,

Katy

Counsellor

Sia and I met again and, after several meetings, a rich description of her *Hopes for the Future* became apparent. This preferred territory became the focus of our conversations, as we looked at the ways in which Sia was already working towards the life for which she secretly hoped.

Summarising co-research

A letter can also be useful, for both the student and the counsellor, to summarise what has happened in a meeting, as details can be lost in time. Here is a letter I wrote to Mary, which summarised the co-research carried out in our first session together.

Dear Mary,

Hi! I really enjoyed meeting with you on Friday and getting to know a bit about you. Your Mum had told me about you on the phone. She said that you are a well-mannered and very nice person, and I agree! She also told me that you are a very bubbly and happy person and that you are taking tennis lessons and having tutoring in Maths

and English. You must be very busy! I have also had the pleasure of meeting your brother, Bob, and your grandmother.

Mary, your Mum told me that you experience problems with handwriting and have also been teased at school. When I asked you about your concerns, you mentioned both of these things and also Maths and English. You said that the handwriting and the Maths are big problems and English and the teasing are just little problems. You said that the teasing boy, who made you feel a bit unhappy, was in a different class now, so the teasing doesn't happen nearly so much.

You decided to call the problem with the writing *The Handwriting Problem*. You made a drawing of it for me, which looked like a smudgy, scrappy book. It certainly looked very nasty. I must say I didn't like the look of it much. I could understand how you don't like having it in your life.

Mary, you said *The Handwriting Problem* had first made its appearance when you started *Kindy* and that it seemed to have become stronger over the years. So strong that even doing the handwriting class for a very long time had not helped. You told me that your writing is sometimes better and sometimes worse. When it is better, have you ignored *The Handwriting Problem* and shrunk its power? I wonder how you did this?

When *The Handwriting Problem* makes an appearance and affects your attempts to make well-written words, you said that the writing goes smudgy and gets squashed together as it tricks you into forgetting to leave spaces. You also said, Mary, that *The Handwriting Problem* gets stronger when you do lots of writing.

We talked about some of the effects the presence of *The Handwriting Problem* has on your life. You said it's like it sits on the desk in front of you and makes you feel stupid. Then you bang your head with your hands. You find yourself rubbing out a lot and making smudges. Then you sometimes get behind in your work. THEN you get low points from the teacher. AND then you have to start again and have to stay in when the other kids are playing.

Mary, you mentioned that you thought perhaps sometimes you were just lazy, that sometimes you don't feel like doing your handwriting well, or you just give up, that you've just learnt to live with *The Handwriting Problem*. Do you think perhaps these are moments when

The Handwriting Problem has grown very big and strong? Do you think it likes moments when it's in control of the writing and you give up?

When I asked you, Mary, if you thought it was okay for *The Handwriting Problem* to be taking up so much of your life, you said, 'No it's not!'

When I asked you why it was not alright with you, you told me that, 'I have to stay in at lunch and I have to start again'. You also told me, 'I would prefer to play outside'.

Mary, some things you told me showed that *The Handwriting Problem* doesn't get its way all the time. You told me that when you write with a pacer pencil, you make better handwriting. I bet *The Handwriting Problem* doesn't like that! You also said that you don't usually let it get you down. I am curious to know how you do that when it's a big problem in your life. Would you mind telling me more about that when we meet again?

We also had time for some fun with handwriting when we met. Do you remember doing the experiment to see who could do the worst handwriting? You had three goes and I only had one go but I reckon we both made a real mess of the word 'dog'. What did you think? When you wrote 'dog' and made a drawing of one with your right hand and then your left, I was interested in how you just jumped into the experiment, even though it was a new thing. Are you someone, Mary, who likes to take on challenges and try new things? I'm interested to know!

I really like your dog drawings. Do you think *The Handwriting Problem* can tell the difference between a drawing and handwriting? Is it around when you move a pencil to draw as well as when you write, or doesn't it take any notice of your drawing efforts? Maybe we could trick it into thinking you are drawing when you are writing! Would you be interested to play with that idea when we meet again?

Wow, Mary, we really found out a lot about *The Handwriting Problem* during our meeting. I'm thinking perhaps the more information we can gather about its tricks and how it operates, the smarter ideas you might be able to come up with to shrink it and make it less powerful. Can we find out what you think makes it grow stronger and what makes it weaker? Does that sound like something you'd like to do? Let's talk more about it next time.

Best wishes,
Katy.

This letter was read to Mary when I delivered it to her. It was also read again at the beginning of our next meeting, so she could pick up and discuss those parts of the letter that were of significance to her. We continued to co-research the situation and, at the end of our times together, co-wrote the report required to go to Mary's mother, Alberta, and her teacher, on the work we had done together. Mary's collaboration as a report co-writer proved to be invaluable, as she not only helped frame the report in terms acceptable to her but she also picked up errors of fact that I had missed.

Confidentiality

The one reservation I have around letter-writing relates to confidentiality for students. A letter is an artefact which, once sent into the world, is out of the writer's control. This presents an ethical dilemma. In checking out the idea of counsellor letter-writing to students, I spoke with an 11-year-old girl⁸, who kindly agreed to advise me on the idea from a student's point of view. While she thought that such letter-writing could be useful, she felt that school counsellors need to be aware of some important privacy issues around the practice. Her advice included the following points:

1. Counsellors should ask students which issues are okay to mention in a letter *before* any words are put on paper, otherwise it may contain information that the student would not want others to know and, if someone else read the letter, privacy would be broken.
2. To ensure privacy, a letter could be read to the student, then kept filed by the counsellor, so no-one else could see it. The student could then go to the counsellor when they wanted to read the letter again.
3. Writing reports to staff and counsellors is important because these people can keep a report safe and look after it. Counsellors and students should co-write reports to parents and school staff so that the counsellor knows what the student has decided is okay to mention and what things the student wishes to keep private.

This thoughtful girl's ideas are a timely reminder to me about respect for children's, and young people's, wishes and intentions for their lives, especially for workers who are operating in usually-well-meaning but stretched and under-resourced systems.

Letter-writing, then, has proven useful in many ways in school counselling work. As I seek to co-research windows onto preferred territories, letters provide ways to make or keep contact, and to reflect on and summarise sessions. The letters I have written to students and parents have met mostly with warm reception and have proven to have connecting powers in bringing people to stand together, separate from the problems affecting their lives.

Notes

1. Katy can be contacted c/o email: katytom@ozemail.com.au
2. In the public education system in New South Wales, extra funding can be gained for a school if a student can be shown to have a disability (Integration Support Funding). Disability is recognised in the following categories: Language (expressive/receptive), Physical, Intellectual, Hearing, Vision, Mental Health, and Autism. Schools are keen to gain extra funding, which might be used, for example, to employ teacher's aides to work with individuals or small groups both in the classroom setting and separate from class, or to provide relief from face-to-face teaching to allow teachers to develop IEPs (Individual Education Programs) for students experiencing difficulties in their academic development.
3. Alice Morgan (2000, p.95) briefly describes the practice of making handbooks which document people's skills and knowledges in dealing with particular issues. Probably the best-known archiving is done by the Anti-Anorexia/Anti-Bulimia League, 207-1168 Hamilton Street, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6B2S2. Glen J. Simblett makes a brief mention of it in his essay, 'Leila and the tiger' (1997, p.151).
4. Clifford Geertz (1986) defines an 'experience-near' description as 'one which someone ... might himself [sic] naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly applied to others' (p.124).
5. From '*Pang'ono pang'ono ndi mtolo* – little by little we make a bundle: The work of the CARE counsellors of Malawi', *Dulwich Centre Newsletter*, 1996 No.3. In this article, the character of Mr/Mrs CARE uses the metaphor of the bundle of sticks to describe to villagers how they can unite against the effects of HIV/AIDS in their community.
6. To read more about re-membling practices please see White (1997) and Russell & Carey (2002).
7. To read more about outsider-witnessing practices see White (2000) and Carey & Russell (2003).
8. Thank you to the girl who shared with me her wisdom and ideas around privacy issues in relation to school counsellors using letters, and to her mum for giving permission for me to interview her.

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