



Using narrative practices to support academic development in an after-school program

by Deborah Mrema



Deborah Mrema is a narrative practitioner from Arusha, Tanzania. Her work in the community is deeply informed by her experience and reflections from the art of life science projects that resulted in synthesising molecules with biomedical properties from substrates as simple as orange peels that would otherwise be considered waste. She is passionate about engaging with creative, evidence-based and innovative methodologies that make visible the relational nature, causes and effects of hardships in order to spark transformational change in young people's lives and future potential. She

has engaged in nurturing of spaces to respectfully honour stories of pride and survival to foster healing possibilities: emotionally, socially, psychologically and spiritually through narrative-based methods, physical exercise and sports when supporting communities that have experienced significant hardships and illness. Deboramrema2006@yahoo.com or dmrema@jacob-alumni.de

Abstract

This paper describes the use of narrative practices in work with young people in an after-school academic support program in Tanzania. Through games, outsider witnessing, re-authoring conversations and the Tree of Life process, we brought to light skills and experiences that had previously been left unrecognised by the evaluation tools we had been using to track students' progress. The Tree of Life in particular created space for our students to rediscover unique abilities and areas in which they shine. These had previously been hidden behind dominant stories about living in an orphanage or not meeting expectations at school. The use of narrative practices supported growth, development and healing for our students.

Key words: *Tree of Life; school; truancy; youth; children; Tanzania; Africa; narrative practice*

Mrema, D. (2023). Using narrative practices to support academic development in an after-school program. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 16–24. <https://doi.org/10.4320/RQJF8949>

Author pronouns: she/her

I work in an after-school academic support program with students from vulnerable communities that have been affected by HIV/AIDS. The program is designed to equip students with skills that will help them improve their performance in school. We believe there is a direct correlation between psycho-social-emotional wellbeing and academic prowess. We support students' self-confidence, communication, academic performance, focus, curiosity, problem-solving skills, self-control, hospitality and general wellbeing.

Our team of caregivers and educators meets monthly to evaluate the impact of the creative lessons and activities our participants undertake. We use particular evaluation indicators, including literacy skills, autonomy, personal hygiene and cleanliness, good mood and responsibility. In a recent meeting, it was determined that a few students required additional support. I decided to create peer-support groups for these students using narrative practice methodologies, namely: games, the Tree of Life, outsider witnessing practice, re-authoring and externalisation.

In this paper, I would like to share the journey of exploring the hopes, dreams and values of these students. Through exploring preferred stories and what was absent but implicit in the students' narratives, we were able to collaborate with them to help them thrive in the after-school support program. I worked with the students in two groups. The first peer-therapy group was attended by secondary students Agustino (19 years) and Benson (18 years). The second was attended by Ayoub (13 years) and Juma (13 years) who were in a special education school. On some occasions, I also met with the students individually.

Unearthing preferred stories

While meeting with Benson and his family at their home, I observed that Benson hadn't attended school that day. When I asked about this, his mother said that Benson had performed poorly in his recent midterm test. He had responded to some of the questions in his exams with explicit comments. Benson's mother went on to express frustration about her son's truancy. She condemned Benson for becoming friends with youths in the neighbourhood who were not on a clear educational pathway. She expressed confusion because despite the presence of poverty and illness in the family, her son had failed to put effort into getting an education. I sensed despair and a loss of hope in her

expressions and asked Benson, who was sitting across from me, what was in his mind after hearing from his mother.

Benson did not share much in response. I became curious about the friends he had been spending time with when he wasn't in school and about where they went. Did he think his mother's frustration was valid? Was he happy or sad about his lack of attendance at school? Did he have a name for what was going on in his life at the moment? Benson shared that he had been hanging around with two friends from the neighbourhood. They would spend time at a kiosk where young people in the area went to get pirated movies and songs. I was keen to learn whether the activities at the kiosk were what Benson aspired to engage in in the future, but he didn't respond to my questions.

As most of my questions to Benson were being met with silence, I decided to switch my focus to enquire about the details of Benson's days. I asked, 'What else do you do besides hanging out with your friends at the kiosk?' Benson's mother, who at this point was visibly angry, shared that Benson would wake up early and make her breakfast then leave the household. I turned to Benson to confirm whether this was true, and he nodded his agreement.

I asked Benson what he would prepare for breakfast in the morning. He said, 'In the morning I would make tea with bread'. I followed up with a question directed towards both Benson and his mother: 'What does it say about Benson that he wakes up early to make breakfast for you and his siblings?' This question too was met with silence. I went on to describe how in my experience, children who make such gestures are demonstrating care and appreciation for their loved ones. I checked with Benson to see whether my description resonated with his thoughts and experience, and he nodded.

A peer-support group

My next meeting with Benson would be at our centre, not at his home. I wanted to make him feel comfortable, so I asked him whether he would like to invite a friend from the centre to join us. Benson said that his friend Agustino could join our activities. Agustino was also a student in our care, and he had improved his attendance in school over the years. Inspired by

outsider witnessing practices (Denborough, 2006), and in an attempt to create an environment where an exchange of stories could occur between us educators and the students, I proposed to Benson and Agustino that the teacher who provided them with academic support might join our conversations so he too could learn about what was important to them. They were both on board with this idea. I helped my colleague to prepare for this session by discussing the importance of creating a space for the students to engage in being curious without worry. Because we were both figures of authority, and in our culture young people tend to be shy and reserved around adults, we agreed that the young people's experiences would be centred in the sessions.

Playing games

When I met with Agustino and Benson, we began the session with a game. Both students were very active and enjoyed sports, so I decided to start with a game in which they could demonstrate some of their skills. The premise was to walk as fast as possible without running until we got out of breath. In order to win this game, one had to walk the fastest. Our winner was Benson. Moments after the game was completed and everyone had caught their breath, the following questions (after Nyirinkwaya, 2020) guided reflection about the game:

- Has the activity connected you with important people in your life? Did a friend from school or a relative cross your mind as you were walking that fast?
- Did any parts of the activity connect you with safe spaces in your life? While you were moving in the game, did you think of a person or place that makes you feel safe?
- Are there other activities you are interested in or are good at?
- What do you do well at home or at school that you would like to share with us today?

Agustino responded to the last of these questions:

Agustino: Yes, playing the drum, helping out caregivers with cooking, cleaning and gardening activities.

Deborah: Agustino, would you like to tell us more about where you learned to play the drums well?

Agustino: I have great drumming skills. When I was six years old or so, in my village in Karatu, there was a parade. The head soldier called me up to lead the other soldiers and that experience sparked my interest.

I checked with Benson as to whether he too had activities that he would like to share. I observed that he had been listening attentively, but he did not respond to this question. After a bit of silence, Agustino shared again: 'Benson is very hardworking. We have helped our caregivers with cleaning and cooking at the home. He is very efficient when it comes to doing things very fast.'

I asked Benson whether what Agustino said was true and he nodded in agreement. Where had he learned how to do things very fast? This question too was met with silence.

I asked, 'Did any parts of the activity remind you about your inspirations, your life experiences or the lives of the other people you care for?' Benson was hesitant to respond to this question, but Agustino replied: 'No, this activity did not remind me of my experiences, but I would like to share that I dream of becoming a lawyer ...'

Tree of Life with Benson and Agustino

The next activity I had planned for this session was to guide Benson and Agustino through the first part of a Tree of Life activity (Ncube, 2006). I explained that they would each draw a tree, which we would use to represent good memories in their lives. This tree would represent only the parts of their lives they wished us to know about.

After they had completed tracing a tree, including its roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves and flowers, I offered questions to guide them in filling in the roots, which would represent their origins. I structured the questions to help the students find connections and associations:

- What are your roots and what is your ancestry?
- Where do you call home?
- Do you identify with your nationality or the town you live in as your roots?

- Are you part of a club at school or out of school whose values you believe in enough to consider adding them to your roots?
- What languages do you speak that you want to include in your roots?

I invited them to share the details they had added to their trees.

Benson: I was born in Kilimanjaro. I lived there with my mum until my mum and dad started quarrelling. Then we moved to Arusha near Tanganyika Packers. I speak Swahili.

Agustino: I am from Mbulu-Mbulu in Karatu. I speak Swahili, English and a bit of Mbulu. I remember one time we had acrobatic performers and a band come to our school in Karatu. My favourite moment was when the band leader called me out to try the drums. I remember this experience to date.

I followed up with a question to Benson: What good memories do you have of these places? Do you know what part of Kilimanjaro? Do you know the hospital you were born in, and would you like to include its name in your roots? Benson didn't share any good memories or remember the name of the hospital. He shared that his life in Kilimanjaro had been exceptionally hard. He remembered being really sick, and that at the time he was sick, his mother was staying with him in the hospital.

Deborah: Where are you grounded? Where do you live now? Where do you feel the happiest? Is there a place you enjoy being?

Benson: I live in Tanganyika Peckers with my mum and my siblings: Agnes, Martin and Esther.

Agustino: I live in St Lucia in Moivaro.

Deborah: Are you a member of any club at school, church or in the community that you enjoy or that makes you feel grounded? Is there anyone – a friend or family member – who keeps you grounded?

Benson: Yes, my mother.

Deborah: What is your nationality and tribe?

Benson: I am Chagga from my dad's side and Meru from my mum's side.

Agustino: I am Mbulu.

After they had completed the roots, they were invited to add their skills to the trunk of the tree. While doing the fast-paced walking activity with Benson and Agustino, I observed they were both exceptionally fast. I became curious about what other activities they were good at. The following were the variations of questions I asked to help the students fill in the trunk:

- What are things you are good at or talented at?
- What do you do well?
- Think of someone you care about like your caregivers and mother, what would they say you do well?

When I turned to Benson, he had not completed this part of his tree. I became curious about what Benson's mother would think he did well.

Benson: My mother would say I am good at fixing things when they break.

Deborah: Has there been a time when you have fixed something? What was it that you fixed? Who was there with you?

Benson: In 2018, when I was really sick, my mother promised me she would buy me a toy car. She ended up buying a two-battery torch to use at home instead. We did not have electricity at home. A few months later when the torch broke down, I started playing with the different parts to figure out what was wrong. Slowly, I was able to make the torch work. My mother was very impressed with that. We also had a radio at home that we would take to our neighbours to be recharged. When this radio broke, I would play with the wires until it started to function again. My mother loves the radio. It made her happy when I could fix it.

When Benson had finished sharing, Agustino exclaimed, 'You are also a really fast walker!' We all acknowledged that he had dominated the activity and was our winner. I asked Benson whether we could also include this skill of being a really fast walker on his tree and he nodded in agreement.

Deborah: Agustino, what are the things you are good at?

Agustino: I am good at making small objects out of paper.

Deborah: Can you think of time when you have made small objects out of paper? Where were you and who were you with? Where did this skill come from?

Agustino: When I was in class at my secondary school, I sometimes would make a boat or a box out of paper to pass around for my friends. I did this to entertain myself and my friends.

Deborah: Did you include this skill of entertaining your friends and people around you on your trunk?

Agustino: No.

I followed up with the following questions:

- What does a young man who entertains his friends care about?
- What does this information tell us about you as a person?
- What does a young man who cares to entertain his friends value about life?
- What does this act say about who he wishes to become?

I also asked what others would say about his skills.

Agustino responded:

If we asked Aunt Naomi, she would say I am good at helping with activities at St Lucia. That is things like cleaning the floors. I also help out in the kitchen when she needs it. I do some activities in the garden too. Together with other children, we make terraces for the vegetable garden. These vegetables give us good vitamins in our meals.

I asked whether it would be appropriate to include caring for others and being thoughtful as some of the skills listed on the trunk of his tree. Agustino acknowledged that he was good at being thoughtful and caring for and helping his elders and peers.

Later in this session, I invited the teacher to reflect on some of the stories he had witnessed.

Deborah: Were there any moments that stood out to you when Benson and Agustino were sharing that reminded you of a time in your own life? Your own roots? Your own skills?

Teacher: I see Benson with a different eye. I didn't know that Benson had been severely ill at some point in his life. I think he must be very strong to go through the illness period even though it was very challenging. His experience of fixing the torch and the radio reminded me of my childhood. When I was young, I used to be very good at making wooden bicycles to play with others. It made me think how if I had pursued this skill and interest, perhaps I would have become an engineer by now.

In the following session with Benson and Agustino, we continued to explore their individual skills and the histories of these, and then moved on to the other parts of their trees where we documented hopes and dreams, important people, and gifts they had given and received.

I found that it was very helpful to have my colleague with the students during the Tree of Life activity because some of the conversations that transpired in the session shed light on competencies that were not evaluated in our monthly meetings. We observed that students' unique skills and the areas where they shine can be underappreciated with the evaluation tool we had been using. For instance, that Benson was able to repair broken items at home for his family, indicating his technical skills and determination. As educators, the Tree of Life process allowed us to create space for our students to rediscover abilities they might have forgotten they had. Not only that, but it created entry points to continue encouraging our students to foster these skills in ways that would support their academic development.

Responding to difficulties

Time passed before I met again with Agustino, this time in an individual session. This session was inspired by a quote:

Within any community that is facing difficult times, community members will be responding to these difficulties. They will be taking whatever action is possible, in their own ways, based on particular skills and knowledges, to try to address the effects of the problem(s) on their lives and the lives of those they care about. (Denborough et al., 2006, p. 20)

In this session, Agustino shared that he had gone to the ward executive officer to process his national identification certification. At the ward office, he did not respond to an inquiry about his home address. Agustino shared that he didn't like to tell people where he lived because he was raised in an orphanage and efforts to reunify him with his extended relatives had not been successful. I was curious to learn why he didn't want to share where his current home was, and asked the following questions:

- What did you think hindered you from telling the ward representative officer where your home was?
- Is there a name that comes to mind for what prevented you from communicating your address?
- Do you get any imagery of what prevented you from confidently expressing what your agenda was at the ward office and what your home address is?
- Does what obstructs you from telling people your home address have a name? Could you describe it with a sound?

Agustino: The name that comes to mind is lack of courage and confidence.

Deborah: Could you tell me some of the characteristics of lack of courage and confidence? When does it come to you? Is it a he or she? When do you observe its presence?

Agustino: Lack of courage and confidence shows up whenever I am out of the orphanage communicating with people. He prevents me from explaining about myself and my origins. He makes me unable to interact with people because I am in fear of what they think. Whenever he visits, I am in total confusion. I forget what I was supposed to say.

Deborah: Has lack of courage and confidence affected you in your life at the orphanage, at school and in the community?

Agustino: Yes! One time I was walking in the road and met with one of the St Lucia friends who brings support at the orphanage. I recognised her face right away. I was embarrassed. I failed to interact with her because I think people disrespect me

because I live at an institution for children who don't have a support system. I notice people don't take me seriously when they know I am a child who lives in an orphanage. People underestimate me.

When I was in form 1, I escaped from the orphanage because I missed my relatives. I wanted to see my extended family in Karatu. I remember that day I woke up really early before the official waking hours. I woke up at 3am to pack my clothes and supplies. I carried my school backpack and when it was time to leave for school, I departed to return to my hometown for a visit. I remember the people on the public transportation asking why I had a backpack and why I was wearing a school uniform. They were inquisitive because students were not typically on the buses at that hour. They asked me questions about where I was from, whose child I was, to whose address I was going to at the end of my destination. I responded to these questions without getting found out that I had escaped. When I returned to the home days after, I became 'the child who was most likely to escape'. This caused me a lot of worry and distress. I wished I had money so I could live by myself in peace.

Deborah: What do you see to be the effects of lack of courage and confidence to your interpersonal relationships? Are you happy about this label?

Agustino: I don't like to be a child who is likely to escape. Those are not my goals in life. I would like to continue helping and caring for others until I figure out how I can continue with school to pursue my dreams. Whenever I get into trouble for escaping, it takes me out of the path I wish to be in.

Deborah: Agustino, you mention goals and dreams in your life – what do you care about in your life? Would you want to share these goals with me? And what is the history of these goals? Are there activities you choose to do in life that reinforce these goals?

Agustino: The activities I choose to do in my life are going to school, learning from my mistakes, reading books that teach me how to care

for my life, motivating my friends when they are stressed by creating handmade craft objects, assisting the gardener with tasks on the farm, and supporting our caregivers with cleaning tasks on Saturdays.

I care about my dreams of being a lawyer. This originates from an incident I saw in the news. The late president Magufuli was on tour in Bukoba town, and a woman ran up to him to tell her about her land dispute. She had been alienated from her land and the justice system wasn't supportive. In the last week, I've read a few chapters of the book *Umezaliwa kufanikiwa* [You were born to succeed] (Stephen, 2019), which explains how to achieve a future one desires. I wish to be a lawyer because I am touched by all the injustice I see in the news. I know I can one day help.

Deborah: Agustino, can you think of ways you will use your skills to beat lack of confidence and courage when you leave this room? Do you have any advice or ways for a young man with a similar challenge on how they too could overcome lack of confidence and courage?

Agustino: The young man needs to know that it will take time to beat lack of confidence and courage. Sometimes our dreams don't match with others' dreams so they shouldn't be discouraged if people don't prioritise their dreams.

Tree of Life with Ayoub and Juma

When I met with the younger peer-support group, I offered a slightly different version of the Tree of Life process. I had previously hesitated to offer the Tree of Life to children with limited literacy skills; however, this time around I decided to ask them simplified and clear questions, and to help them write down their thoughts on their trees.

As a warm-up activity, the children were invited to share with the group their first and last names and a song they particularly loved.

- What is one song in the world you love the most?
- Where did you hear this song for the first time?
- Why do you like it so much?

- Who was you with when you were listening to this song?
- Does this song remind you of someone you care about? Who does it remind you of?

We then traced their trees including their roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves and flowers. To help them fill in their roots, I asked:

- Where are you from?
- What is your origin?
- Where do you feel at home?
- Where do you live?
- With whom do/did you live?

To fill in the trunk, I asked:

- What activities do you choose to do by yourself?
- What are you good at?
- Are there things in your day-to-day life that you do exceptionally well?
- Is there something you did well recently?

This was followed by sharing across the table.

Ayoub's Tree of Life

Ayoub introduced himself with a song he had learnt from the radio. This was a song he listened to with other children at the orphanage. As we discussed the roots of his tree, I learnt that he had very fond memories of his uncle and that he had been named after his grandfather.

On the ground he shared all the places he recalled having stayed in the course of his life. He mentioned that he loved to hang out at Mama Kibajaji's shop, a local grocery shop in the village he used to live in before he was admitted to the orphanage.

The skills he recorded included his summersaulting. He learnt this skill from Johanna, a famous football player in the local leagues. Ayoub hoped that with somersaulting he could strengthen his muscles. He spoke about his challenges with balance and coordination, and mentioned that his brother who stayed at Kijiweni did some weightlifting, which inspired him to want to build his own strength. I also learnt that Ayoub was a great dancer and entertainer.

Ayoub also shared about Omary, a person who had cared for him when he was really sick and encouraged him to look forward to a hopeful future. He said that he missed eating chai ya maziwa and chapati, food that his brother Abdalla cooked. I learnt that when Lillian asked if he was okay while lying in bed, this evoked feelings of care and love. Mwalimu Lucy had taught him Kiswahili really well. Teacher Sylvester from his school had helped him whenever he fell down or was being abused by other children .

Ayoub could not remember his sister's name, but he remembered the contribution she had made to him when she cared to ask about his wellbeing. He shared that Mwl Kaaya was important to him because he gave him leadership opportunities.

Juma's Tree of Life

Juma also introduced himself with a song he learnt from the radio. He wasn't able to describe why he loved this song in particular. In completing the roots of his tree, I learnt about Mama Mkubwa Asha and his brother also called Juma. He is of Sambia and Nyaturu tribe. Some of his favourite places were shopkeepers' stores in his village, which he visited before he was admitted to our care at Kwa Mchagaa.

Juma shared some of the activities that he chooses to do and enjoy: his brother and he would listen to their mother when she told them to do things in the household. He enjoyed riding bikes, having learnt this skill from his brother. His brother had also taught Juma the trick of holding on to the handlebars and taking his feet off the pedals while in motion.

Reflections

As I reflect on what was shared during the conversations with the students, I am reminded of how inadequate evaluation tools can be in making sense of and honouring our students' experiences and skills. Many of our students' stories had never been heard or acknowledged: the stories of where they have come from, the hardships they have faced in life and the effects of these hardships, their hopes and dreams, and what is important to them. The Tree of Life activity enabled conversations about aspects of our students' lives that we wouldn't have expected to exist if we believed they were defined by dominant narratives of 'growing up in an orphanage' and 'falling below average' in a metric established by their teachers and authority figures.

Involving a teacher as an outside witness not only provided a re-telling of the students' stories, it also offered them a glimpse of ways they had responded to similar experiences in their upbringing. This showed our students that they are not alone in their obstacles.

There is no doubt the journey towards academic prowess will require concerted effort from our students and their educators in areas that are captured by our academic tools and evaluation metrics. However, I am convinced that this pursuit should be guided by the discovery, acknowledgment and recognition of a much wider range of experiences and skills that make our children who they are. In this way, we can create space for who they can become. There is also the need for us educators to engage with our own experiences in the process and bring to light resonating themes. I believe by doing this, we can support multidimensional growth, development and healing for our students: physically, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically.

References

- Denborough, D. (Ed.). (2006). *Raising our heads above the clouds: The use of narrative practices to motivate social action and economic development*. Dulwich Centre Foundation International.
- Denborough, D., Koolmatrie, C., Mununggirritj, D., Marika, D., Dhurrkay, W., & Yunupingu, M. (2006). Linking stories and initiatives: A narrative approach to working with the skills and knowledge of communities. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (2), 19–51.
- Ncube, N. (2006). The Tree of Life project: Using narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 3–16.
- Nyirinkwaya, S. (2020). Games, activities and narrative practice: Enabling sparks to emerge in conversations with children and young people who have experienced hard times. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1). 34–45.
- Stephen, J. (2019). *Umezaliwa kufanikiwa* [You were born to succeed]. First Choice.