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Creating Narrative Leagues in Schools

The authors present a practical set of guidelines for school counselors interested in initiating and using narrative leagues after a small group experience ends. A case example demonstrates how a narrative league can help students to maintain new skills or behaviors.

Group counseling is a valuable approach in the school environment (Whiston & Sexton, 1998), and group interventions have been noted to promote learning (Goodnough & Lee, 2004). Although there are several advantages for using group counseling with students, such as instilling hope (Berg, Landreth, & Fall, 2006), there is one significant drawback. Researchers often have concluded that the learning occurring during small groups or even prevention programs dissipates shortly after exposure to the group or program has ended (Belcher & Shinitzky, 1998; Gilvarry, 2000). The formation of narrative leagues may offer an approach for addressing the erosion of benefits from group experiences. By recruiting an audience to support the desired behavior outside of the group, narrative leagues offer a unique, practical way to maintain and strengthen learning long after the group has ended.

THE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The narrative approach is based on the idea that people live their lives according to the stories they believe about themselves and the situations in their lives. People are not the sole creators of their stories; they are influenced by experiences, school and work environments, family and societal values, and many other situations or local institutions (Winslade & Monk, 1999). The continuous process of giving stories shape and meaning is played out in a social context (Gergen, 1991). Story development requires a "storyteller" and an audience or group to hear the story and provide recognition and feedback to the storyteller. Central to the narrative perspective is that the audience is an active, collaborative, and vital participant in the process of meaning making, rather than a passive recipient of information (Bruner, 1986).

Narrative Leagues

In order for a new story (e.g., appropriate behavior) to remain vibrant and develop significance in a student's life, that story needs to take root in the context of an audience, not just in the mind of the student. As Winslade and Monk (1999) described, "a story isn't a story unless it finds an appreciative audience" (p. 96). Narrative leagues provide an expanded audience that can be used to further develop a student's preferred stories and to increase the diversity of available viewpoints regarding a student's situation (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Importantly, the relationship between the storyteller and various audiences can be understood using a transactional model of communication (Kublin, Wetherby, Crais, & Prizant, 1989). Interactions between the storyteller and his or her audiences are reciprocal and bidirectional, each influencing, reinforcing, and shaping the other. In this way, the narrative league moves the life and meaning of the story beyond imagined and counseling audiences into the realm of everyday life.

Narrative leagues are compatible with a variety of therapeutic approaches. A strength of narrative leagues lies in their flexibility. They can be used to extend the therapeutic environment achieved by a small group beyond its life by assisting the student to recruit and organize a new audience (e.g., parents) appreciative of the changes he or she is undertaking. In this way, narrative leagues are similar to support groups, especially if the league includes individuals with similar life challenges (O'Rourke & Worzbyt, 1996). The difference between support groups and narrative leagues is that leagues are established as a communication environment existing in the student's everyday life. All of the exploration of feelings and practice of behaviors that occur in the student's primary group and related support groups are transferred to broader, everyday audiences in leagues. Typically, narrative leagues are

developed for individuals; however, a narrative league could be created to function at a group level as well (Freedman & Combs, 1996). This article outlines the process for creating individual narrative leagues, based on the authors' experiences implementing leagues in schools.

Creating Narrative Leagues

A narrative league is bounded only by the imagination and resources available to its creators and participants. When forming a league, the school counselor will want, at minimum, to take stock of the developmental age of the student, the availability of the league members to meet, and the nature of the problem. In this way, the school counselor forms and facilitates a league much in the same way one would a support group. Initially, the school counselor serves as the narrative league's primary organizer and facilitator. Thus, the school counselor should tailor his or her leadership and participation to the needs of the league much in the same way one might lead a group (e.g., using more directive strategies at the beginning of the league). At minimum, a league should have at least two members and meet at least once (either face-to-face or virtually) to discuss the purpose of the league, the expectations of league members, and procedures and organization of the league.

Beyond these basics, we have found it helpful to pay particular attention to three key elements: identifying and recruiting league members, establishing activities to support the new story, and establishing and monitoring leadership.

During and especially nearing the end of a school-based group, a school counselor and the student member will want to identify people (e.g., teachers) who can assist in promoting the preferred story. This is the first step in creating a league. The student should be asked to identify people who he or she would like to know and support the new story. Where possible, students should recruit the members for their league. They can approach individuals whom they would like to be involved and explain how the league works. A contract of sorts detailing each member's level and kind of participation may be useful. At this point, group members might name their league in a way personifying the new story (e.g., Anti-Anorexia League). In principle, the more people who join in and appreciate the new story, the more powerful and successful the new story can become. Members of leagues appreciate being respected for their contributions and like the opportunity to contribute in a positive way to the student's progress (Freedman & Combs, 1996).

The second step is to develop and implement league tasks, activities, and meeting schedule. The goal or task of leagues is to converse about how the problem will be conquered and how it is already being conquered. Typically, leagues use various activities such as letters to the problem, Web pages with links to inspirational stories or resources, and e-mail conversations of encouragement and success to track and promote change. Leagues may choose to establish an archive or portfolio of these activities, which could be anonymous. Winslade and Monk (1999) noted that this collection of successful stories may be shared with other leagues sharing similar concerns.

Regarding meeting times, it is important to find times that do not disrupt the student's daily class activities. Holding meetings before or after school, during recess or a study period, or over a lunch break is likely to be the least disruptive to a student's day. In addition, a meeting schedule should occur as frequently as possible for the first few weeks of the league's inception and decrease frequency with an increase in desired outcomes.

The final step is to determine leadership and roles not only for members but also for the leader. At first the school counselor should play the role of facilitator of league discussion and activity development as well as league manager until the students can assume some of those duties. At a point later on it will be important for students to invest themselves in maintaining the league, regardless of their leadership role. In the case of an adolescent, the school counselor may serve more as a league consultant and monitor. For younger students, the school counselor may take on a more active leadership role. Regardless of how the leadership begins, as the student develops expertise in managing the league, the school counselor's role increasingly shifts toward that of a consultant. League members need to be active participants in the implementation of goals and activities developed by the student and/or facilitator (school counselor). League members should be reminded that they are an audience to the new story being created and, subsequently, to provide observations of desired behavior.

A CASE EXAMPLE

The following is a true case, but identifying information has been changed.

David, age 11, had a 5-year history of aggressive outbursts (e.g., hitting teachers) resulting in his transfer to numerous schools in the same district. When his outbursts resurfaced at his current school, the school counselor placed David in an anger management psycho-educational group that she was running. As long as David remained in the group, he showed marked improvement. Unfortunately, keeping David in a group was not feasible. After consulting with the lead author and other school personnel,

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the school counselor agreed to help David initiate and run a narrative league.

Excited by the league, David quickly named it the "Jedi League" (he had an interest in Star Wars and knew that Jedis are able to master their anger and not cave in to the "dark side"). David identified his mother, his mental health counselor, his school counselor, and his teacher as desired audience members for his league. The school counselor helped David in the recruiting process by calling the members on David's list and letting them know what David was trying to accomplish. Everyone agreed to participate with David. After an initial meeting, it was decided that the league would meet weekly for approximately 30 minutes in the school counselor's office. David's mental health counselor was unable to attend weekly meetings but agreed to attend two meetings a month.

David agreed to document the times he remained calm during the week on a construction paper star and bring it to the league meeting. The league members also agreed to note on paper David's successes and share them at the meeting. To create an archive of his success, David taped the stars on the wall in the school counselor's office. League members used the stars to strengthen David's developing story of being calm and relaxed instead of angry. During league meetings, the school counselor facilitated a discussion of David's successes using narrative-based questions. For example, she asked questions such as how the Jedis handle anger, how David handled his anger, how David handled anger similarly or differently from Jedis, and how David's life will look with less anger.

Over the span of 3 months, David's feelings of anger significantly reduced and, according to his teacher, he is outburst-free. David added artwork and created an anti-anger game for recess as new additions to his archive. He continues to meet with his founding league members, but the meetings now occur once a month. In a separate venture, David created a new league consisting of three other students with similar anger issues. This new league, consisting of only David and his peers, decided to meet briefly with the school counselor on a weekly basis to share with each other their successes. The successes were posted on the wall in a similar fashion as before. The school counselor was the only adult attending these meetings and assumed only a supervisory role. David provided leadership to the league's agenda. The school counselor, impressed with David's success, encouraged the three newly recruited students to identify adults to participate in the league as well.

David's school counselor recently noted that all students in David's league were members of his anger management group; all of them experienced a decline in problematic behavior during the group, but an increase after the group; and all have shown significant progress (almost outburst-free) since their involvement in their leagues.

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CONCLUSION

School counselors may wish to consider the following suggestions when creating and maintaining a league. Early success is important, so league membership should focus first on close friends and trusted adults. Later on, the league can grow. Communication, inside or outside the league, should be expressed in a positive form, such as labeling appropriate behaviors instead of negative behaviors. If it is necessary to talk about the problem, league members should make sure to frame the problem outside of the student (e.g., "the student experiences anger at times" instead of "the student has an anger problem").

School counselors also should consider the time commitments required of themselves and other league members. A school counselor can expect to spend approximately 1 hour per week in a new league with a couple of members. If the league expands, then the time commitment could become several hours a week unless the school counselor utilizes another school counselor, counseling intern, teacher, or other appropriate professional to help facilitate league meetings.

The success of a narrative league depends, in our experience, upon the creativity of its participants, the developmental age of the student, the facilitation skills and resources (e.g., time) of the school counselor, and the ultimate ability of the league to function effectively as a group. An advantage to this approach is that even with scant resources such as time, a nominal narrative league (e.g., one or two members) can be used to extend the gains made within a group. If nothing else, narrative leagues are exceedingly responsive to a variety of circumstances and therapeutic approaches. In this way, narrative leagues adapt to the needs of the student and the resources of the school counselor. ∎

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