

Practitioner Perspective

Something Larger: On sharing therapeutic case notes with children and young people

By Mike Moss



How often do we think of our clients out with the sessions and out with supervision? I am imagining we don't think of them all the time, but there will be times we may have a sense of them, or a memory from a session. How we experience being in relationship with children and young people may not only be from our contact in the room. This article is an attempt to focus on how writing therapeutic notes and offering to share them can be an integral part of the therapeutic experience and may become part of the healing process.

They also record a story of the relationship. My original training was in Youth & Community Work and then I trained in Solution Focused and Systemic Family Therapy, Integrative Counselling and Person Centred Therapy, and have benefitted from all these approaches. I am now a counsellor and psychotherapist for children and young people at West Lothian Council in Scotland.

Therapists' sharing their thoughts in written form with clients is common in solution focused and systemic approaches and narrative therapy and

feels similar to my writing and sharing case notes with children and young people. The term *therapeutic letters* can be attributed to White & Epston (1990) 'Narrative means to therapeutic ends' who describe writing letters as a way to document and privilege peoples lived experiences by offering hope and the possibilities of change, and consider they are an extension of the therapy session. Letters are generally appreciated by clients and have contributed to positive outcomes in therapy.

I always clarify any notes I write are from my perspective only and children and young people can read them or I can read them if they want. One young person liked to call the notes the story of her journey. Another young person suggested we read previous notes at random at times, trusting what emerged would be beneficial in some way.

Therapeutic notes are never written during the session as this could be a distraction and perhaps create an unnecessary power imbalance. I write as soon as I can afterwards which feels crucial to the integrity of the work. There can be a gap between the end of session and finding enough time, particularly if I have to see other children and young people soon afterwards, and I have to find space to tune back in to the session. Some children and young

people may not be interested in the notes and never read them and I accept this; however the process of writing notes informs my practice and focus on the work. They also create a unique record to help recall the session. There will be changes between sessions and I give space for this to emerge however reading previous session's notes can be a good way of re-connecting where we left off. They can also create a familiar container for some children and young people, and don't seem to get in the way of the flow.

Many children and young people have said they feel really heard this way, sometimes for the first time, and welcome an account of the previous session which I believe contributes towards creating a deeper relationship. The notes are kept in a client file and stored in a secure place and can only be accessed by myself and my manager and will be shredded after a number of years.

Epston (1994) describes therapeutic letters as being '*organically intertwined*' with the counselling session and Fox (2003) writes about what he calls '*therapeutic documents*' and believes letters record particular knowledge, encourage preferred stories and contribute to the rite of passage accompanying the end of work together. Moules (2003) finds there is a powerful influence in therapeutic writing and claims words can be read by people with their '*spirits and their bodies*' and are an extension of the therapeutic relationship when attentive and reflective of the work.

I believe there is a similar process in my attempt to convey meaning and understanding in writing case notes. A typical reflection after a counselling session in school with Crystal

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16yrs (not her real name) is written as follows:

It was good to see Crystal today. She seemed quieter than usual. I asked how things are for her just now. She told me she was 'raging' with her mum. We talked about how the arguments seem to be getting worse and how she feels the only thing she can do is go to her room and cut herself. Crystal said she still loves her mum but feels treated unfairly. This session felt a bit different from last week, and I mentioned this. I also noticed how Crystal seemed to feel angry when she talked about her mum. I mentioned how she seemed both angry and sad at times and I also heard her say that she loved her mum too. In writing these notes I am now wondering how it is for Crystal to have these big feelings she describes as making her f.... crazy at times, and how it feels important she is starting to trust herself to talk about them in the session. I look forward to seeing her next week.

My reflection here is on some of the words and mood and tone of the session from my experience of Crystal, and also wondering what it might be like for her. In the example above I try to keep Crystal in mind throughout, and believe the notes reflect my continuing attempts to maintain Rogers core conditions of '*congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard*'. I also experience a powerful intention towards wellbeing when writing. In trying to explain this

further I can only offer a tentative description. When I am in the process of writing case notes the core conditions appear to still be active in me and there is a sense of being with the child or young person in both a real and imagined way. Moules (2003) describes an '*alchemy that occurs when tones are in harmony*', which seems to fit my intention to help, and it is as if I am in contact with a grander potential for growth in a deeper and more profound way.

At the end of our work together Crystal found the case notes helpful. She said she felt *important* because someone had really listened to her and cared enough to write about her without judgement, and she had experienced someone who trusted her to trust herself.

I believe writing notes from a position of honouring the client's potential can help empower children and young people. Pyle (2006) observes that the most important part of communicating in written form may be to help the client '*mine their own resources and knowledge*' to reveal their own strengths to themselves.

As mentioned earlier children and young people may not be interested in hearing about the previous session and it feels important the notes themselves do not become a focus of the work. Not every case note appears to contribute something when read back. However I believe having time for reflection is important in terms of the direction of the work, and could offer more than we know. It is as if the notes expand the quality of the relationship which may be felt in the work, and we can trust its direction. I once worked with a boy who seemed very unsettled at the beginning of our work

together. After each session I would write case notes and the following week offer to read them back to him. This felt like a way of containing our relationship and appeared to help. As the work progressed, reading back the case notes became less of a feature and at times unnecessary, as he eventually became able to just bring himself and 'we experienced what emerged in these moments.' Moss, M. (2018).

In Rogers essay on 'The Foundations of the Person Centred Approach' (1980) he talks quite openly about what he discovered when he was at his best as a group facilitator and therapist and writes:

...I find that when I am closest to my inner, intuitive self, when I am somehow in touch with the unknown in me...then whatever I do seems to be full of healing. At those moments it seems that my inner spirit has reached out and touched the inner spirit of the other. Our relationship transcends itself and becomes part of something larger. Profound growth and healing and energy are present.

I understand Rogers is commenting on his particular experience during direct work with others, yet his awareness may also lead us to appreciate what could be experienced beyond the session. This 'something larger' may be an indication of a wider energetic field and perhaps this field could be utilised in times of reflection and writing case notes. Also being able to attend to this possibility in supervision may even help us discover more in our work.

In an article *The Fifth Wave: beyond the mainstream* (2018) I imagined that what we are all

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seeking may be found inside ourselves and the potential for this may be present in therapist and client and also in the direction of the therapeutic relationship and that there may be a 'directional presence' towards growth and change. William Bloom (2011) writes about a 'holding field' in therapy and believes there may be an energy connecting all things. I agree this is a possibility and wonder if this energy could be set in motion by the core conditions being experienced by the client and also active beyond the session.

And finally, there is a short visualisation exercise I sometimes do on my own where I imagine building a fire outdoors and invite all the children and young people I am working with to join me. Sometimes previous clients attend too and all are welcome. I greet everyone who appears and we sit around the fire in a circle. Some bring sticks and help light the fire and some sit quietly. There is some humour and a general flow of wellbeing and connection. I usually notice who comes to sit beside whom and how they get on with each other and there are some wonderful surprises at times.

I know this is an imaginary exercise and it feels almost dreamlike, however it seems to enhance my actual relationships in some way. It just feels important we can meet like this in another world that may

hold therapeutic possibilities. I understand this meeting takes place in my thoughts and I only ever invite the visualisation as a way of connecting to my own sense of the work; however it feels there is an additional part of the therapeutic relationship that is helped to grow in some way.. Perhaps we are all connected in ways we do not yet understand and it may be worth thinking about. ☺

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