

# The Use of Therapeutic Storytelling in Primary School Settings in China

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In the UK and other western countries, educational psychologists have adopted storytelling as a therapeutic technique with children for decades. However, although therapeutic storytelling has been introduced to China, little research has been done on the application of this therapeutic technique in Chinese primary school settings. The current study addresses this gap by using a constructivist grounded theory analysis of semi-structured interviews to explore how Chinese primary school psychological counsellors understand and use therapeutic storytelling. The data collection was based on a small purposive sample that includes twelve psychological counsellors. The findings indicate that storytelling can be used to facilitate the establishment of a therapeutic relationship and is compatible with a wide range of therapeutic approaches.

## **Introduction**

It is widely acknowledged that story has a quality which could provide people with comfort, encouragement and inspiration. It is well supported in literature that storytelling can be used as a therapeutic technique, especially when working with children and young people (Gardner, 1971, 1993; Cook, Taylor & Silverman, 2004, Friedberg & Wilt, 2010). Over decades, researchers in western countries have developed a range of approaches of using stories and storytelling for therapeutic purposes based on different theoretical foundations (Gardner, 1971, 1993; Bettelheim, 2010; Carlson & Arthur, 1999; Cook, Taylor & Silverman, 2004; Erickson & Rossi, 2012). In recent years, an increasing body of research on using therapeutic storytelling in a Chinese context has been published. However, there is a dearth of studies on using this therapeutic technique in Chinese primary school settings. The present study addresses this research gap by exploring how Chinese primary school psychological counsellors understand and use therapeutic storytelling. A constructivist grounded theory methodology underpins the research design, research questions, data collection, analysis and interpretation. The main research questions are:

1. What are Chinese primary school psychological counsellor's viewpoints on the therapeutic use of stories and storytelling?
2. What are the implications of these viewpoints for the future practice of Chinese primary school psychological counsellors?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The participants in this study (n=12) were certified psychological counsellors working full time or part time in primary schools. The participants were recruited from a psychological counsellor community established by a psychological counselling training school in a city located on the east coast of China. Eight of the participants were purposively recruited at the beginning of the study. I engaged in theoretical sampling following the seventh interview in order to develop emerging categories. At the stage of theoretical sampling, another four participants were recruited. The participants' number of years of practice ranged from 1 to 17 years with a mean of 6.6 years.

### ***Data collection and analysis***

Based on the guidelines for creating therapeutic stories proposed by Sunderland (2001), I developed four therapeutic stories targeting Chinese primary school students' common mental health problems, including examination anxiety, social withdrawal, separation/loss, and adaptation problems. Generally, therapeutic storytelling was a new technique for the participants involved in this study. Hence, I delivered an online presentation to each participant to introduce the basic concept of therapeutic storytelling and present the stories devised by me. The participants were encouraged to use the stories in their practice, and eight of the participants found the opportunity to deliver the stories. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the participants' viewpoints and experiences regarding the therapeutic use of stories and storytelling. I was aware that the online presentation might somehow influence the participants' views of therapeutic storytelling. Therefore, during the interviews, I guided the participants to focus on their own experience and understanding and discuss this therapeutic technique critically.

In Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theory approach, data collection and analysis should be carried out simultaneously. Therefore, the data analysis in this study started following the completion of the first

interview. The data analysis methods employed include: initial coding, focused coding, theoretical coding, constant comparison, and memoing.

## Findings and Discussion

Two core categories congruent to the research questions emerged from the analysis of the data gathered. The following table illustrates the core categories and corresponding subcategories.

*Table I. Main Findings*

Core Categories	Subcategories
Facilitating therapeutic relationship	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Establishing therapeutic alliance through storytelling</li> <li>● Adopting storytelling as a way of communication</li> </ul>
Integrating therapeutic story into existing therapeutic approaches and procedures	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Understanding the rationale and impact of therapeutic story from diverse perspectives</li> <li>● Incorporating therapeutic story as an adjunct therapeutic tool</li> </ul>

The section below further discusses the core categories, and several responses from the participants have been extracted from the interview transcripts in order to provide examples.

### ***Facilitating therapeutic relationship***

#### *Establishing therapeutic alliance through storytelling*

There was a consensus amongst the participants that storytelling could be used to facilitate the establishment of an effective therapeutic relationship. For psychological counsellors working in Chinese school settings, it is common to work with students who show resistance. This might be because sometimes teachers and parents would ‘send’ a student to see a psychological counsellor. In this study, many participants were concerned about establishing an effective therapeutic relationship with the children they worked with, and believed that storytelling was helpful. For example:

‘Telling a story was definitely a better strategy compared to explaining something directly. The child was encouraged to engage in the counselling. According to my own experience, usually it is pretty difficult for a child to engage actively.’ (Participant 4)

‘Storytelling might make the counselling less like a counselling...it is something that children are already familiar with. This activity may help to prevent children labelling themselves as ‘problematic student being told to see a psychological counsellor’. (Participant 9)

In Chinese primary schools, usually the psychological counsellor is also responsible for teaching mental health lessons. Therefore, it is likely for the students to perceive the psychological counsellor as a teacher, which might hinder the communication process in the consultation. According to the participants, storytelling is an effective technique to help students recognise them as professional psychological counsellors and talk more openly. Some participants also noted that children’s stage of development needs to be taken into account when analysing the reason of their resistance.

#### *Adopting storytelling as a way of communication*

Many participants described storytelling as an effective ‘communication strategy’ or ‘communication tool’ that can be used to communicate with children. This effect of storytelling was much appreciated by the participants because many students they worked with were unwilling or unable to articulate their thoughts and feelings. The participants believed that storytelling can be used to help children express themselves and understand what is being said by the counsellor. For example:

‘I would say therapeutic story is more like a communication tool. In other words, if you want to say something, say it with a story.’ (Participant 2)

‘It makes what you would like to say less abstract. Vivid and concrete information attracts more attention, and is easier for children, especially young children to understand.’ (Participant 8)

It can be seen that the effectiveness and efficiency of the communication between the child and the counsellor were enhanced by using storytelling. Storytelling, as a non-threatening communication strategy, allows

children to experience and express emotions vicariously and to develop insights about themselves.

### ***Integrating therapeutic story into existing therapeutic approaches and procedures***

#### *Understanding the rationale and impact of therapeutic story from diverse perspectives*

The participants interpreted the effects of therapeutic storytelling from different theoretical perspectives, including cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic, child-centred, etc. Some participants viewed therapeutic story through more than one theoretical lenses. The participants believed that therapeutic storytelling is compatible with a wide range of therapeutic approaches. For example:

‘When using stories in teaching, usually we would teach a moral or lesson to children. We can do the similar thing with stories in counselling, maybe in CBT.’ (Participant 12)

‘I believe therapeutic stories could be used as a projective and expressive tool for children in counselling, just like music, painting and playing.’ (Participant 6)

In the interviews, most participants defined therapeutic story broadly, and they were aware that there are many different types of therapeutic stories. Therapeutic storytelling was used by the participants in a variety ways, illustrating that storytelling can be used as a trans-theoretical therapeutic technique.

#### *Incorporating therapeutic story as an adjunct therapeutic tool*

In this study, none of the participants used therapeutic storytelling as the only approach to address the children’s mental health problems. According to the interviews, the participants advocated using storytelling as an auxiliary therapeutic technique. For example:

‘I intended to use storytelling to support my main approach... Storytelling has the potential to contribute to achieving therapeutic goals by helping children change their beliefs and evaluations.’ (Participant 1)

‘In the training, we were told that we do not have to stick with one therapeutic approach when conducting counselling. We can use

multiple approaches as long as they are useful...so storytelling can be used for different purposes.’ (Participant 2)

There was a wide consensus among the participants that the timing of delivering therapeutic story should be determined based on children’s responses to other therapeutic approaches used in the consultation. The participants had a tendency to use storytelling to support the implementation of other therapeutic approaches. A possible reason is that they were not familiar with or proficient in using this therapeutic technique.

Based on the findings of the current study and a review of literature, I identify some differences in using therapeutic storytelling to help children and young people with mental health problems in China and western countries. The participants in this study tended to use therapeutic storytelling as an adjunct technique. However, researchers in western countries have developed systematic approaches of using storytelling as the main technique in psychological counselling (Gardner, 1971, 1993; Sunderland, 2001; Pomerantz, 2007). For Chinese psychological counsellors, resources on the therapeutic use of stories and storytelling are insufficient. There are various therapeutic story collections published in English, but there is not yet a professional therapeutic story collection book developed by Chinese authors. Some western studies have developed therapeutic storytelling approaches that incorporate multimedia (Brosnan et al., 2006; Matthews and Doherty, 2011), but such work has not been performed in China.

## **Conclusion**

This study explores Chinese primary school psychological counsellors’ understanding and experiences of the therapeutic use of stories and storytelling. According to the participants’ reports, storytelling is especially useful for establishing an effective therapeutic relationship when working therapeutically with Chinese primary school students. The participants also confirmed that therapeutic storytelling is compatible with a wide range of therapeutic approaches. These findings conform to previous studies suggesting that therapeutic storytelling is a trans-theoretical technique that can be used to integrate different therapeutic approaches (Long, 2013; Sunderland, 2001; Prochaska & Norcross, 2007). The differences in therapeutic storytelling in China and western countries indicate that more resources need to be developed to support Chinese primary school

psychological counsellors in using this therapeutic technique. Overall, the findings of this study may help to inform the future implementation of therapeutic storytelling in primary school settings in China. This study is limited by its sample size, therefore future research may include a larger and more diverse sample of psychological counsellors. Moreover, future research is needed to explore the experiences of children who are involved in therapeutic storytelling.

## **About the Author**

Xi Liu is a PhD researcher and Graduate Teaching Assistant at the School of Education at University of Sheffield, where he completed a master's degree in Psychology and Education in 2013. He works as a part-time tutor at Sheffield Confucius Institute and Lifelong Learning, Skills & Communities in Sheffield City Council, teaching Taichi and Chinese calligraphy with a particular focus on promoting mental health wellbeing. Before coming to England, Xi was a certificated psychological counsellor in China and had one year experience of working as a psychological teacher in a local primary school. Since 2011, Xi regularly writes short stories for several Chinese children and teenager magazines and his first children's book has been published.

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