NARRATIVE WRITING FOR ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

By

Shirley Anne Cameron

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Appreciation

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Dedication

To my family and close friends who have supported and nurtured my personal growth throughout my education by offering their unconditional love and acceptance, words cannot express my gratitude. To my dad, whose personal narrative has taught me that love conquers all. His story will forever live in mine.
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INTRODUCTION

Writing is a long process of introspection; it is a voyage towards the darkest caverns of consciousness, a long, slow meditation. I write feeling my way in silence, and along the way, discover particles of truth, small crystals that fit in the palm of one hand and justify my passage through this world. –Isabel Allende, *Paula* (as quoted in Zimmerman, 2002)

It is human nature to work to surmount challenging life events and to wish to restore harmony in our lives. We all have the capability to succeed because we are all descendants of survivors. Challenging life events can result in developing a greater sense of belonging, a greater sense of self-esteem, and an increased concern for others (Brendtro & Shahbazian, 2003). Current trends in the study of psychology and education indicate that there is an increasing awareness in the effectiveness of writing as a mode of achieving personal development since “…writing about emotional experiences is associated with a host of positive outcomes” (Slatcher & Pennebaker, 2006, p.160). Writing about personal experience may help to provide clarity in thinking and pave the way toward self-understanding.

It is during the years of adolescent development that the need to define and identify the self truly begins in a meaningful way. Writing about life experience helps adolescents to come to terms with emotional and social dysfunction. As Pennebaker & Chung (2007) point out, writing can be a significant learning tool for adolescents as they
struggle to find meaning with life’s negative experiences. Improvements in social, psychological, behavioral, and biological measures result.

Through reviewing current literature that examines adolescent identity, narrative structures, and the importance of writing as a means of healing, this paper will identify the psychological and sociological benefits attained for the adolescents in terms of defining self through writing for personal development. In addition, I will use personal reflection to explore the question, ‘Why is narrative writing essential to an adolescent’s personal development?’ Answering this question is critical in determining a philosophical foundation for teaching writing for personal development to adolescent learners. I will begin by examining adolescent behavior and identity, and by reflecting on my own experience of searching for identity during my adolescent years. This information is significant as my story carries with it my internalized experience for it is “…only when we go deep into the forest- the place deep within where we learn to rely upon ourselves and, through work and creation, allow ourselves to emerge- are we able to become whole and to heal (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 16).

After reflecting on my adolescent experience as it relates to behavior and identity, I will define narrative in terms of writing and examine current research to determine the effects of story telling as a therapeutic process. I will include an example of my personal experience with narrative writing for healing. I will then explore the essentiality of narrative writing for personal development as it pertains to the adolescent’s sense of belonging and identity. This literature examines the values of narrative writing as it is
reflected in the lives of adolescents. I will also examine the critical role language plays in narrative writing and the importance of psychological, social, and physical benefits from narrative writing for the adolescent. It is my intent to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of writing about past emotional experience, specifically in the process of behavioral development of the adolescent, and to apply that knowledge in my teaching.

Both my personal and professional experience have led me to the understanding that writing for personal development is essential to adolescents in terms of helping to develop identity, belonging, and connectiveness to others. As Butcher (2006) suggests, teachers process information in relation to the life experiences they have had both inside and outside the classroom. Writing about these experiences “links storytelling as being relevant to learning…” (Butcher, 2006, p. 197).

**My Adolescent Experience/Adolescent Behavior and Identity**

As previously mentioned, an important motivating force in the life of the adolescent is the need to strive for the development of a sense of self and a sense of uniqueness. It is obviously an integral component in adolescent literature, as the subject of 85% of young adult literature that has been written in the past ten years is focused on identity (Koss & Teale, 2009). The adolescents in our Western culture and society face many challenges in this pursuit. Through her research, Bunting (2004) observed that British adolescents are 70% more likely to suffer from anxiety and emotional problems
than adolescents of thirty years ago. They are 25% more likely to suffer from behavioral problems, which correlate to their increased chances of experiencing a wide range of dysfunctional adult issues (Bunting, 2002). As they begin to create a place for themselves, so many pressures from society and culture cause for them significant personal stress and emotional tension. Some of these vulnerabilities such as low-income, substance abuse, single parenting, sexual abuse, abandonment and learning disabilities are beyond what could be interpreted as common and expected life occurrences. In fact, some of these adolescents have already incurred a lifetime of losses (LaBelle, 1987). Life becomes effectively insurmountable.

Self-understanding is the substance of the adolescents’ self-conceptions. It provides the rational underpinnings of self-identity (Mooney et al., 2005). As an adolescent, I suffered a great deal of anxiety, yet I was unable to express or identify my feelings as anxiety at that time. My life on the surface appeared very ordinary. I appeared to function well in my home, and in my friendships, but inherent in my sense of self was an overwhelming fear that manifested itself in panic attacks. They began for me when I was twelve years old and continued throughout my adolescence and beyond.

Adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorder generally struggle to succeed in high school. Deficits occur across academic subjects as students have difficulty attending to instruction, focusing on subjects, and relating new information to what is already known. They have trouble managing their own academic behavior (Mooney et al, 2005, p. 205). As an adolescent, I struggled to be able to focus as my anxiety escalated in the classroom. I sensed I was intellectually capable, yet I couldn’t understand my inability to function successfully.
Throughout this stage of life’s passage, and as they move toward an elevated measure of self-understanding, adolescents begin to think in more abstract and idealistic ways. The result is a heightened sense of self-awareness that subsequently helps to develop a more integrated self-identity (Stantrock, 1998). This is the process of typical adolescent behavioral development. In my case, I was unable to connect to who I was and the purpose for my existence. This heightened sense of awareness caused fear and anxiety. This caused problems for me to be able to attain a self-identity beyond the fragile structure of my home life.

When an adolescent’s life experiences cause them to have to deal with exceptional emotional trauma, effects of low socio-economic status, or deep personal loss, a raft of problems ensue. My father was an alcoholic. This reality caused much dysfunction in our home and I was deeply affected yet I did not understand it at the time. The effects of his alcoholism manifested in my anxiety and through my panic attacks, yet I was unable to connect these feelings with my personal situation. I did not understand the connection until many years later. I suffered from a disassociated sense of identity and a low sense of self worth. These problems created in me storm waves that interfered with what otherwise would have been a relatively safe if not smooth passage through the corridor of my adolescent developmental behavior.

Without having developed a solid sense of identity during my adolescent development, I entered adulthood without the ability to trust myself and therefore made some significantly poor life choices that I attribute to a heightened sense of anxiety and the disconnectedness to self. I searched for acceptance and love in a man who was unable
to fulfill those needs that I had no idea could only be fulfilled by me. I married him to leave the turmoil of my home. I had my first child at 19, thinking this love could fill my need for happiness. My anxious state worsened upon the death of my second son a year later and I worked very hard to control this anxiety by keeping it hidden.

Not talking about important psychological phenomena is a form of inhibition, which could cause or exacerbate psychosomatic processes, “thereby increasing the risk of illness, and other stress-related disturbances” (Pennebaker, 1997, p. 164). Pennebaker (1997) points out that mere expression of trauma is not enough; health gains appear to require translating experience into language. I have spent most of my adult life writing about my childhood experiences. When my storm waves were recreated through written narrative in the form of re-telling my past negative life experiences, significant healing occurred. It took many years of intense therapy to come to terms with these experiences, and for me to be able to gain a sense of identity.

My Writing Experience/Narrative Writing as a Mode of Expressing Feeling

Narrative is a complex notion. The term is used within a wide domain of academic research including literature, psychology, and education. It is defined as a type of discourse that is agent-oriented, meaning it focuses on people, and it “expresses the unfolding of events in a temporal framework” (Berman & Nir-Sagiv, 2007). Narrative
therapy is a form of psychological therapy whereby the therapist provides “theoretically informed scaffolds or supports” in the form of reflective responding, and paraphrasing to facilitate the co-construction of an integrated healing narratives (Cook-Cottone, 2004, p. 178). According to Polkinghorne, 2004, the basic theory of narrative therapy draws on Foucault’s notion of societies’ dominant stories and holds “that people normally incorporate for their identities the dominant story of the culture” in which people are controlled by the problematic parts of their selves. The purpose of narrative therapy is to “assist people in forming … an identity story in which they assume control over their own lives” (Polkinghorne, 2004, p. 274). Once the problem is externalized, it loses its power and the person is able to separate the self from the problem. In both my personal and professional experience, coming to an understanding of this notion is a fundamental step in healing. Through their narrative writing, so many of my students have been empowered by coming to a realization that the negative emotion they feel is a result of some of the trauma they have experienced. A simple realization that they do not own the trauma helps them to understand that although they own the experience, it is not who they are, just part of their life experience. These thoughts become the cornerstone of positive healing.

Thought is retained in our minds in the form of narrative. Like the continuous story of a child’s imagination, we spend our lives storying and restorying ourselves (Bolton, 2005). We are “embedded and enmeshed” (p. 105) in the story structures we have created. These stories are constructs of our past experience and narrative is essential in living with those experiences. Narrative expresses our values. It is “the frame through which humans endow their world with meaning” (Bolivar (1988), as cited in Susinos,
Our thoughts and actions are understood as texts to be interpreted. Narrative provides our experience with meaning. It is central to human understanding, memory systems, and communication. Narratives make, for us, sense of our lives.

It was during my mid-twenties that I found a way to identify, define, and articulate the negative past experiences in my childhood. It was at this point that I realized my “personal upheavals provoked intense and long lasting emotional changes” (Pennebaker & Chung, 2007, p. 4) that had caused suffering in my life. Until that point, I managed to function with my anxiety, but the responsibilities of my adult life caused me to face the internal storm head on. I was drowning in the deep and murky waters, and I needed help. During the next decade, I entered a regime of psychological therapy that helped me to come to terms with my life experience. The crucial outcome to this therapy and the most essential element to my eventual recovery was narrative writing.

Within the structure of my therapy and through my healing process, I was able to reconstruct the trauma of my past experiences through narrative writing. Many pages of re-telling and re-writing my childhood experiences enabled me to come to terms with my feelings of abandonment that I had always carried with me, that had manifested in fear and anxiety, and that had defined my perception of who I was. Within a safe environment, the process of putting the words to all my feelings of hurt and rejection onto the page allowed me to distinguish my self from my hurt.

I began by writing fictional autobiographies with the voice of my childhood self. According to Hunt and Sampson (2005), exploring early memories using a child voice as narrator leads to “insight into the present psyche”, and using the senses to describe
experience forces us to “enter our own feelings and emotions in a way which we may not be able to do simply by writing about the facts of our lives” (p. 33).

In one of my narratives, I began to write about a visual image I had of a pink dress with white lace trim that I remembered from my childhood. I wrote about myself as a little girl wearing the dress. Thinking of the dress frightened me. Through the narrative, I (re)created images of my father playing a game of helicopter with me by hoisting me into the air with his feet. I felt safe and loved by this play. I remembered feeling angry when my younger sister took my turn. Something happened during that episode that created in me a sense of abandonment that I had not been able to come to terms with throughout my life.

Through the voice of my childhood self, I was able to remember that my mother became very angry at my reaction, took the dress off me, put me into my play clothes and sent me out the front door, into the night, with a suitcase saying “Well if you don’t want to let your sister have her turn, you can leave and I will give your dress to the new daughter I will get from the Children’s Aid”. I was five years old that first time, and I remember standing on the sidewalk, feeling shame, and looking up and down the street wondering how I would find my way to my grandmother’s house. Writing this narrative brought immediate attention to my feelings of abandonment and rejection, and I then remembered being threatened with the abandonment of being sent away many times during my childhood.

The autobiographical narrative is the ever-changing story that we tell about ourselves. As we write over the course of our lives, the story becomes increasingly
complex, symbolic, and sophisticated (Gully, 2004). The pink dress story, written in the
voice of my childhood self, helped me bring to light one of the many causes of my
insecurities and fears that challenged my health and happiness. Through the process of
putting the fear on the page, I was able to externalize that feeling and separate the adult
me from that scared little girl.

Translating experience into words forces some kind of structure to the experience
itself (Pennebaker, 2006). As survivors of childhood trauma, we are searching for
evidence of the external forces that have diminished us. In studying our own experience,
we are recovering our own possibilities (Alvine, 2001). When I was able to separate my
self from my fears, I was able to grasp layers upon layers of possibilities. I ended my
marriage and went to university. Over time, I was able to create for myself and for my
children, a healthy, productive, and fulfilled life, separated from the residue of childhood
trauma.

My Teaching Experience/Connecting Adolescent Identity
with Narrative Writing

For the adolescents who have suffered life’s storms and who have struggled with
giving voice to those experiences, narrative writing can serve as a safe port that not only
shapes what they declare about themselves and their experiences, but serves as a beacon
to guide them through those troubled waters toward a safe passage to adulthood.
Because language is at the crux of the adolescents’ emotional, social, and intellectual world, it is necessary to examine how it influences adolescents. The emancipatory effect of reflexive analysis is best illustrated through the medium of narrative writing (Susinos, 2007). It is important for adolescents to go deep inside language and use it to know, shape, and play with the narratives of life experience (Atwell, 1998). Connecting the language of story to past experience frees the emotion because language allows us to construct the meaning of our thoughts, feelings, and actions. The fashion in which we retell our story—what we underline, what we omit—and our position as main actor or victim-shapes what we declare about our lives and our past experiences (Susinos). After a reading of her narrative, one of my students was surprised that she felt for the first time a sense of control over her past experience. Her story centered on an early experience that she had after her family had moved across the country. She remembered feeling desperately lonely and afraid of her new home. She wrote the words of her narrative in first person point of view with her voice as a guardian angel talking into the ear of her child-self, giving words of comfort and support. Because of this narrative, she experienced a freeing epiphany that helped her to realize she did have the control to turn that experience of loss into new opportunity. She was able to deal with her fear of leaving for university with the knowledge that the “guardian angel” would be a pencil and paper away at anytime she needed her.

Narrative deals with experiences, not with propositions (Charon, 2006). Therefore, our story is a culmination of the reality of all of our positive and negative life experiences. Narrative writing tells a life story through language. When we use language to retell the events of our lives, we create epiphanic moments that are manifested from
the essence of these life experiences. For the adolescent, language within the structure of narrative writing is an important tool that helps them connect to their past experiences.

I have experienced many rewarding years of teaching English language arts to adolescents. Perhaps the single most rewarding result of my teaching is the remarkably insightful personal realizations that come to my students through their narrative writing practices in the classroom. In our classroom, we begin by quieting our mind “so we can hear what the landscape or the character has to say above the other voices in our mind” (Lamott, 1994). We begin with one narrative sentence because its “chief duty is to lead to the next narrative sentence (LeGuin, 1998). The structure is not as important as the freedom with which we use our pens to express our memories and our feelings associated with those memories. The content is a reflection of what value we place on the events in our memory and the language we use guides us to important clues from our past that connect us to who we are.

Language is a social construct. Self-identity does not develop independently but is constructed in relation to a social and cultural environment. For us to find a place in society through story, language becomes crucial. The significance of narrative is that it is more contained than a more loosely ordered discourse. It is through a process of interacting with others that we come to identify self and this process is constantly changing as we interact with other individuals and groups (Stuart, in Hunt and Sampson, 2005). Narrative writing, as an integral part of language, influences the development of self. Narrative writing as a social process “has played its part in both offering some individuals self-esteem and others shame” (Hunt and Sampson, 2005, p. 215).
Through group sharing in narrative writing class, many of my students learn acceptance and develop a sense of belonging. As Murray and Whyte (2002) point out, often the dominant story of adolescents is one of personal struggle and negative experience within the social environment and little focus is given to the positive experiences and personal attributes or strengths. By involving peers in responses to writing, I have found that many students begin to see the problem as being external and they are able to “explore their past and find times when the expected event associated with the problem did not occur” (p. 168).

It has been my experience that the adolescents are particularly influenced by the positive reinforcement and feedback they receive from their peers. This allows the adolescent to experience the problem as being separate and having a voice of its own outside of the identity of the self. This is especially significant if the problem is talked about and related to their peers’ experiences. Writing, reading aloud, and sharing allow students to share, expand, and reflect on each other’s experiences (Chandler, 2002). These moments contradict the dominant story of the problem, bring it into the light of day, and open a window for healing. It has been my experience that students leave the writing class feeling empowered and hopeful.

The following story is an example of a teaching experience of mine that illustrates the power of social interacting and peer sharing through narrative writing. A very quiet and reflective student shared a narrative with the class that revealed her anxiety about always seeing too much, interpreting too much, and having feelings of being very “weird” because of her perceived insight. She related this heightened awareness to times in her life when she would spend hours daydreaming over dust specks illuminated from
the early morning sun’s rays coming through her grandmother’s window. Her anxiety centered on sophisticated feelings of disassociation and unreality that she found difficult to interpret and explain. Her narrative beautifully reflected the senses she felt as she described color, movement, and texture. Her classmates immediately picked up on the association between her anxiety and her ability as one of the most creative visual artist in the school. Once she understood that her perceived “weirdness” was an important attribute that was accepted by her peers as being very positive, the anxiety lost its hold on her. Identifying her uniqueness freed her from her internal worry and she was able to establish for herself a sense of belonging within the group. This sense of belonging was manifested in both her future personal writing and her art work.

As previously stated, adolescence is a period in life that has special significance for the development of self and identity. Many theories that conceptualize identity through narrative life stories suggest that identity is formed in adolescence and revisited throughout the course of life when new experiences are integrated into the understanding of self (MacLean, 2008). It is during this period that autobiographical memory is encoded, which in narrative terms “constitutes the stuff of which selves are made” (Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009, p. 558). It is often through transitions or periods of heightened awareness that adolescents are faced with a need to understand, or even to communicate, who they are in the moment. There comes a need to explore identity when vulnerability is felt through changes in fixed perspectives and beliefs (Erikson (1968), as cited in McLean &Pratt, 2006). Adolescents often find themselves searching for meaning during life’s difficult moments when past dependability and security is threatened.
As a result of a narrative assignment, one of my students was able to share a story he wrote of his experience of coming to terms with his sexuality. The assignment was to focus on past feelings of loneliness and isolation. He described in passionate detail the feelings of isolation he experienced during his early school years as a result of some of his classmates calling him names and bullying him by making references to his homosexuality. He prefaced the reading of his story by sharing with the class that he had only recently come to terms with his own sexuality. By bringing these feelings of loneliness and isolation to the surface and by sharing them within the safe environment of the classroom, he was able to find security in his isolation through peer acceptance in the narrative writing program. In spite of his vulnerability, he found that he could depend on himself to reach out within the structure of the classroom and find acceptance.

In my classroom experience, I have encountered many students who initially demonstrate a negative disposition, apathetic disinterest, and disrespect toward narrative writing and toward life, in general. When faced with a narrative writing task, they disassociate. It becomes obvious that they have little hope in themselves because of their present life circumstances.

Narrative writing often helps these students to come to terms with their negative feelings. One of the most difficult challenges as a teacher is to be able to find a way to engage these students in writing in order for them to be able to sort through personal grief. There are countless effective narrative writing programs available. Some use emotion as a trigger, some use past experience as a prompt, and some use proprioceptive responses. It is my experience that before I can introduce writing methods to bring the student to the writing table, I have to invest in establishing a relationship with them. This
must be firmly based on trust, respect, and mutual understanding. This takes and
incredible amount of time, patience, and effort but the results are truly inspiring. I make
sure this investment is solid before I begin the writing process with them. Through the
process of engaging in exploring past events that trigger anger and fear, students are able
to understand that their experience has contributed to the negative feelings they live with
(Voorhees, 2006). I have been an educator to those students who are least likely to do
well in school. I have heard them labeled as disadvantaged, struggling, reluctant,
resistant, educationally deprived, and at risk. Most of these students do not experience
positive literary experiences in their education but through investing in personal
relationships with them, I have become a better teacher and a better person.

Johannessen (2004) believes that a cognitive approach to teaching and learning
helps these students connect to out-of-school experiences and engages them in powerful
learning strategies. Getting away from teaching basic writing skills and focusing on
cognitive approaches such as engaging the students in meaningful writing works to help
them find a sense of purpose in the classroom. In some cases, these children have become
a burden to their families, schools, and community. They have experienced no sense of
value within these cultures. They feel defeated and are unable to express themselves so
they hide that vulnerability through inappropriate behaviors. Some are frightened to try to
write because it has become a mode of expression they have no capabilities of using. This
means one more failure on a list they perceive is monumental. Shifting the emphasis
from basic skills to sensory details in their narrative writing assignments helps these
students produce meaningful pieces of narrative that communicate personal feeling rather
than literary skill (Johannessen). I convince them that their experiences and their feelings
about those experiences matter to me. Through spending the necessary time it takes to
make personal connections to each of my students and by engaging these students in a
meaningful narrative writing process that is personal and indicative of their own life
experiences, I am able to see them “not as lost causes” but to see their potential and
“catch a glimpse of the stories” behind the writer (Voorhees, 1999). Helping these
students find a sense of belonging and a greater insight into the positive aspects of their
identity has been one of the most rewarding moments in my teaching career.

One of the most effective ways to communicate feeling through life stories
involves a self-reflected process called autobiographical reasoning. The process happens
when we talk or think about our past to form links between the past and the self. This
helps us understand who we are and helps us to create a life story (MacLean, 2008).
Forming narrative is an important way for adolescents to integrate experiences as they
learn to associate how a past event influenced another event or aspect of the self. This is
an important step in self-understanding. These life story narratives begin to emerge in
adolescence, and come to life as they become more psychologically mature.

In my writing classroom, students explore connections with past events through
associating feelings in narrative writing. As the adolescents begin to think about and
make meaning of past events, they construct life stories to explain how these past events
led to or influenced the self. Many of my students share their experiences of finding a
personal life passion through their writing. One of my students wrote of his love for
music and came to understand the importance of music to his sense of self when he
connected past aesthetic experience to music. He became aware of how important music
was to his future career choices.
Bump (2000) explores the notion of affective education. He defines it as emotional intelligence, knowing one’s emotions, managing one’s emotions, motivating oneself, recognizing emotions in others, and handling relationships (Bump, as cited in Anderson (2000)). I teach writing skills that help the students communicate emotion through connecting personal experience to events in literature. I look for literature that will potentially evoke a “calisthenics of emotion” within the memory of the students for them to make connections between their past experiences and the literature (Bump, as quoted in MacCurdy & Anderson, 2000, p. 153). Finding emotional connection and past experience triggers through experiencing good literature can be a catalyst for healing. There are countless well-written pieces of young adult literature that partner with personal narrative writing for adolescents.

As the minds of the adolescents develop and mature, thoughts become more abstract, less concrete, and more susceptible to vulnerable feelings associated with their prior life stories. According to McLean (2005) identity is determined in life’s story. If identity is a life story that begins to develop through adolescence, then it makes sense that this story includes identifying and making sense or meaning of past experience. According to McLean (2008), identity development is a major psychological task of adolescents and has important implications for healthy psychological and physical development throughout life. The body has its own sense of identity. That is why negative feelings that are inhibited and kept secret for long periods of time manifest in health problems. The mind is capable of deception but the body is not (Metcalf & Simon, 2002). A practice of releasing emotional tension through narrative writing is a sure way of letting go of not only negative feelings associated with past experience, but also of
many physical ailments. When the students bring the feeling onto the page, the emotion is released. It is outside of the self and outside of the body. It leaves a space, if ever so small, in which healing can occur.

It is common in psychoanalysis to refer to language as the ‘talking cure’ as language was used to treat paralyses, convulsions, sleep disorder, anorexia, and many other physical and emotional disorders and recently, researchers are suggesting that the effects of talking are extended to ‘writing cure’. (Bucci (1993), in Pennebaker, 2006). For adolescents who face factors such as decreased self-esteem, feelings of disassociation, and fear of failure, narrative writing is the therapeutic requirement they need to make personal gains in discovering a sense of self (Wolter, DiLollo, and Apel, 2006, p. 168).

Narrative writing has been looked at in the education field as both a negative and positive method of expressive writing in the classroom. In trying to control content of curriculum, many spokespersons have condemned such writing activities as being “contrary to the wholesome development of moral, social, and cultural outlooks” (Simmons, 2007, p.3) of the adolescents. It certainly requires careful and responsible handling by the teacher in the classroom to be able to make a judgment on the possible need for referral to professionals more suited to adolescent counseling. It is essential that teachers working with emotionally distressed students are able to make a professional decision to guide the student to those who possess the background in clinical psychology or psychiatry to deal with the heightened emotional responses. Simmons points out clear guidelines in dealing with these students: keep a portfolio of the student’s work, communicate with other professionals about the work, note facial expression and body
language, look for patterns of unusual writing, observe and note any aggressive behavior, refer the student to school guidance personnel, and pray hard (Simmons, 2007, p. 7)

**Concluding Thoughts/Why Narrative Writing is Essential**

Sense of self: The part that wrestles with the other. The part that feels love, pain, and joy and grief, the part that speaks across the pages to bring a future where we can let go and take up again, where we rise up against the language of confusion and come to know who it is we have become. (MacCurdy & Anderson, 2000, p. 80).

Throughout this paper, I have shared my narrative writing experience from my personal perspective and from my professional perspective. I have come to understand that my reconceptualizing the value of narrative writing has occurred through a correlation of my prior knowledge of narrative writing with the new insights I have gained through teaching narrative writing to adolescents and through my graduate studies. Reflecting on my experiences set the context for why I became passionate in exploring the essentiality of narrative writing to the adolescent’s writing experience. I have also shared some of the personal challenges I faced in coming to terms with my negative past experiences. These experiences have profoundly influenced my thinking
and molded me into becoming a teacher who is able to relate with empathy to my
students’ narrative writing experiences. As Crocker and Parker (2004) explain:

Recognition and acknowledgment are not the same as love and
acceptance, and they do not create the safety and security people desire.
People cannot protect themselves from dangers they experience in child-
hood by proving they are smart, strong, beautiful, rich, or admired or that
they satisfy some other contingency of self-worth. In the words of Claire
Nuer (1997), a Holocaust survivor and leadership development trainer,
“The only way to create love, safety, and acceptance is by giving them”. (p. 407)

Exploring this recent research on narrative writing and adolescent identity has
continued to challenge my ever-evolving philosophy of teaching. By examining the
literature, I have formulated clearer understandings and conceptualizations that inform
my philosophical foundation. As Hartill, in Hunt and Sampson (2005) indicate, we are
given opportunity to understand that because and in spite of our lived and experienced
trauma, we find “a source of strength and power” that leads us into a “new and more
developed personal constellation” and in the “wounds of life lie the very wellspring of
creativity”( p. 48). As a result of my reflection, I have a deeper understanding of the
importance of becoming familiarized with the numerous values in advocating for
narrative writing as a means of personal development in adolescent learning.
My readings and reflection have impacted my thinking about the adolescent identity and
where I see the opportunities in my teaching to help the adolescent through narrative
writing establish a heightened sense of self and sense of belonging within and outside of my classroom.

Because narrative writing has helped me to be able to come to terms with my negative childhood experiences, I am able to feel a strong connection to the angst my students experience with the problems they encounter in coming to terms with some of their own experiences. It also helped me to make strong connections to my family and gave me the ability to feel empathy and understanding. This ultimately led to forgiveness. My father passed away last year having battled cancer for two years. During that two-year period, we worked together; he reminiscing on his mother’s life and me putting his words into story. I cannot ever express the feelings of healing that process allowed for me and for him. I was able to let him go in the end with love and understanding.

I believe that by listening and responding to their stories, I can advocate for a stronger rationale for narrative writing and its place in education. It becomes increasingly important for me to ensure that my students experience the opportunity to write their story in the safe and secure environment of a classroom. As Atwell (1987) contends, there is a good chance I can “avoid the worst of the orthodoxies- the maxims that prevent me from teaching my students what they need to know” by being less caught up in “adhering to program and curriculum” and more concerned with “responding” to what it is the adolescent needs to “lead them and help them grow up”(p. 26).

Narrative writing is not a luxury that we indulge in. It is a necessity and essential to the development of identity in adolescents. It is a way of knowing and understanding self and is a creative representation of reality, past experience, and personal expression. Teaching students to emotionally find a connection between their present life
circumstances and their negative past experiences is an important contribution in affective education. As I explore the personal reality of my teaching, I am excited about the prospective healing I will help to bring to fruition in the lives of my students through their journey in narrative writing.

Many years ago, after I became whole through narrative writing, I bought a little pink dress. It sat for a long time folded neatly, covered in scented paper in a decorated box on a shelf in my closet. Recently, I gave it to my friend Sophia, a five year little girl who brings happiness and joy to my life. She loves to wear it on special occasions and when I look at her, I think of that scared little girl who stood outside in the dark night, not knowing who could love her. I imagine them both holding hands feeling safe, loved, and full of promise for a happy future. Narrative writing has helped me release the fear and anger associated with my childhood experiences. It has helped me separate who I am from my experiences and it has helped me to understand and come to terms with the actions of others in my past.

In my teaching experience, it is my hope that the young adults who I am privileged to share learning with find these healing experiences through narrative writing at a time in their lives when they will be able to move into adulthood having acknowledged the essentiality of connecting emotionally to their past experiences. We must strive to find meaning by connecting our emotions to our past experiences. Narrative writing is an essential tool in helping adolescents find meaning in their negative past experiences and move forward toward a healthy adulthood.
References


