

FROM REFLECTION TO AWARENESS: HOW LIFE STORIES SHAPE

A GRADE 7 BOY'S IDENTITY

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Abstract

At Crescent School, our *Portrait of a Crescent Graduate* identifies three questions about the knowledge, skills, and character strengths a graduate should be able to ask and answer: Who am I? How do I lead? and What is my legacy? In this current model of character education, students organically develop six essential qualities (being a moral person, self-aware, a positive leader, critical thinker, adaptable, and an engaged citizen) to answer the three guiding questions. Within this framework, this project introduced an intentional process of identity formation by using critical life-story events as a platform for developing narrative coherence to explore the question: Who am I?

For ten weeks, the boys reflected on two high-point, two low-point, and two turning-point life story memories. Observations, one-on-one interviews, discussions, and surveys measured the boys' ability to make connections between their lived experiences and the construction of their identity. To determine the efficacy of this project, a comprehensive analysis comparing the pre- and post-action data was completed. Upon careful reflection, the data confirmed a shift in identity formation. The analysis of life-story events promoted the development of narrative coherence, which strengthened the boys' ability to reflect and become more self-aware. The boys' responses to the question, Who am I? evolved from a basic biographical description into a deeper understanding of identity that included personal attributes and characteristics.

Understanding one's self is an evolving process. This project confirmed the importance of using narrative tools for self-reflection and the need for an intentional framework to build identity formation in adolescent boys.

Glossary

Life story events - isolated events that are identified as contributing parts to a greater whole.

Narrative coherence - is used to link the episodes within a life phase to explain changes in the narrator's values or personality (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Autobiographical reasoning - a process of self-reflective thinking or talking the personal past that involves forming links between elements of one's life in an attempt to relate one's personal past and present (Habermas & Bluck, 2000).

Effective- a shift in self-perception or a deeper understanding of self has been identified.

Meaning-making - the narrator's understanding of the implications of events through the use of lessons or insights.

High-point memory - participants described an episode in which they experienced something extremely positive.

Low-point memory - participants described an episode in which they experienced something extremely negative.

Turning-point memory - participants described an episode in which they experienced a time of change or transition.

Causal coherence - a process of interpretation in which the individual continually attempts to make meaningful connections between life events and the sense of self.

Introduction

Narrative is both a tool to examine identity development as well as the vehicle by which identity is constructed.

-McLean, Breen & Fournier, 2010

My motivation to explore the 2018/2019 IBSC topic, *Boys and Stories: Pathways to Learning* grew from my investigation of narrative therapy, the launch of Crescent School's *Portrait of a*

Graduate, and the belief that adolescence is a pivotal period of development for identity formation.

According to Rosen (2011), the current cohort of adolescents, known as the “iGeneration” is radically different from any previous generation of students. Immersed in technology, these teens are defined by their technology and media use, their love of electronic communication, and their need to multitask (Rosen, 2011). Identity, in the reality of the iGeneration, is correlated to how many “likes” they receive on a post. Research by Rosen confirms the impact of social media and the Internet on identity formation and a teenager’s ability to understand himself and others. The desire to create a digital identity and the need for social validation is a significant shift from classical narrative theorists who believe “the ways in which we recall events of our lives help to define who we are in the world and how we understand ourselves and others” (Fivush, Bohanek & Zaman, 2010, p. 45).

At Crescent School, educators endeavour to guide students in the increasingly complicated task of understanding their authentic “self.” Now, more than ever before, we must challenge the influences of social media by mentoring our students to create a personal identity using the richest source of data available, their personal story. Thus, my research question: *How does analysing life story events develop Grade 7 boys’ narrative coherence?* seeks to empower young men to develop the reflective tools needed to move forward with clarity in their journey of self-discovery.

This action research undertaking reflects a shift in the current model of mentorship at Crescent School. If we aspire to have our graduates answer the three essential questions in the *Portrait of a Graduate*, we must revolutionize our current state of character development and investigate pathways to promote self-awareness and individuality.

Literature Review

Everyone has a story and within the story lies the notion of the "self." The perception of one's self is created "through stories that children tell about themselves, stories others tell about them and the stories they share with others" (Fivush, Bohanek & Zaman, 2010, p. 47). As children develop, "they can tell a complete and understandable narrative about a single event in their life" (Reese et al., 2017, p. 612); however, they are unable to connect episodic events in their lives to create a coherent narrative or life story. Individuals between the age of 12-18 years-old are

tasked with creating their identity and understanding their self to move them forward into adulthood (Cairney & Breen, 2017).

The tension arising during this critical stage of adolescent development was first introduced by Erikson (1968) who noted the "identity crisis" as a period of time when a young person endeavours to find the answers to the question, Who am I? This phenomenon prompted cognitive and behavioural psychologists to examine theories of narrative identity and use autobiographical narratives as "both a tool to examine identity development as well as a vehicle by which identity is constructed" (McLean, Breen & Fournier, 2010, p. 166). From a narrative perspective, the neurological developments during adolescence give rise to the capacity of abstract thought. When cognitive development emerges, teens are better able to derive meaning from their autobiographical accounts and integrate their past to better understand their future self (Cairney & Breen, 2017). Student support services (guidance, learning support, social work) within middle and high schools across the country support the academic, social, and emotional needs of their students; however, identity formation is left to be created organically. It is for this reason, an explicit counselling framework is needed to understand one's self well enough to answer the question, Who am I?

Existing literature supports the importance of adolescents using their life story events as the starting point for identity analysis. Gryzman and Hudson (2010) used a high-point, low-point, and turning-point narrative to measure causal coherence and meaning-making, while Fivush, Bohanek, Zaman and Grapin (2012) used autobiographical narratives to note gender differences in adolescent identity formation. Chen, McNally, Wang and Reese (2012) completed a study investigating the coherence of critical life event narratives and adolescent psychological functioning, while Reese et al. (2017) used adolescent narratives to measure identity, personality traits, and well-being across cultures.

One emerging theme from the literature is highlighted by McAdams and McLean (2015) who state that "repeated interactions with others, stories about personal experiences are processed, edited, reinterpreted and retold and the storyteller gradually develops a broader and more integrative narrative identity" (p. 235). In the aforementioned studies, narrative coding or a "meaning-making scale" is used to quantify the tendency of participants to deduce insight through connecting the story they told into a broader context of their story or narrative (Gryzman & Hudson, 2010). Thematic coherence and causal coherence are measured; however,

a gap in the literature exists, whereby the explicit ways (one-on-one counselling or group therapy) in which adolescents can further develop their coherence to create a more reflective narrative identity is yet to be explored.

Differences in identity formation via narrative pathways between genders has also been explored in the literature. A study completed by Fivush et al. (2012) notes that females tell “longer, more elaborated, more coherent, and more reflective narratives than do males” (p. 315). In support of this finding, is the work of McLean, Breen and Fournier (2010) who note that females are better able to elaborate their emotional experiences because Western cultures nurture the emotional experiences of females more so than males, suggesting that boys have less opportunity to develop narrative skills in childhood. Further, Fivush et al. (2010) completed a study on the narrative interactions within families and found “females are more relationship and emotion oriented than are males, whereas males are more achievement oriented” (p. 50). Interestingly, while the distinction between narrative journeys for males and females is noted in the literature, there is a gap in the research targeting the developmental trajectories of narrative identities for males and females (McLean et al. 2010). The findings of Fivush, Bohanek, Zaman and Grapin (2012) confirm the need for further investigation of explicit narrative identity construction among males.

Literature investigating the correlation between narrative identity and adolescents' well-being is plentiful. To highlight a few examples, Fivush et al. (2010) investigated the power of intergenerational narratives and well-being, while Reese et al. (2017) explored adolescent narrative identity, personality, and well-being across cultures, and McLean et al. (2010) focused on narrative individuation and well-being among late adolescent boys. Consistent in these studies is the conclusion that through autobiographical reasoning and regardless of cultural background or gender, participants were able to identify life story events as a snapshot of a larger, more comprehensive life story narrative. When identity formation evolved, participants reported feeling a strong sense of self and having higher self-esteem (Reese et al., 2017).

Surprisingly, one factor reported as negatively contributing to overall well-being is age. Reese et al. (2017) note that in early adolescence, causal coherence is not fully developed; when younger participants are asked to reflect upon negative life story events, there is a dip in their overall happiness and self-esteem. Remembering experiences that are associated with feelings of vulnerability and discomfort can trigger very negative thoughts. This dip, according to Reese et

al. (2017) and Chen et al. (2012), is a result of younger adolescents not being able to fully understand how to resolve their negative emotions and experiences and attach meaning that can be used more thoughtfully.

The contributions of researchers investigating narrative tools as pathways to learning are plentiful. This action research project sought to investigate the development of narrative coherence and its impact on identity formation by posing the following question: *How does analysing life story events develop Grade 7 boys' narrative coherence?*

Research Context

Established in 1913, Crescent School, is a boys' independent day school in Toronto, Ontario. The school embodies the core values of respect, honesty, compassion, and responsibility to live its mission: *Men of Character From Boys of Promise*. The School recognizes that boys with curious minds and humble hearts have the potential to discover their unique passion and purpose in life.

From the eighty-two Grade 7 boys enrolled at Crescent School, a random sample of 11 students was invited to participate in the study. These boys were assigned to my Mentor group for the 2018/2019 academic school year. As the boys' Mentor, it was my responsibility to monitor their school engagement and support their academic and social-emotional development. I had 12 scheduled touch points weekly with this group to discuss various topics on our thematic calendar, such as wellness, diversity, positive relationships, and masculinity. I also engaged in one-to-one conversations when more refined support was needed.

At the School's curriculum evening in September of 2018, I announced the IBSC initiative and provided parents with an overview of my action research project. The presentation included a handout outlining action research, the School's support, a timeline, my commitment to communicating results, and a consent form. Each parent was asked to sign and submit the consent form to confirm their son's participation.

Following the curriculum night, the concept of action research was introduced to participants. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification regarding their role in the process. I also discussed the format in which results would be shared with the school community and beyond. The confidentiality agreement was presented, and all participants

understood their participation was voluntary and had the option to withdraw from the study at any time.

The Action

Based on existing research, the action for this project examined identity formation via the analysis of life story memories. Each student answered the question, "Who am I?" as a baseline assessment. Following this pre-data activity, each participant created a personal narrative portfolio, including accounts of critical life story events. Students chose to build their personal narratives as a reflective journal, a timeline using programs such as Prezi or Google Slides, or a social media display using Instagram or Facebook. Over the course of eight weeks, portfolios were populated with personal reflections of six critical life story events. The memories were a combination of two high-point, two low-point, and two turning-point memories. Following each submission, I met with each participant for a one-on-one discussion to promote the development of narrative coherence. Conversations included asking questions to challenge each participant to reflect more deeply to make connections between their lived experiences and how they understand themselves. This action was a significant shift in our current advisory model as students were intentionally given the time and space to focus on identity formation.

Data Collection

A wide variety of data collection methods were included to ensure the reliability of findings. While primarily qualitative in nature, coding of narrative submissions on a numerical scale was used to include one component of quantified data. The majority of the data gathered included the perspectives of each participant; however, anecdotal observations of my own were also included. Data collection methods such as pre- and post-action reflections, one-on-one interviews, student journal entries, observations, surveys, and exit tickets were used. The focus was to gather data in multiple forms to allow for deeper reflection among the boys and to accommodate a varying degree of comfort with personal disclosures.

The data collection process began with the boys completing a baseline activity that asked them to answer the question, "Who am I?" The focus of this activity was to encourage each participant to reflect deeply on how they understand themselves and how others perceive them. This activity was also used to collect post-action data to determine if there was a shift in how they

understand themselves and the depth of their responses. They were also used to determine if the boys were able to integrate personal qualities extracted through their life story memories.

The primary source of qualitative data was student journal entries, whereby the participants shared two high-point, two low-point, and two turning-point life story memories. Each submission was then coded using a three-point scale to rate the level of narrative coherence included. I rated each submission for autobiographical reasoning, which included evidence of links between life story memory and identity construction. As the boys completed each of their life story memories, I recorded observations including their overall level of engagement with the tasks, obstacles encountered and prompts they required to complete the task with greater efficacy.

One-on-one interviews were completed with each participant at various times throughout the action. Interviews were voice-recorded, which allowed for rich discussion, questioning, and the analysis of alternative stories emerging from the life story memories. I used a list of questions that challenged each participant to create connections between the construction of their identity and their unique personal experiences and backgrounds.

Data Analysis

The data were analysed to identify recurring trends or themes. The boys' voices were authentic as each life story memory reflected an honest and personal account of a high-, low- or turning-point event. Using multiple forms of data collection (written submissions, interviews, and pictorial representations) allowed for each boy to choose the method that he felt allowed for safe and accurate disclosure. The consolidation of data included a comprehensive review of each life story memory submission, along with the transcription of each one-on-one interview, cross-referencing anecdotal comments, and observations with the pre-action and post-action entries. The various data collection methods provided a substantial amount of information and segued into the process of analysis to extract emerging themes and patterns.

Discussion of Results

There were a number of themes that emerged from the boys' writing and my analysis of their six critical life story events. The most evident themes were:

- The importance of trust

- A shift in self-awareness
- A place to pause

The Importance of Trust

The timing of the action called on the boys to begin writing their life story narratives only weeks after having met me. Despite starting the data collection process with a high-point memory, it was clear a trusting relationship needed to be established. When it was time for the boys to write about a low-point memory, many were uncomfortable with the disclosure. One boy commented, "I don't really know what to write. I have had bad things happen to me, but I'm not sure I want to tell you about them." Similarly, another boy said, "I'm not used to talking about my feelings. At my old school we didn't do this sort of thing and if I tell you something, you could tell someone else."

It was clear the boys needed to establish a trusting relationship with me before they felt comfortable to share their memories. Within a post-action submission, a boy noted, "I am a very independent person. I didn't open up to Ms. Alviano and tell her everything that was asked of me because it is hard to gain my trust." While the establishment of trust acted as a barrier for some, other boys were very forthcoming in sharing their innermost thoughts. For example, when reflecting on a low-point memory, one boy disclosed, "When I think of this moment, it reminds me of the Lego Batman movie. Batman needed to think of a way to protect those he loves, and so do I. It's almost like I'm always wearing an imaginary cape." Moreover, another boy said, "This memory made me notice how nervous of things I can get. Whenever something that someone else would consider a small problem, I get overworked and nervous it will become serious."

It was very clear throughout this process that as relationships formed, trust was established, and the boys' engagement increased. It is also interesting to note that the boys who were more apprehensive about sharing their feelings were those who later identified themselves as "guarded and private." When trust was established, disclosures came more naturally, the boys felt more comfortable showing vulnerability, and the process of creating narrative coherence strengthened.

A Shift in Self-Awareness

The boys' pre-action submission to the question, "Who am I?" reflected a limited understanding of "self," with no evidence of narrative coherence. The boys had difficulty connecting their life experiences with an understanding of their identity. Despite the use of exemplars, explicit teaching about narrative coherence, and group discussions of identity construction, the majority of participants responded with basic biographical information. For example, "I am a 12-year-old boy who likes sports, video games and Youtube," "I am a 12-year-old student at Crescent School," and "I am in Grade 7. I was born and raised in Toronto and I have two brothers." The pre-action responses identified some personal qualities but lacked depth and explanation. One boy noted, "I am a happy guy and I fidget a lot," while another said, "I am very sensitive and I have a lot of stress."

Throughout the course of the action, the boys relied on feedback from narrative submissions and one-on-one discussion to make meaning of their life story events. A shift in self-awareness and the beginning stages of narrative coherence emerged consistently among group members when post-action submissions challenged them once again to answer the question "Who am I?" Autobiographical reasoning and narrative coherence were evident as the boys' submissions reflected greater depth and the ability to more accurately identify their personal attributes and explain how they had come to understand themselves. One boy noted, "I would describe myself as adaptable. I moved to Toronto from Connecticut and it was scary but exciting to move to a completely different school in a new country. It didn't take me long to think about Toronto as my home." Another boy reflected, "I am a very understanding person. When my mom is feeling stressed because she is busy with work, I don't bother her because I understand that she has a lot on her mind." Upon reflecting on a low-point memory, another student said, "I started thinking about myself as a person and I realized I won't get anywhere in life if I don't control my anger." Similarly, another boy bravely noted, "I am a very sensitive person and at times, it can make me feel lonely. I grew up in a family where it is strange to see people cry." Thinking and reflecting about various critical moments in their life story clearly impacted the boys' ability to develop their narrative coherence and think more deeply about how their life story is the anchor for the construction of their identity.

A Place to Pause

Recurring comments from the boys were along the lines of, "I've never stopped to think about myself," "No one has ever asked me to think about myself like this before," and "It feels a little bit weird. This is the first time I'm going deep down and talking and thinking about who I am." Engaging in this process initially presented a challenge to some participants as they were unfamiliar with how to pause and think critically about themselves. The entire group needed guidance and prompting to make connections and build the narrative coherence needed to link their critical life story event to their identity. On more than one occasion, I challenged the boys to think about themselves as the "character in their life story" and suggested that similar to how they would complete a character analysis from a text in English, they needed to think deeply about their own story.

The questioning during the one-on-one interviews was essential in guiding the boys to integrate various autobiographical events to the construction of their identity. For most of the boys, it was their first experience in a therapy-like setting. One boy commented that he preferred talking about his life story and his identity rather than writing about it. This comment was echoed by two other boys who noted that they enjoyed discussing their personal narratives rather than writing them because "the writing process felt too much like work." During the 1-on-1 interviews, the narrative submissions acted as a foundation to begin the discussions. Questions such as, "What are the similarities/differences between your low-point memory and your turning-point memory?" and "How does this process make you feel?" were needed to nurture the development of narrative coherence. The boys needed coaching to identify links between their life story and their understanding of personal identity.

Overall, the post-action survey results were overwhelmingly positive and demonstrated that sometimes, taking a pause allowed the boys to work toward the development of narrative coherence. I recognized that the boys needed to have a safe space for their narrative coherence to develop and that the boys' ability to create meaning from their narratives needed to be an intentional practice. For example, one boy noted, "I liked this project because otherwise I would never stop [to] think about myself." Another boy said, "In the beginning I didn't think this project was going to be worthwhile, but then I saw my pre-action activity and I couldn't believe how much my answers changed." He added, "I like this project because it has allowed me to get to know myself ten times more than I would have if I did not do this project."

Conclusion

Findings from this action research reflect a positive correlation between the development of narrative coherence and identity formation. Through the analysis of critical life story events, it was remarkable to see each Grade 7 participant experience a shift in their understanding of "self" as they answered the question, "Who am I?" more fully. I was pleased with the boys' ability to be vulnerable. While this proved to be a challenge for some, in time, all of the boys became comfortable with the process. In the latter part of the data collection, the narrative submissions improved significantly in depth and detail, and the boys effortlessly engaged in one-on-one conversations. It was clear each participant wanted to make connections between their lived experiences and their identity. It is also interesting to note that the conversations continued well beyond the time allotted for data collection.

Narrative inquiry is a topic I have always been interested in. My research on the development of narrative coherence confirmed the need to offer Crescent students with an intentional process to answer the three guiding questions in the *Portrait of a Graduate*. Framing the question, "Who am I?" in a predictable context allowed the boys to stop and think about themselves. While this process moved the boys forward in understanding their identity, I recognize answering the question, "Who am I?" is an evolving process, one during which each boy will continue to think about into adulthood. I have learned the importance lies in equipping our boys with the reflective tools needed to build self-awareness.

While the action reflected a small shift in my practice, the impact on the participants was significant. I will continue to provide the boys I mentor with the opportunity to actively engage in self-reflection. Adolescence is a challenging time for identity formation. To ease the tension, it is important to provide young men with the time and space to build their self-awareness and grow into their true "self." The results of this action research will be shared with the Crescent community and I hope to inspire my colleagues to implement a framework, such as the analysis of life story events, to intentionally guide their mentees in identity formation.

Reflection Statement

I enjoyed every stage of this action research journey. The experience gave me the opportunity to extend my learning of narrative therapy and understand the power of storytelling as a pathway for learning. As I challenged the boys to develop narrative coherence, I recognized that analysing one's life story and reflecting on critical life story events can strengthen self-discovery at any age.

I learned the importance of listening. Stories can be interpreted in a variety of ways and they are multilayered. In the role of the researcher, it was essential to ask critical questions to guide each participant in their self-discovery and to give them the space to process their thoughts. It is for this reason, one of the major limitations of this research was time. While I allotted ten weeks for the data collection, understanding one's identity is an ongoing process. Unfortunately, there were many opportunities where I would have liked to extend my conversations with the boys, but in doing so, I would not have been able to complete each of the assigned tasks. There were also a number of interruptions to our Mentor Group schedule, which impacted the time I had to complete the process. Thankfully, to make up for the missed sessions, the boys were willing to book one-on-one conversations during morning and lunch recesses.

As a result of this action research, my relationship with each of the participants strengthened. The trust we established throughout the process acted as an anchor in all of our interactions. When faced with adversity, the boys felt comfortable approaching me for guidance. Conversely, when they experienced success, the boys were eager to share their triumphs.

I am grateful to the IBSC for an incredible opportunity, and in particular, to Janet Lien for her professional guidance throughout this action research journey. Janet's dedication to providing support in each step of the process allowed for an enriching experience. I am also thankful for the team of researchers around the globe affectionately known as "Team Janet." It was a privilege to collaborate with you and I will cherish the friendships I have created.

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IBSC Mentor, Isabelle Moore, who inspired me to embark on this journey and offered much support along the way. To the young men who participated in this study, may you always have the courage to tell your story and the tools to think deeply about *who you are* and the *person you aspire to be*.

“Life is a story, what does yours say?”

-Anonymous

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