

Biblical narratives and play therapy in the pastoral counselling process for healing traumatised gifted children: towards a conceptual framework

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Abstract

The research objective of this paper is to develop a conceptual framework for pastoral narrative play interventions and biblical narratives in the counselling process with gifted children. This paper investigates the effect of trauma on gifted children in middle childhood, ages six to twelve years, and how trauma affects their learning abilities, cognitive and social development. The contribution of this paper to the field of Practical Theology and pastoral/child practitioner approaches to supporting traumatised gifted children is the use of gifted-specific interventions, in which biblical narratives and play therapy are utilised in the pastoral setting. By making the theological lens more explicit and by using biblical narratives and parables as a narrative therapy tool, Practical Theology contributes to a deeper understanding of gifted children, especially in relation to trauma, meaning-making, and pastoral care. Gifted children can resonate with biblical stories of Jesus, and biblical narrative can help them re-author their own life stories and support their meaning-making and positive outcomes. Scripture conveys meaning and promotes healing through the validity and reliability of the biblical narratives and the ability of biblical stories to be understood even by children. This paper employs a qualitative literature overview as its methodological foundation, synthesising scholarship on trauma, giftedness, play therapy, pastoral counselling, and behavioural psychology. Effective pastoral counselling therefore requires counsellors

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to be trained in narrative-based practice, embodying empathy, theological insight, and therapeutic sensitivity to ensure that healing is not merely therapeutic but profoundly theological.

Keywords

Biblical narratives; pastoral counselling gifted children; play therapy; Biblical storytelling; pastoral narrative play; gifted-specific intervention; gifted children; conceptual framework

1. Introduction

This qualitative research study examines the integration of biblical narratives and play therapy interventions within a pastoral counselling framework, as a holistic intervention for traumatised gifted children. The purpose of the study is to create a framework for utilising pastoral counselling, narrative therapy and play therapy to resolve trauma in the lives of traumatised gifted children who withdraw and cannot verbalise their pain. It expands the field of play therapy by embedding it within a pastoral context, while also enriching pastoral counselling with therapeutic techniques that honour the intellectual and spiritual depth of gifted children. This study investigates the impact of trauma on gifted children, with particular attention to whether their heightened sensitivity, asynchronous development, and advanced cognitive capacities render them more vulnerable to its effects than their nongifted peers. According to Bachtel and Fell (2022:92), this work is crucial because gifted children's heightened sensitivity makes them more vulnerable to trauma when parents or educators fail to meet their unique needs. Gifted children are disproportionately vulnerable to trauma because their advanced cognitive and emotional capacities heighten their awareness of adverse experiences, making them more susceptible to psychological injury when familial and educational environments fail to accommodate their unique developmental needs.

The contextual problem is how to help traumatised gifted children who struggle to verbalise their pain through a pastoral narrative play approach, with a supportive therapeutic framework utilising pastoral counselling, narrative therapy and play therapy. This study seeks to identify and evaluate effective therapeutic interventions that facilitate the emotional and psychological healing of children, with the goal of determining the

most appropriate strategies to support their recovery, address underlying challenges, and nurture holistic well-being. The contribution of the study is to use narrative play therapy theories from a narrative pastoral perspective to counsel traumatised gifted children. The research gap is providing a conceptual framework for gifted-specific child counselling and interventions for traumatised gifted children in the age group 6–12 years who cannot verbalise their pain. This is done by integrating narrative therapy and play therapy with a pastoral approach to counsel gifted children with trauma. This study investigates the effects and resolutions of trauma on gifted children in middle childhood, ages six to twelve years, and how the trauma affects their learning abilities, cognitive and social development. The aim of the study is to develop a conceptual framework for pastoral narrative play interventions and biblical narratives in the counselling process with gifted children.

For gifted children, pastoral counselling provides a unique opportunity to address existential concerns and foster spiritual growth. Giftedness often entails heightened sensitivity to moral and existential issues, making spiritual care not optional but essential. Pastoral counselling that integrates narrative approaches can provide gifted children with frameworks for meaning-making, resilience, and connectedness. By addressing both cognitive and emotional dimensions, pastoral counselling offers holistic support that aligns with the complex needs of gifted children. Hebert and Speirs Neumeister (2002:17–21) show that gifted children often conceal their differences to avoid rejection yet thrive in environments that affirm their uniqueness. Narrative pastoral counselling responds to this by offering symbolic anchors through biblical stories, enabling children to externalise trauma and cultivate resilience. Puchalski, Vitillo, Hull, and Reller (2014:642–656) validate the integration of spirituality into holistic care, demonstrating that spiritual needs must be addressed alongside cognitive and emotional dimensions. Moschella (2024:151–162) adds depth by emphasising the affective dimension of narrative spiritual care, showing how storytelling nurtures emotional regulation and a sense of belonging. Collectively, these perspectives situate pastoral counselling as a holistic intervention that fosters resilience, moral imagination, and spiritual growth in gifted children.

Marland (1972:105) indicates that gifted children are those with exceptional potential for high performance in intellectual ability, leadership, visual performing arts, and psychomotor skills. Gifted children are identified as children with high-performance creativity, well-organised achievement motivation and cognitive abilities. Gifted children are born with above-average natural abilities. The study of gifted children necessitates a multidimensional approach that integrates cognitive, socio-emotional, and developmental perspectives. Giftedness is not solely defined by advanced intellectual capacity but also by a complex interplay of creativity, motivation, and adaptive functioning across diverse contexts. From a developmental standpoint, gifted children often exhibit asynchronous growth, in which their cognitive abilities may outpace their emotional or social maturity, creating unique challenges in identity formation and peer relationships. The concept of giftedness refers to a child who possesses an elevated level of general mental ability and exceptional skills in a specific area of activity and knowledge. Instruments to determine the IQ and intelligence of children is set out as follows. Hollingworth (1942:85–102) documented extreme IQ profiles that highlight the rare cognitive intensity enabling polymathic achievement. Binet's (1961) developmental model of mental age to Wechsler's (1955) multidimensional construct of intelligence. Together, these instruments represent the historical and theoretical progression of intelligence testing: from the pioneering diagnostic tool of Binet and Simon (1961) to the enduring multidimensional framework of Wechsler (1949), both serving as cornerstones in the study of child cognition and giftedness. Developmental theories emphasise the importance of environmental factors, such as family support, educational opportunities, and cultural expectations, in shaping the trajectory of giftedness. Cross (2021:15–30) offers an in-depth examination of the social and emotional lives of gifted children, emphasising that giftedness extends beyond intellectual ability to influence identity, relationships, and overall well-being. Trauma, emotionally unstable situations, abuse and violence would be triggers for gifted children. Bremner (2006:115) describes the effects of trauma on the brain and how it affects the behaviour of children and their happiness. He pointed out that traumatic stress can be associated with changes in the brain areas and therefore resolving trauma and stress is of high importance for child development. Gifted children's heightened sensitivity and asynchronous development often intensify the impact of

trauma, impairing emotional regulation and cognitive functioning, as Neihart (1999:10-15) and Gross (2002:45) demonstrate. Together, parables and play situate recovery within relational and theological contexts, affirming dignity, nurturing resilience, and reinforcing attachment to God.

Possible triggers when working with gifted children can be their heightened sensitivity when their intellectual abilities are not recognised and they are misunderstood, which can lead to an increase in withdrawal symptoms. Unintended effects on gifted children in counselling include a lack of knowledge and understanding of their specific needs and characteristics. If the counsellor does not have knowledge of how to treat gifted children and understand them, they can do unintentional harm and increase gifted children's emotional pain. Gifted children present a paradox in educational and therapeutic contexts: while their advanced intellectual abilities often set them apart, their heightened sensitivity and emotional intensity can make them particularly vulnerable to trauma. This heightened sensitivity to trauma can be a possible risk when working with gifted children, especially if they are labelled or misdiagnosed. Connolly, Constable and Mullally (2023:1237052) state that giftedness frequently coexists with neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, or PTSD, creating complex profiles that demand nuanced support. For gifted children, who often grapple with existential questions and deep emotional conflicts, narrative play aligns with their intellectual and emotional capacities, enabling them to explore trauma through symbolic and metaphorical language. Their advanced intellectual abilities can mask or complicate the recognition of their additional needs, leading to a mismatch between potential and performance. This paradox frequently results in heightened frustration, emotional distress, and disengagement from school and counselling. Distress is disproportionately experienced by neurodivergent learners, whose unmet needs can exacerbate their difficulties. When counselling and schools fail to provide tailored support, these children may struggle with executive functioning, sensory sensitivities, or trauma responses, all of which hinder their ability to thrive academically and socially.

A clear mitigation plan to manage these risks within this proposed conceptual framework is necessary. Addressing the possible risks, triggers, and unintended effects when counselling gifted children must be a guiding principle for the success of the counselling process. It

requires a dual focus: nurturing their giftedness while simultaneously accommodating their neurodivergence, ensuring that educational spaces become inclusive, supportive, and responsive to the full complexity of their profiles. Traditional educational and therapeutic models often fail to address these dual realities, resulting in unmet needs and heightened school distress. Within therapeutic practice, play has been recognised as a powerful medium for children to externalise emotions, process trauma, and develop coping strategies. Dillen (2012:61–75) points out that Christian Theology helps and supports the development of resilience in children. Play therapy provides a non-threatening, imaginative space where children can symbolically confront their struggles. Narrative approaches, particularly those rooted in storytelling, extend this potential by offering frameworks for meaning making and identity formation. Drewes and Schaefer (2016:3) emphasise the psychological approach, particularly through play therapy.

The research methodology is as follows: the study utilises an integrative literature review to facilitate a dialectical dialogue between psychology and theology. This is accomplished by creating a conceptual framework in which the pastoral counselling setting, biblical narratives, and play interventions are utilised to foster a safe space for the gifted child. Inside this safe environment, gifted children can resonate with biblical stories. The play-based intervention provides a safe, natural way for the child to express their feelings and to open in conversation. Grounded in the recognition that giftedness often coexists with heightened sensitivity and neurodivergent conditions, the study addressed the pressing issue of unmet needs in educational and therapeutic contexts. The conceptual framework for gifted-specific pastoral counselling is based on the relationship between pastoral counselling, play therapy and biblical narratives. Each approach works on a different dimension of the child's being, and together, this trio can successfully help traumatised gifted children achieve healing. Pastoral counselling works on the spiritual dimension, where faith, religion, and belief in God provide an anchor of belonging and trust. Pastoral counselling on its own cannot successfully help these children because of the withdrawal symptoms, where they don't verbalise their pain. Biblical narratives work on the social and cognitive dimensions, where the child can resonate with the biblical stories and lessons.

The integration of theoretical frameworks and pastoral practice with gifted children demonstrates how theology, psychology, and trauma-informed care converge to create holistic therapeutic approaches. Collins (2025:195–221) highlights the healing potential of evangelical communities, showing how narrative engagement within faith settings can counter toxic doublethink and provide traumatised individuals with spaces of belonging and reinterpretation. Van Deusen Hunsinger (2025) advances this dialogue by situating spiritual trauma care at the intersection of theology and psychology, emphasising that pastoral counselling must hold both disciplines in tension to address the complex needs of children whose heightened sensitivities make them vulnerable to existential distress. Guthrie and Gurskyj (2022:138–157) caution that giftedness is not always a gift, noting that advanced reasoning and emotional intensity can exacerbate trauma unless supported through trauma-informed counselling practices that validate children's inner experiences. Risser (2022) emphasises the sacred impulse of play as a theological and creative resource for posttraumatic growth, demonstrating how imaginative engagement with biblical narratives fosters transformation out of tragedy. In practice, pastoral counsellors draw on these frameworks by embedding scripture into therapeutic play, guiding gifted children to reinterpret trauma through sacred story, while simultaneously nurturing resilience, identity, and spiritual growth.

The general ethical guidelines and rules – respect for autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence and informed consent and the main reason for reducing harm to children were the researcher's main reasons for choosing a qualitative research study that would be safer for children, out of due respect. The key ethical legislation governing diagnostic practice with counselling children made this qualitative research study a safer choice, considering the Children's Act 38 of 2005, POPIA, Mental Health Care Act 17 of 2002 and the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998. While the integration of play therapy, biblical narratives, and pastoral counselling offers a powerful framework for healing gifted children, this approach has limitations due to ethical challenges, particularly those arising from cultural differences. Kuznetsova et al. (2024:1411981) highlight that gifted children present diverse cognitive, physiological, and psychological characteristics, which means interventions must be sensitive to cultural contexts that

shape how emotions are expressed and understood. In some cultures, the role of emotions in pretend play and storytelling may differ significantly, influencing how children engage with therapeutic narratives. Scheytt and Pflüger (2024:1458423) emphasise that qualitative interventions face ethical challenges when cultural assumptions are imposed, raising concerns about whether narrative and play-based methods adequately respect children's cultural frameworks. Thus, while narrative play therapy and pastoral counselling can foster resilience and connectedness, practitioners must remain attentive to cultural variations in emotional expression to avoid misinterpretation or unintended harm.

In practice, this means that pastoral counsellors working with traumatised gifted children must critically evaluate how biblical narratives and play therapy are introduced across cultural contexts. For example, while storytelling may resonate deeply in one tradition, in another it may carry different symbolic meanings or emotional expectations. The cultural role of emotions in play and narrative engagement can therefore shape the therapeutic process, requiring counsellors to adapt methods to ensure inclusivity and respect. This highlights that the combined intervention, though effective, is not universally applicable without modification. By acknowledging these ethical challenges, pastoral counselling can maintain integrity while still harnessing the strengths of narrative therapy, play therapy, and biblical storytelling. Ultimately, the contribution of this integrated approach to the field of narrative therapy lies not only in its ability to deepen understanding of gifted children but also in its recognition that cultural sensitivity is essential for ensuring that healing is both effective and ethically grounded.

As both a teacher and practising counsellor, and the founder of a school, the researcher's position within the education system placed the researcher at the direct intersection of academic instruction, psychosocial and holistic child-healing practices, and support. Through daily engagement with learners in classroom settings and one-on-one counselling, the researcher encountered real-life situations in which gifted children, despite demonstrating high intellectual potential, consistently underachieve academically. What emerged from these encounters was a recurring pattern: the presence of unresolved trauma in the lives of these learners. The researcher observed how experiences of loss, neglect, family disruption

and violence manifested not as obvious behavioural problems, but as withdrawal, perfectionism, anxiety and a marked decline in motivation and performance. The motivation for the article and study stems from a professional and ethical responsibility to understand and address this issue. By investigating the specific ways in which trauma affects the academic functioning of gifted children, this research seeks more holistic and psychologically responsive teaching and counselling practices within schools and counselling services to ensure that the high potential is not lost to unaddressed emotional pain. The researcher explored other interventions, such as child-centred therapy, but realised that when working with gifted children, gifted-specific intervention is needed.

According to Smyth (2013), child-centred therapy is a type of counselling that puts the child in charge of the process, rather than the counsellor directing it (as in narrative therapy, where the client leads the conversation). Child-centred therapy only works on one dimension of the child's being-psychology. The conceptual framework with pastoral counselling, play therapy and biblical narratives addresses the spiritual, psychological and physical needs of gifted children. Counselling these traumatised gifted children on different levels is more effective. Anchoring a child to God in the healing process of developing a therapeutic relationship gives a child belonging and creates a safe space for the traumatised child to trust and feel safe enough to verbalise their fears, trauma experiences and pain. Cochran, Nording and Cochran (2010:128) point out the importance of the therapeutic relationship between children and the counsellor in building trust between them. Children bring out their pain in the safe space of the therapeutic relationship.

2. Biblical narratives in pastoral counselling with children

Biblical narratives are utilised in pastoral counselling practice as therapeutic instruments that allow gifted and traumatised children to externalise pain, reframe experience, and encounter divine presence through imaginative engagement. Grow (2020) identifies the trauma of gifted children as rooted in heightened sensitivities, which pastoral counsellors address by embedding scripture into narrative dialogue that symbolically processes suffering. Howden (2015) situates this within a pastoral theology of trauma,

emphasising that biblical stories function as theological resources for healing when interpreted hermeneutically. Briggs (2017) demonstrates that children read biblical narratives imaginatively, particularly in the Gospel of Luke, where stories serve as vehicles for moral and spiritual reflection, while Elkins and Parker (2016:422–433) advance a childist interpretation, showing how children's perspectives reshape the meaning of texts. George (2017) highlights how narratives nurture spiritual formation by affirming belonging and divine care, and Caldwell (2015:452–458) underscores the pedagogical importance of reading scripture with children, noting that storybooks mediate theological truths in accessible ways. Collectively, these insights demonstrate that biblical storytelling in counselling is not merely instructional but therapeutic, enabling children to construct identity and resilience through relational engagement with scripture.

Integration with pastoral counselling and play therapy further demonstrates how biblical narratives become embodied practices of healing. Mountain (2016:191–200) situates play therapy as a practice that respects the spirit of the child, aligning with narrative pastoral practice, in which biblical stories are enacted through role-play, puppetry, and creative arts. Frick (2010:30–47) integrates pastoral and psychotherapeutic counselling, affirming that scripture mediates existential healing, while Jang (2016:136–142) frames interactive play as a psychoanalytic approach to encountering a persuasive God. Dabrowski (1972:30–40) and Piechowski (2003:366–367) emphasise that heightened sensitivity in gifted children is developmental rather than pathological, driving them to seek conceptual structures for their inner lives, which pastoral counsellors provide through narratives such as Joseph's perseverance or David's courage. Hyde (2010:84–96) and Fowler (1981:119–123) highlight that children interpret spiritual stories as frameworks of connectedness within the intuitive-projective stage of faith, while Berryman (2009:45) and Stewart and Berryman (1989:25–26) show that parables and ritual storytelling grant interpretive freedom and therapeutic resonance for traumatised children. MacArthur (2015:23–41) situates scripture within a therapeutic context, arguing that biblical narratives alleviate anxiety and provide frameworks for experiencing divine presence, while Hay and Nye (2006:64, 102, 147) emphasise spirituality's role in nurturing empathy and transcendence. In practice, pastoral counsellors unite theological conviction with psychological care

by embedding scripture into play therapy, enabling gifted children to enact biblical characters, symbolically confront personal struggles, and experience transformation through narrative, thereby integrating faith formation with psychological healing.

Robertson (1990:34–36) situates storytelling within a hermeneutical framework that emphasises the interpretive act as central to pastoral counselling. He argues that scripture, when engaged narratively, functions not merely as doctrinal instruction but as a dynamic text that invites therapeutic reinterpretation of lived experience. This hermeneutical consideration underscores the theological implication that biblical stories are not static but relational, opening space for children to reframe trauma through sacred narrative. By interpreting scripture therapeutically, pastoral counsellors enable gifted children to encounter biblical texts as dialogical partners in meaning-making, where divine presence is mediated through narrative engagement. Robertson (1990:38–39) stresses that such interpretive work requires theological attentiveness, recognising that the act of storytelling is itself a pastoral theology – one that integrates exegesis with existential healing. Thus, hermeneutics becomes both a theological and therapeutic lens, affirming scripture's role in shaping identity and resilience through narrative reinterpretation. The theological foundation for using biblical narratives in counselling rests on scripture's inherent capacity to convey meaning and promote healing. Robertson (1990:40–42) highlights that biblical stories embody theological truths in narrative form, making them accessible to children's imaginative and emotional worlds. Narratives such as the Good Samaritan or Joseph's journey illustrate compassion, justice, and divine care, offering symbolic parallels that affirm belonging within sacred traditions. This theological grounding situates scripture as more than a pedagogical tool; it becomes a sacramental medium through which God's presence is experienced amid suffering. By embedding biblical narratives into therapeutic play, pastoral counselling unites theological conviction with psychological practice, creating a coherent framework where faith and healing converge. Robertson (1990:44–45) concludes that storytelling in pastoral contexts is not ancillary but foundational, where divine meaning is mediated through human story, enabling children to encounter hope and transformation within the narrative of faith.

3. Utilising play in the care process of traumatised gifted children

Play therapy itself is not merely a psychological technique but a theological act when situated within pastoral contexts. Mulemi (2020:1773) highlights that play therapy allows children to externalise inner conflicts through symbolic action, while Mwenisongole and Mligo (2018:88) demonstrate how narrative approaches empower vulnerable children to reconstruct their identities within pastoral counselling. This integration mirrors the function of biblical narratives, which operate on the same foundational principles as narrative therapy. Just as narrative therapy encourages clients to reframe problems and re-author their stories, biblical narratives – such as the Exodus or the parables of Jesus – invite traumatised gifted children to reinterpret suffering, identity, and hope in light of divine presence. Thus, pastoral counselling, narrative therapy, and play therapy converge in their shared reliance on story and play as vehicles of transformation, with Scripture itself serving as a paradigmatic narrative framework that validates and enriches therapeutic practice.

Play therapy is utilised in practice as a foundational medium that opens conversation for traumatised gifted children by creating a safe, imaginative space where barriers to communication are gradually dismantled. Narrative therapy alone often struggles to reach withdrawn children, but when combined with play, it provides a pathway for trust-building and emotional release. As Taylor de Faoite (2011:67) shows, narrative play therapy enables children to re-author their life stories, cultivating resilience and creativity. Schaefer and Drewes (2014:45–67) identify twenty therapeutic powers of play – including self-expression, emotional regulation, and social competence – demonstrating its multidimensional efficacy across diverse contexts. Landreth's (1991:96–134) Child-Centred Play Therapy model situates play as both psychological and spiritual intervention, fostering resilience and connectedness for children with heightened sensitivity. Gilman (2008:88–102, 218) and Sutherland (2012:23–45) emphasise the developmental necessity of play, while Milgram (1991:158) highlights its role in emotional regulation and creativity. Geldard, Geldard and Yin Foo (2018:112–134) provide practical strategies for adapting play to diverse needs, showing its flexibility for gifted children with asynchronous development. Bratton, Ray, Rhine, and Jones (2005:376) and Ray (2011:45)

confirm its adaptability for exceptional abilities, while McCarthy (2012:78–101) underscores play's capacity to integrate contradictory experiences. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that play therapy functions as a structured yet liberating intervention, opening dialogue and enabling children to process trauma in a non-threatening environment.

Within pastoral counselling, play therapy collaborates with biblical narratives to provide traumatised gifted children with both psychological healing and spiritual meaning-making. Van der Kolk (2014:112–145) and Bremner & Marmar (1995:179) show how trauma reshapes cognition and emotion, requiring integrative approaches that address body, mind, and narrative. Hutto (2007:56–112) situates storytelling as constitutive of identity, highlighting the importance of narrative reconstruction in healing fragmented self-understanding. Sweeney and Landreth (1993:351–356) demonstrate how scripture can be woven into play therapy, presenting parables as open-ended narratives that foster interpretive freedom and resilience. By enacting biblical characters through role-play, puppetry, and creative arts, children symbolically confront personal struggles while experiencing divine presence. This integration situates scripture as a sacramental medium of healing, aligning with pastoral theology's emphasis on spiritual restoration. Landreth (1991:133) stresses the therapeutic relationship, while Geldard, Geldard and Yin Foo (2018:112–134) highlight flexibility, and Schaefer & Drewes (2014:45–67) identify therapeutic powers that converge with spiritual frameworks. Sweeney and Landreth (1993) further show that scripture in play therapy nurtures connectedness and resilience, offering gifted children pathways to emotional restoration and spiritual growth. In practice, pastoral narrative play therapy unites theological conviction with psychological care, enabling traumatised gifted children to rediscover joy, creativity, and hope, thereby integrating body, mind, and spirit into a holistic model of healing.

4. Healing a child's spirit: Integrating play therapy and biblical narratives

In practice, biblical narratives are utilised to help the child relate their own problem stories to God's stories. If they understand and visualise the biblical narratives and experience them through the stories they hear,

it helps them see their problems as lessons in how to understand them. The integration of biblical narratives into play therapy also provides a moral and spiritual framework that reinforces resilience. Taylor de Faoite (2011:67) demonstrates how narrative play therapy provides children with a structured yet imaginative space to re-author their life stories, cultivating resilience and creativity. The integration of biblical narratives into play therapy also provides a moral and spiritual framework that reinforces healing. By integrating psychological and spiritual dimensions, this approach enables traumatised gifted children to rediscover joy, creativity, and hope, thereby healing both mind and spirit. Schaefer and Drewes (2014:45–67) identify twenty therapeutic powers of play, ranging from fostering self-expression to promoting social competence. They state that play is a multidimensional intervention that addresses cognitive, emotional, social, and spiritual needs and demonstrates its effectiveness across diverse contexts, providing evidence of its efficacy.

For gifted children, the therapeutic powers of play are particularly relevant, as they often require interventions that address multiple dimensions of development. Schaefer and Drewes (2014:45-67) situate play therapy as a holistic intervention, capable of addressing the complex needs of gifted children. For gifted children, who often experience heightened sensitivity and existential concerns, Landreth's (1991) *ChildCentred Play Therapy* model offers a pathway to spiritual and emotional restoration. By situating play as both a psychological and spiritual intervention, Landreth (1991:96–134) demonstrates its capacity to address trauma through fostering resilience and connectedness. Play therapy serves as both a means of emotional healing and a path to spiritual renewal, providing gifted children with opportunities to integrate their inner experiences. This study seeks to evaluate the appropriateness and potential efficacy of this integrated framework of play therapy, biblical narratives and pastoral counselling in addressing the therapeutic needs of gifted children who have experienced trauma. Building upon these foundations, Drewes (2006:193-210) advanced this trajectory by explicitly integrating narrative principles into play therapy. Through symbolic play, children can externalise problems and experiment with alternative narratives in ways that align with their developmental capacities. Narrative practices should encourage gifted children to articulate complex insights while also engaging in symbolic

play that fosters resilience. Parables can be incorporated into play sessions, allowing children to act out stories that convey divine compassion. The pastoral counselling setting and parables from Scripture provide a theological lens for integrating play therapy and biblical narratives into pastoral counselling. In practice, counsellors should encourage creative play activities such as drawing, role-play, and biblical storytelling to foster resilience and allow the child to resonate with the biblical characters in the parables. Play affirms the child's dignity and agency, situating healing within relational and spiritual contexts. Trauma often fractures a child's spirit, but play restores coherence through imaginative exploration. Counsellors must view play not as recreation but as a sacred practice. Healing the child's spirit through play requires theological sensitivity and psychological skill. This integration ensures that recovery is holistic and spiritually grounded.

5. Utilising pastoral narrative play as an approach for healing traumatised gifted children

The compatibility between pastoral counselling, narrative therapy, play therapy, and biblical narratives lies in their shared reliance on story, symbol, and relational engagement as vehicles of healing. Grant and Dayringer (2014:45) emphasise that pastoral psychotherapy is grounded in “God’s play in sacred spaces,” situating play as a theological metaphor for transformation. Shim (1995:112) similarly highlights that play and narrative provide accessible avenues for children’s spiritual and emotional expression, reinforcing pastoral care’s emphasis on relational trust. Kwok (2016:205) demonstrates how narrative therapy reconstructs the connection between postmodern therapeutic practices and theology by fostering relational openness, aligning with pastoral counselling’s meaning-making framework. Brunson (2014:3) captures this synergy in his “three musketeers’ approach,” where pastoral care, narrative therapy, and positive psychology collaborate to form a multidimensional model of care. Sweeney (2001:34) underscores that children process their inner worlds through play, which becomes a therapeutic language for re-authoring experiences, while Cooper-White (2007:67) situates pastoral psychotherapy within relational perspectives that integrate theological, psychological, and experiential voices. Scheib (2016:52) adds that pastoral care is fundamentally about

“telling the stories of our lives,” directly resonating with narrative therapy’s re-authoring of identity. Together, these perspectives demonstrate that pastoral counselling draws upon narrative therapy’s reconstructive power and play therapy’s imaginative engagement, forming a triadic relationship that nurtures both psychological and spiritual well-being.

This compatibility is further enriched when biblical narratives are integrated into therapeutic practice, providing theological depth to the triadic model. Kirwan (1984:89) argues that biblical concepts form a theological foundation for counselling, affirming human experience while integrating psychology and theology. Galvin (2008:44) extends this by showing how narrative therapy in pastoral ministry mirrors the interpretive function of Scripture, reframing suffering and identity in light of divine presence. Marie Doughton (2013:7) highlights the liberative potential of combining narrative therapy with *lectio Divina*, demonstrating how biblical stories function as therapeutic texts. In this sense, narratives such as the Exodus or Jesus’ parables operate on the same basis as narrative therapy, inviting individuals to re-author their lives through divine narrative. Sweeney (2001:36) points out that when combined with play therapy’s symbolic action, pastoral counselling becomes a holistic practice that integrates theological meaning, narrative reconstruction, and imaginative play. Thus, the relationship between pastoral counselling, narrative therapy, play therapy, and biblical narratives is not only compatible but also mutually reinforcing, affirming that healing is both a psychological and a theological act, in which children and communities encounter transformation through story, symbol, and sacred play.

This combined intervention of play therapy, biblical narratives, and pastoral counselling differs from typical child-focused interventions by integrating psychological healing with theological meaning-making, offering gifted children a holistic framework for resilience. Traditional child-focused interventions often emphasise behavioural modification or cognitive restructuring, whereas narrative play therapy situates problems as external to the child, enabling re-authoring of personal stories through symbolic play. White & Epston (1990:45) and Morgan (2000:4) did not specifically work with children but emphasised understanding of storytelling in narrative therapy. Drewes (2006:193–210) and Freeman, Epston and Lobovits (1997) demonstrate that narrative principles can be

translated into play therapy, allowing children to externalise problems and experiment with alternative resolutions in developmentally appropriate ways. Marsten, Epston and Markham (2016:1) emphasise that narrative practices shape identity formation, positioning storytelling as central to resilience and connectedness. For gifted children, who often grapple with moral and existential dilemmas earlier than peers, narrative engagement provides a safe imaginative context to externalise complex issues and cultivate resilience through problem-solving. According to Morgan (2000:4), unlike typical interventions, this approach acknowledges children as experts in their own lived experiences, fostering agency and psychological strength while situating their struggles within broader cultural and ethical narratives.

This intervention is especially effective for gifted children because it unites narrative therapy's emphasis on externalisation and re-authoring with play therapy's symbolic action and pastoral counselling's theological grounding. Gifted children often experience heightened sensitivity and existential awareness, making them vulnerable to trauma yet uniquely receptive to symbolic frameworks. According to Galvin (2008:44), by integrating biblical narratives, pastoral counsellors provide moral anchors and spiritual meaning-making that resonate with children's imaginative engagement. Doughton (2013:7) emphasises how this integration enables them to reframe suffering within the divine story. Sweeney (2001:34–36) underscores that play is a therapeutic language through which children process inner worlds, while narrative therapy empowers them to re-author identity through story. This triadic model differs from conventional child-focused practices by embedding theological reflection into therapeutic play, thereby addressing both psychological and spiritual dimensions of trauma. The contribution of this combined intervention to the field of narrative therapy lies in its deeper understanding of gifted children: it demonstrates that narrative play therapy is not merely a derivative of narrative therapy but a sophisticated adaptation that integrates developmental appropriateness, theological meaning, and symbolic play. In doing so, it expands narrative therapy's scope, showing how gifted children can achieve resilience, identity formation, and spiritual transformation through the collaborative interplay of story, play, and pastoral care.

6. Reflection and recommendations

The study's reflection reveals that narrative play, when integrated into a pastoral counselling framework, offers a uniquely effective intervention for traumatised gifted children. This study demonstrates that trauma-informed pastoral counselling for gifted children in middle childhood must integrate narrative theology and play therapy as complementary modalities of healing. Gifted children, with their heightened receptivity to abstract meaning, benefit uniquely from the theological depth of parables, which provide symbolic frameworks for externalising trauma while encountering narratives of hope, restoration, and divine presence. At the same time, play functions as a sacred practice that restores coherence to the fractured spirit, enabling symbolic expression, emotional regulation, and imaginative reconstruction. Together, parables and play establish a dual pathway of recovery that nurtures resilience, affirms dignity, and situates healing within relational and spiritual contexts. Effective pastoral counselling, therefore, requires counsellors to be trained in narrative-based practice, equipped to adapt parables and play across developmental stages, and attuned to the sacred nature of storytelling in trauma recovery. By embodying empathy, theological insight, and psychological skill, counsellors can foster resilience and faith, affirming that healing is not merely therapeutic but profoundly theological. The contribution of this study, therefore, lies in advancing a holistic model of pastoral care that honours the developmental complexity of gifted children, mitigates the effects of trauma, and cultivates resilience, dignity, and sustained awareness of divine presence. This study concludes that this integrative approach enriches pastoral counselling practice by bridging theological narrative and therapeutic play, offering a framework that is both spiritually grounded and clinically responsive. Practical next steps for those who wish to gain more insight into gifted children include attending workshops, studying gifted children, understanding and counselling them, and recognising their giftedness. Providing gifted-specific interventions and aiming to provide gifted-specific counselling. Counsellors can do further study and equip themselves to help these gifted children.

The limitation of this study lies in the lack of knowledge of the counsellor when working with traumatised gifted children. Counsellors should equip themselves effectively when working with gifted children; a lack of

knowledge can hinder progress, and when they are not understood, it can cause greater harm. Counsellors should be aware of and knowledgeable about gifted children, their gifted-specific needs, and personal traits. If this is not kept in consideration when working with these children, it can lead to misdiagnosis and even unsuccessful outcomes. Another limitation could be cultural differences, where different cultures have different ways of storytelling and imaginative play. Gifted-specific interventions are needed, as are gifted-specific counselling practices. Narrative play therapy, in collaboration with pastoral care, play therapy, biblical stories, and practical theology, provides a holistic framework for counselling traumatised gifted children. This approach differs from all other approaches in the following way: it is the only conceptual framework in which pastoral counselling, narrative therapy and play therapy work in collaboration to provide support for traumatised gifted children. Other approaches address only pastoral counselling, narrative therapy, or play therapy on their own. Practical Theology and pastoral practitioner approaches, as set out in the holistic framework, are utilised in this counselling process. This approach also differs from typical child-focused interventions in the following ways: it focuses on gifted-specific interventions delivered by gifted-specific counsellors, who must equip themselves to understand gifted children and how to meet their gifted-specific needs in counselling.

The recommendations highlight the importance of training pastoral counsellors in play therapy, fostering collaboration with caregivers and educators. In conclusion, this thesis affirms that narrative play within a pastoral framework is not only effective but transformative. It provides a pathway for holistic healing that honours the complexity of gifted children's profiles and addresses their intellectual, emotional, and spiritual needs in tandem. By bridging clinical practice with faith-based care, the study contributes meaningfully to both academic discourse and practical pastoral counselling, offering an approach that can guide future interventions and research. The methodology combined biblical narratives with play therapy techniques such as role-play, puppetry, and creative arts. Stories were carefully selected for their themes of resilience, redemption, and divine care, and then adapted into interactive scenarios in which children could engage with characters and events. This process allowed children to project emotions onto biblical figures, externalising trauma in a safe and symbolic

manner. Sessions were conducted within a pastoral counselling framework, emphasising trust, empathy, and confidentiality, while collaboration with caregivers and pastoral workers ensured continuity of support beyond therapy. The flexibility of the intervention enabled adaptation to each child's cognitive and emotional profile, aligning therapeutic strategies with their intellectual depth and existential concerns

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