From isolation to connection:

Young people, narrative practice and canine care

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Author pronouns: Jack: he/him; Sharon: she/her

Abstract

This paper presents a project combining narrative practices and human–canine interaction to support young people in Hong Kong who were socially withdrawn and not in education, employment or training (NEET). Such youth often face societal stigmatisation and isolation. The "We Can" project paired participants with traumatised rescue dogs, fostering mutual healing and reconnection with the young people's preferred identities and their wider community. The paper examines how cultural and familial pressures can contribute to feelings of inadequacy. Using narrative therapy, the project emphasised participants' knowledge, competences, values and resilience rather than deficiencies. Caring for resilient dogs enabled participants to externalise their challenges and construct hopeful, empowering narratives. A key story shared in the paper is the transformational journey of a participant, referred to as Tarzan, who found his purpose through caring for dogs. His experiences, along with those of others, inspired broader personal and social commitments, as participants rejected societal expectations in favour of authentic and meaningful lives. The project challenged stereotypes about youth isolation, promoting reintegration while affirming the humanity and agency of marginalised young people in Hong Kong.

Key words: social withdrawal; social isolation; NEET; unemployment; youth; young people; human–canine interaction; animal-assisted therapy; dogs; Hong Kong; documents; collective narrative practice; narrative therapy

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Intentions for this paper

We have several intentions in writing this paper. First, we would like to honour and document the knowledge, skills, values and principles of living of young people who have struggled with social withdrawal. Second, we would like to make available the knowledge and lived experiences of these young people in a way that might contribute to others who share similar struggles. By doing so, we hope that issues of social withdrawal are made visible, and that this may lead to less loneliness and despair. Lastly, we would like to share with people who are interested in narrative practice how working with these young people has moved and inspired us as practitioners.

"We Can": A project for young people struggling with social withdrawal

The narrative project "We Can" was carried out with young people in Hong Kong aged between 15 and 21 who had experienced social withdrawal. These are referred to as "hidden youth" in Hong Kong terminology. This was a small part of the innovative Career and Life Adventure Planning (CLAP) project led by Professor Victor Wong of Hong Kong Baptist University and funded by the Hong Kong Jockey Club Charities Trust. Author Sharon Leung was a research consultant on this project. The CLAP project aimed to reconnect young people with meaningful engagement in learning, careers or preferred leisure activities. Over five years, this community-wide initiative engaged 122 secondary schools, 115 youth-services nongovernment organisations and 3700 employers.

The We Can project within the broader CLAP initiative was given a Chinese name meaning "joining with dog companions" (狗狗同行). It aimed to support young people who had been secluded at home for over three months, and who were not in education, employment or training (NEET), to develop skills and competence, agency and aspiration. We Can combined narrative practice and animal-assisted therapy. It was initiated and designed by author Jack Chiu and his colleagues at the Evangelical Lutheran Church Social Service in Hong Kong, where he was then project manager. A unique part of this project was the involvement of Debbie Ngai, an animal-assisted therapist, who introduced the idea of working with dogs from an animal rescue shelter.

Principles of narrative practice in this project

Narrative ideas guided this project. We took steps to create contexts of practice that were safe, respectful, non-pathologising and valued young people's lived experience and insider knowledge. We supported the development of multiple stories and multiple identities. We resisted totalising identity conclusions about social withdrawal, incompetence, failure, uselessness and worthlessness. Instead, we worked with the young people to identify stories of competency in order to make visible their skills, values, knowledges of living, hopes and dreams. We invited the young people to remember and reconnect with their love, patience and kindness through caring for shelter dogs who had also been through hard times. The young people were invited to reflect on the significance of human–canine relationships and the mutual contributions they made to each other's lives. We critically examined normative cultural discourses because we believe that social norms and expectations are significant in constructing young people's lives, identities and relationships.

The phenomenon of social withdrawal

Social withdrawal refers to the avoidance of social interactions with others that results from anxiety or fear anticipated in a social context (Malti & Perren, 2011). A sense of belonging is seen as a basic human need. People are expected to build social and emotional connections with others and be accepted as a member of social groups. When young people choose to live a life of social isolation, this is assumed to be abnormal and raises mental health concerns from parents and professionals.

In human history, social isolation has not in all instances been seen as problematic. Priests or Buddhist monks have sought voluntary solitude as a means of inspiration, connection with nature, self-reflection and spiritual growth. People in ancient China who left high office and retreated as hermits were highly regarded for this act of resistance to the political regime. Recent discourse about social withdrawal as a psychological phenomenon was initiated in Japan by psychiatrist Tamaki Saito, who described "hikikomori" as having a "culture-bound psychiatric syndrome" (Teo & Gaw, 2010, p. 444). Teo (2012) described hikikomori as "modern-day hermits" who confine themselves at home and

avoid social relationships, causing significant social dysfunction. Such withdrawal is not restricted to Japan. The terms “status zero” or “NEET” were first used in the UK to represent young people not engaged in education, employment or training (Bynner & Parsons, 2002). This label emphasises economic inactivity and suggests that government interventions are required to help young people make a successful transition between study and work. Other labels such as “slacker”, “twixter” and “adultolescent” have been used to describe young people who live with their parents and have not achieved independence (Staff, 2013). Language such as “hidden youth” or “non-engaged youth” is frequently used in Hong Kong research (Li & Wong, 2015; Wong, 2012). Recently, “lying flat” (躺平) or “lying like a dead fish” (似一條死魚) have been used to describe young people who have given up struggling to meet expectations of success. These young people can be seen as seeking to free themselves from parental and school expectations and refusing to be exploited by neoliberalism.

According to data from the World Bank Group (2024), young people aged between 15 and 24 who have not engaged in education, employment or training for the previous six months are found in many countries, including Canada (11.7% of the total youth population in 2023), UK (12.8%), US (11.2%), Singapore (6.8%), India (23.5%), Australia (7.9%) and Hong Kong (5.9%). The label “NEET” carries negative connotations and may affect how young people perceive themselves. The World Bank data emphasises economic and human resources development and so provides limited utility in understanding the NEET phenomenon. We believe that the data does not represent the full range of experiences of these young people. Nor do mainstream discourses of social withdrawal that link it to mental health problems such as substance use, anxiety disorder, depression and self-harm (Gariépy et al., 2022). Social withdrawal is linked to school bullying, dysfunctional family interaction and fear of expectations and failure (Teo & Gaw, 2010). It is listed as an indicator for anxiety and depressive disorders (Li & Wong, 2015). Medical developmental psychopathology attributes social withdrawal to factors such as “aberrant brain processes, psychiatric conditions, unfavorable temperament, adverse family processes and excessive internet and media use” (Muris & Ollendick, 2023, p. 459). These dominant discourses draw attention to individual deficits and medical-psychological interventions, and give little attention to the effects of sociopolitical injustice on young people’s lives.

Social withdrawal in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, young people face intense pressure to succeed academically. This is underpinned by the belief that educational achievement secures wealth and career advancement. The cultural ideal that “a book holds a house of gold” drives families to invest heavily in their children’s education. This often results in significant stress for both parents and students. Those who withdraw from school or work, sometimes turning to online gaming, are typically met with societal disapproval rather than empathy. Their disengagement is frequently interpreted as personal failure, and they may internalise labels such as “invisible” or “loser”. These self-perceptions often stem from experiences of bullying, academic pressure and fear of disappointing family expectations. For many, withdrawal becomes a form of self-protection in the face of emotional strain and perceived injustice. Some express a desire not for success but for fairness, autonomy and relief from relentless pressure.

Social withdrawal among youth in Asian contexts, including China, is shaped by intersecting forces of gender, class and cultural norms. Girls are often expected to be obedient and family-oriented and may withdraw as a quiet form of resistance (Cheng & Furnham, 2004). Boys are pressured to embody academic and economic success, and failure to meet these ideals can lead to distress and disengagement. In this light, withdrawal may be seen as challenging dominant ideals of gender and achievement.

Disabled and neurodivergent individuals may withdraw, not because of inherent deficits but in response to social exclusion, sensory overwhelm, lack of accommodations or societal prejudice. Dominant narratives continue to pathologise neurodivergent ways of being, rather than recognising diverse forms of communication and participation.

Economic disadvantage further restricts access to education, leisure and peer networks, positioning withdrawal as a coping strategy amid structural inequality (Roberts, 2018). In capitalist societies like Hong Kong, withdrawal is often stigmatised as a moral or personal shortcoming, deepening the shame experienced by those who disengage.

Narrative practice offers a powerful framework for understanding youth withdrawal not as a personal failing but as a form of resistance. White (2002, p. 46) argued that such refusals can be seen as signs of the “partial failure” of modern power – the power that

encourages individuals to shape their identities and lives according to socially constructed norms. From this perspective, withdrawal can be seen as a meaningful act that disrupts dominant scripts of success and conformity. Narrative practices can help young people to explore the significance of their actions, make sense of their resistance, and re-author alternative stories about their lives, values and relationships.

Project outline

The young people who participated in this project were referred by parents, social workers or practitioners from local schools and youth organisations. Many of these young people exhibited fear of social interaction, having remained at home in isolation for months or even years. During home visits conducted by the project team, we were careful to avoid intruding on the lives of the young people, instead prioritising respect for their autonomy and preferences. Establishing a sense of safety and trust was essential, and team members refrained from initiating direct conversations with the young people until such trust had been developed. Instead, initial interactions often involved engaging with parents and other family members. Although families were often eager to facilitate communication between the team and the youth, team members emphasised the importance of respecting the young people's choices and pace of engagement. In their interactions with families, team members focused on identifying the young person's interests. Notably, they learnt that many had a history of caring for pets including cats, dogs, rabbits, tortoises and hamsters. While the young people avoided discussing personal matters or engaging in social interactions with other humans, they showed kindness and affection towards the animals they cared for. This observation highlighted a unique aspect of their emotional expression and capacity for connection, even in the context of significant social withdrawal. As we began to learn about their experiences of quitting school, the young people reported bullying, rejection and anxiety about academic demands. However, when describing their relationships with their pets, they expressed a sense of security and happiness, and a longing for genuine and nonjudgemental connections.

We invited the young people to consider visiting and offering help to shelter dogs. Team members shared stories of the dogs with the young people, describing how the dogs had been abused, traumatised and abandoned by their previous carers and ended up in the shelter. The young people were invited to reflect on any resonances with their own experiences.

Those who chose to join the program were given training on how to examine the physical health and emotional condition of the dogs. During their initial visits to the shelter, they noticed that these traumatised dogs were timid, anxious and often indifferent to human contact. The dogs were in poor health and in a poor living environment. Training was provided on how to approach, care for and support dogs emotionally. Animal welfare was a core element. The young people's observations about the dogs, the care they provided and the meaning of their volunteer work were reflected on in small groups and carefully documented.

After a few visits, the young people noticed that dogs under their care had become calmer and more relaxed. They expressed satisfaction because the human–canine relationship offered comforting companionship to them both. Their interest in animal care and welfare were linked to other animal-related fields of work such as hotels for dogs, animal food or product sales, animal grooming and ecological tourism. Through caring for the dogs, the young people started to communicate with others volunteering at the shelter. Some became assistant trainers in the shelter, helping to coach other new volunteers to care for the dogs.

Integrating narrative practice and animal-assisted therapy

Traditional animal-assisted therapy emphasises the healing power of service and therapy dogs on distressed humans. The We Can project, in contrast, emphasised mutual support and healing of both the young people and the traumatised dogs. The project aimed to provide young people with a way to reconnect with themselves, others and the world around them through building relationships with and supporting the shelter dogs in combination with using narrative practices to support meaning-making about this experience.

The human–canine interaction required little spoken expression and human interaction, so it facilitated the young people's participation without causing too much anxiety and discomfort. Dogs are nonjudgemental, offer unconditional acceptance and respond to genuine care. These relationship qualities provided a nonthreatening context in which the young people could demonstrate their ability to establish connections and receive validation in ways often lacking in their human relationships.

The human–canine interactions provided multiple openings for team members to invite the young people to tell their stories in the context of resonance with the dogs' experiences of abandonment, survival and trust-building. Through learning to recognise the dogs' survival strategies, the young people were supported to externalise their struggles and talk about their own challenges more freely. This created opportunities to develop a shared narrative about overcoming adversity, and to reconsider negative identity conclusions like "lazy", "wasting life" and "internet-addicted" in light of skills and knowledge developed when facing adversity.

Co-construction of human–canine relationships and identities

The young people were invited to reflect on why they enjoyed being with the dogs, what they and the dogs could offer to each other, and how such contributions were made possible. They also thought about the meaning of care, their hopes and dreams for the dogs, and the possible future they could co-create through the relationship. The young people expressed gratitude for the dogs' genuine trust, acceptance, kindness, lack of judgement and companionship. They recognised their own contributions to the relationship, particularly through providing care, love, respect, play and protection, as well as a clean living place and sometimes a better chance of being adopted in the future. They witnessed changes in the dogs, from being timid and withdrawn to trusting and accepting their care, and then to leaving their cages to explore and play.

The young people witnessed how the traumatised dogs were resilient and responsive to their love and care, despite adversity, abandonment and a poor shelter environment. The dogs' reactions inspired the young people to overcome personal difficulties such as physical discomfort, anxiety and fear of communication. Through re-membering practices (White, 2007), the young people discovered their knowledge of kindness, skills of care and purpose in life through rich description and reconnection with their lived experiences, including other significant relationships with pets and people. This discovery not only gave them a sense of comfort, confidence and love but also encouraged them to spend more time with significant people around them and remain hopeful in relationships and the future.

Some young people expressed a preference for interacting with dogs rather than people. We explored this through a focus on the values that might be "absent but implicit" in this preference (White, 2011). In this light, withdrawal from human connection could be seen not simply as avoidance, but also as an expression of preferences about relationships. This focus allowed the team to honour the young people's relational preferences and their particular ethics of care. Their bond with the dogs was an opening to conversations about the kinds of human relationships they valued – ones built on respect, equality, kindness, compassion, nonjudgement, acceptance and mutual care. The human–canine relationship offered a safe space where these values could be experienced and affirmed, helping to clarify what meaningful connection looked and felt like for them.

The young people in this project displayed significant compassion for the dogs. Through the understanding they gained of the pet industry and its operations, they became keen to advocate for animals' rights. They spoke up about abandoning pets, treating animals with cruelty and practices of commodification. They advocated for adoption, particularly for aged dogs. Some explored the possibility of becoming foster carers for animals. They changed on a personal level, to be more genuine, kind and relaxed, and on a political level, to want to change the destiny of dogs, advocating for animals' rights and wellbeing, and respecting and treasuring life and relationships in general. Apart from searching for their preferred lifestyle, they also challenged the dominant ideology of modern life, with its fast-paced money-status-material-achievement orientation.

The following paragraphs share the journey of one of the participants, a young person nicknamed Tarzan. A medical social worker gave Tarzan this nickname because he had long hair, which reminded the social worker of the fictional character who was raised by apes in the jungle (Burroughs, 1912). When we sought Tarzan's consent to share his story in this paper, we asked him about the name he preferred to use. He agreed to use Tarzan because he said he would like to be thought of as an animal lover and protector of nature. Jack did not record all his conversations with Tarzan, but he did write down many of Tarzan's thoughts about the purposes of life, and the values and commitments that were important to him.

Tarzan's story

Tarzan, a 17-year-old referred by his medical social worker, had been isolated at home for over two years.

His mother was concerned about his insomnia, lack of communication and constant internet use, suspecting addiction or mental health issues. The family criticised him for dropping out of school and spending time on comics and games.

At our first meeting, Tarzan was reluctant to speak. I (Jack) noticed he was holding a comic book featuring animals and used this as an entry point for conversation. I asked if he liked animals and introduced the idea of volunteering at a dog shelter. Volunteering at the shelter – feeding and caring for dogs – requires minimal verbal interaction and I wondered if it might help Tarzan to reconnect gradually with others. When I invited him to join, he didn't commit immediately.

Warm up exercise: Animal-related stories as a collective theme

On the first day of the volunteer service, eight young people who had been in social isolation for different durations participated, including Tarzan. We met Debbie, an animal-assisted therapist who trains volunteers and uses animals in therapy to support emotional and social wellbeing. Debbie shared the basic rules and information that the volunteers needed to know about dog care. I asked the young people to choose an animal to represent themselves and to write down ways in which they were similar to this animal. I also prepared an exercise using a collective narrative timeline. Denborough (2008, p. 144) described this practice as "a method that enabled participants to share powerful personal memory and history but in a way that linked to a collective theme. It brought people together while also acknowledging a great diversity of experience". I hoped that producing a collective timeline would be a useful way to help the participants feel comfortable in this first meeting, and it powerfully honoured the knowledge of everyone in the room. The group drew a timeline on a long piece of paper on the floor of the activity room. This was divided into ages and their corresponding school grades. I invited the group to reflect on their experiences with:

- any animal
- knowledge and stories of caring for animals
- an intention, a wish, a learning or a value that is important to them and their relationship with animals.

To make the participants feel comfortable, I invited each person to think about the following (drawing on Denborough, 2008):

- What is the history of this intention/wish/commitment/hope/learning or value and when did it begin?
- How old were you or what grade were you in?
- Where did you learn this?
- Who did you learn it from?

Because they were not used to talking or socialising, we provided each participant with sticky notes and animal cards we designed to help them express their thoughts, either in simple words or drawings. Then, they were invited to stick their pieces of paper on the timeline at the appropriate year/age. After doing this, they walked around the timeline and read each other's notes. They were also invited to ask questions about other stories or drawings on this collective timeline. For most, this was their first time engaging in a group activity in some time, so they chose to write on the sticky notes and select animal cards to place on the collective timeline but declined to ask questions.

Tarzan chose a picture of an owl to represent him. He placed a sticky note on the picture saying "silence, observation, avoid people and noise, show up in the dark".

Matching young people with rescued dogs

Debbie briefed the participants about why the dogs needed their care, which was to help the dogs reconnect with and trust humans so they could have a better chance of being adopted. Debbie had screened the dogs in advance to identify those that she considered safe. She introduced each dog to the participants, describing its temperament. Then, they were invited to choose a dog they wanted to serve. To create an opening to their personal stories, I invited each young person to consider the knowledge, skills, values or commitments that informed their choice of dog.

Tarzan chose a dog that was described as timid, sensitive and insecure. He mumbled a few words about the values and skills he could bring to caring for this particular dog, which included patience, observation and kindness.

Resonance with the dog's adverse experience

After the first two visits to the dog shelter, Tarzan appeared upset and asked a question for the very first time. His dog was unwilling to try the food he had prepared. He asked Debbie if this was his fault.

This presented an opportunity to invite Debbie to talk about why the dogs were so timid, and the state they had been in when they were found. Debbie said that the dogs had been skinny and malnourished, with skin infections. They had been found in isolated environments where they could hide from threats and dangers.

The young people listened attentively and showed sympathy for the dogs. I then invited them to think about the following questions in relation to their own experience to encourage understanding and connection with the dogs:

- What do you think the dogs have experienced?
- Why do you think the dogs display this current behaviour?
- Is there any resonance with your own stories of challenge?
- Can you share ways you have responded to or resisted adversities?
- Are your experiences of adversity and despair okay, not okay, or a bit of both?
- If you could name the problem you have been dealing with, what name would you give it?

Here are some of the wisdoms Tarzan identified in the experiences of the dogs:

> Dogs can … ignore the noise, stay calm.
>
> Observe, be patient, stay away from harm.
>
> Do things they feel comfortable with.

I asked Tarzan, "What makes you think the dogs are doing these things?" and "Do these qualities resonate with your own skills of resistance to problems?" He replied:

> I can feel how the dogs feel. These dogs were probably unable to do things their owner wanted and were abandoned … People expect others to do the things they want you to do.
>
> Sometimes I wonder why I have to put effort into something other people regard as useful or important and give up something I feel is interesting.
>
> I can ignore other's "noise" like the dogs do.

Tarzan pointed out that it was people's "noise" (judgements and demands) that caused him distress, leading him to isolate himself. As Tarzan and the other young people progressed through the program and learnt more about the suffering of the dogs, their silent participation was replaced with expressions of empathy and connection.

Skills and knowledge about surviving difficult times

We designed a volunteer journal (狗狗同行手冊) to record the young people's observations of the dogs and of their own knowledge and skills in facing adversity. The participants documented the strategies the dogs used to overcome challenges and connected these insights with their own experiences of similar themes or concerns. They were then invited to record their personal knowledge and skills. Such "documents of knowledge" (Fox, 2003) can be invaluable for individuals at risk of losing sight of their preferred identities, helping them regain a sense of agency and control in their lives.

Tarzan used his volunteer journal to document his observations about how the dogs had been able to survive tough times:

> Dogs live simple and direct lives. They have no complicated thoughts.
>
> Dogs try hard to survive and stay away from harm.
>
> They are seldom bothered by the environment, even though the shelter is noisy and in poor condition.

He documented what he had been doing in response to the hard times he faced, including how he survived the "noise" that bothered him:

> Play songs, just don't care about people's comments.
>
> Keep noise away. Wear earphones, even without music on.
>
> Do something else. Play video games.
>
> Caring about things (and dogs). I care. Focusing on how I can do better.
>
> Watching documentaries like Animal Planet is healing.
>
> Stay silent, listen and observe.

In these journal entries, Tarzan recorded how he had been actively resisting oppression from noise. This provided him with a sense of agency and a sense of himself as the author of his own life.

Caring for traumatised dogs provided opportunities for the young people to reflect on their life challenges in new ways. Tarzan shared how he stayed calm and observant despite the noise. He told us how he had learnt to protect himself from difficult life situations. Tarzan's sharing reminded me of what Michael White once wrote:

> No-one is a passive recipient of trauma. People always take steps in endeavouring to prevent the trauma they are subject to, and, when preventing this trauma is clearly impossible, they take steps to try to modify it in some way or modify its effects on their lives. (White, 2006, p. 28)

Double-storied accounts about treasured values

White (2000) described double listening as hearing both the hardship and the person's response to it, including what is "absent but implicit". Participants shared challenges they faced, such as staying silent, withdrawing at home, and turning to the internet or games – strategies that were often misunderstood or dismissed by their families. For many, this group was the first space where their coping methods were acknowledged and respected as valid efforts towards self-preservation and wellbeing. Gradually, they grew more confident in sharing their stories.

After reading about Tarzan's strategies for staying away from noise, I asked:

Jack: If the noise makes you want to stay away from others, what does that say about what's important to you in relationships?

Tarzan: It means people shouldn't press others to follow their pace and do what they believe to be important.

Jack: So, would you like to share what is important to you?

Tarzan: Paying attention to detail, trying my best to prepare food for the dogs. These are things people around me despise but I believe it to be important.

This reflection shifted our conversation from problem-saturated talk towards naming what mattered most to him: respect for choice and individual differences.

Tarzan spoke about the distress caused by noise, which he described as insincere concern and rigid expectations from adults:

> Some people want me to act how they expect. It's not genuine care. Even in the family, they say they want you to be happy, but only if you do what they want. I stay silent and away. I do my best to protect myself.

Tarzan's retreat wasn't passive: it was an intentional strategy to shield himself from judgement and maintain emotional integrity.

From personal issues to injustice and oppression in the social context

After listening to Tarzan's account of the problems related to noise, I was interested to know whether he felt okay, not okay or a bit of both about the effects caused by the noise and why. He replied:

> People categorise others according to their performance. They focus on what the majority regard as good and ignore those who don't fit in. When you do not conform to their standards, you will lose everyone's respect. Just like you are living in profound loneliness.
>
> Some dogs are active and outgoing while others are slow and introverted. Every dog has its own pace. Why can't I have my own pace? Their timetable is not mine.

Tarzan expressed disagreement with societal expectations and standards. He had his own values, which involved respecting individual pace and choice.

A wonderful moment in the dog shelter

After a few sessions of human–canine interaction, the trust and bond between dogs and the young volunteers had developed significantly. We believed that it would be worthwhile to acknowledge this development, so we asked the young people about their experiences of caring for the dogs. Most importantly, we invited them to share their perceptions of the dogs' experience of their service to them. We asked, in the eyes of the dog you are caring for:

- What personal qualities are they admiring/loving about you?
- What challenges have you overcome during the service?

- What knowledge and skills have you used to help improve your relationship with the dogs?
- What values, commitments or hopes have you been holding on to in your caring work with dogs?

In narrative practice, documentation of positive identity conclusions is used to help people whose sense of identity is at risk (White, 1995). We invited the young people to share and write down their new discoveries at the end of each dog caring session. Tarzan's reflections in his journal included the following:

> Dog validated my existence! Never feel so welcomed by anybody.
>
> Dogs react positively to people who treat them well and stay away from those who are not good to them. Dogs do not judge. They are straightforward. They do not care whether you are good or bad looking, smart or dumb, normal or abnormal. They care about someone who really treats them well.
>
> Dogs knew my wholehearted contribution to them.
>
> They let me know I am important. What I have tried hard with or contributed to is worthwhile. Somebody will know it. I would keep going with what I believe to be worthwhile.

Through this journaling in response to the questions above, Tarzan reconnected with neglected aspects of his lived experience. Acknowledgments and validation of self from the dogs and others had become available to Tarzan. This allowed him to author a new, preferred story of his life.

Conclusion

This work explored how dogs might "participate" in narrative practice. Rather than serving as a therapeutic tool, the dogs emerged as a significant presence – a kind of person – whose attunement and responses created space for the young people to feel seen, heard and valued in ways that unsettled dominant narratives of failure or deviance. Through these interspecies encounters, young people experienced moments of recognition that traditional human-centred practices had often failed to offer. In this light, the dogs' role was not ancillary but ethically and relationally central, challenging us to reconsider the boundaries of meaning-making and the agents who participate in it. This reorientation invited further attention to how interspecies relationality can disrupt grand narratives and make visible the dignity, labour and humanity of those often marginalised in therapeutic and social spaces.

The social workers and narrative practitioners involved in this project spoke powerfully about how their relationships with young people were not only transformative for the youth, but also deeply reshaped their own lives. Rather than stepping into roles of authority, the practitioners saw themselves as collaborators. This collaboration was grounded in mutual learning, respect and care. Inspired by Michael White's "taking-it-back practice" (1997), practitioners reflected on how the insights, creativity and resistance of the young people influenced both their professional commitments and personal growth. Many described being reconnected with the core values that first called them to this work – rediscovering courage, humility and a renewed sense of purpose. Stepping beyond comfort zones, the practitioners stood side by side with young people in the shared care of shelter dogs. This became an act of solidarity, not charity: a shared ethical stance, as Vikki Reynolds described it, "the connective practice of resisting oppression and promoting justice-doing" (2019, p. 9).

This collaboration between practitioners, young people and rescued animals became a living expression of collective care, in which power was shared and voices were honoured. The often-unheard stories of both young people and dogs were not only acknowledged but valued as forms of resistance and dignity.

As practitioners, we remain accountable, not as experts but as companions in struggle, challenging structural injustice and nurturing spaces where hope can take root. The young people reminded us that even within systems that attempt to silence and marginalise, there is still room to reclaim identity, dignity and possibility. The young people's transformations deepened our own collective belief that life is not only survivable, but beautiful and full of potential when we walk together in solidarity.

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