

# *A child's voice:*

## *Narrative family therapy*

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This article recounts an approach to working with a seven-year-old girl in response to a problem that had muted her voice. The narrative practices employed included absent but implicit questions, therapeutic documents, re-authoring conversations, definitional ceremony, and the use of an 'Anticipated Petitioner' to support a 'consulting your consultants' interview.

Keywords: narrative practice, children, absent but implicit, decentred practice, therapeutic documents, re-authoring conversations, definitional ceremony, outsider witnesses, anticipated petitioner, consulting your consultant

## INTRODUCTION

This article is a record of a journey of eight narrative therapy meetings, over about five-and-a-half months, in which I met as a psychologist and narrative therapist with a seven-year-old child and her family. It is a story of tricky beginnings, surprising twists, and magical powers. This story has been edited to uphold privacy but, as it is based on 'real' conversations, it still reflects both those times where narrative practice filled our sails and we moved along together with wind in our hair, and times when things got choppy, conversations stalled, and my efforts seemed to bounce off into the distance. In this particular telling, the focus will be less on the details of this family's life and more on the dilemmas and intentions that guided the work and stretched my thinking.

We will call our seven-year-old adventurer Kendra, and her mum Anna. Together, we are delighted that parts of their story are being published and, in particular, hope that in some small way this supports the work of other practitioners and other families. Although we hope that this article could especially support children facing similar struggles, we know that no two journeys are exactly the same, and wish to take care that this re-telling is not confused as a kind of 'favourite recipe' for a class of problem.

## SERIOUS PROBLEMS AND 'THE MOST COMPELLING STORIES'

It started off with a not-so-everyday phone call when Kendra's mum, Anna, introduced me to a problem that had understandably left her in a desperate position. I learnt that Kendra's talking voice had stopped in a way that left family and friends baffled and concerned. Against the backdrop of loud, cheerful chatter with other children and family, Kendra's voice dwindled in the presence of adults. Anna's optimism about things getting better had now hit rock-bottom as her daughter had not uttered a word aloud in front of another adult for two years, and the problem was beginning to stifle smiles and eye contact. Out of concern, Kendra's parents had turned to multiple professionals over the years without prevail and they wondered if they had reached the end of good ideas. Unwilling to

give up on Kendra's voice and perhaps to encourage my own sense of adventure, Anna told me her interest had risen when she heard we 'did something differently'. Something to do 'with stories' ... after all, her daughter is an avid reader. With this introduction, Anna asks me if I think I can be of any help or use.

The following quote goes some way to explaining the effect that this invitation had on me:

*There is a certain dark realm where the serious problem reigns and, like Frodo the Hobbit looking up at the looming Mount Doom in Mordor (Tolkien, 1965), we find that it's tremendously hard to have faith that we will find a way out with our young friends. But isn't this the way it is in most compelling stories?* (Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997, p. 11)

Frodo was tugging at my sleeve. From Anna's end of the phone, I'm guessing that Frodo sounded like a silent pause; in my head it was much noisier, sounding something like:

- Kendra is already sick of meeting with professionals – how is meeting with me not going to further exacerbate this?
- If talking about the problem has been 'overdone' somehow – then where do you start?
- How can I go about privileging Kendra's voice, when my adult presence in the room may be the exact condition in which to silence it?

I took a deep breath, and attempted to quiet the Frodo. I reminded myself that life and identity is always multi-storied, that there will be more to know than what this problem would have me noticing – that in its shadow there will be cracks and treasures hidden in the undergrowth, and the beginning of some untried path to pursue. So, with a spirit of adventure and an attitude of curiosity, I asked Anna: 'What else would you want me to know about Kendra that would help me understand what kind of a challenge we are up for? What do you know about Kendra that I might never guess or uncover by meeting with her about this problem? These questions brought forward some rich knowledge about Kendra that I was very interested to learn.

## DECENTRED PRACTICE AND THE ETHIC OF CURIOSITY

Michael White's ideas about being 'decentred and influential' (White, 2007, p. 39) informed my preference to listen to Anna's story from a position of curiosity – as distinct from listening with a different agenda in mind. I found this supported me to take notice of the particular way Anna defined her experience, as it was her language and knowledge about this predicament that I wanted to take priority in our conversation. And there were many details of Anna's story that stood out to me. For example:

- Kendra left adults stunned with her voracious appetite for reading, leaping to books others would imagine to be years out of her reach. What books had grabbed Kendra's attention the most? What kinds of stories would move this accomplished reader to the edge of her seat?
- Kendra had been elected as the student representative to appear on behalf of her class in school meetings. What was it that the other students knew about Kendra that would have them picking her as their ambassador? Could this be evidence of Kendra discovering ways to outwit the problem's attempts to silence her?
- Anna expressed a foreboding fear at the extent to which this problem had reached into her daughter's life. When asked, Anna explained this fear was in relation to the world never knowing that her daughter is 'so much more than the girl who doesn't talk'. What was the 'more about Kendra', that her mum had not lost sight of, but that the problem might have blinded me to knowing if I didn't ask?

I wanted to craft this curiosity into questions to Anna so our conversation could go beyond a single-storied account of Kendra and her life, but I encountered some familiar dilemmas: against the backdrop of this serious and enduring problem, how could I ask about Kendra's excellent reading skills without this coming across as a 'search for the positives'? How could I safeguard against my enquiries being experienced as a kind of brushing

aside of Anna's serious concerns? There would be many ways to navigate these dilemmas. At this time, I asked for Anna's permission: 'I want to really respect your deep concern over the not-talking. After all, that's why you're calling! But would it be okay if I took some time at the start to get to know a bit more about Kendra – the Kendra that can get missed out on when this problem keeps her quiet?' Anna gave her approval for our conversation to proceed in this way, and I'd like to share with you a few of the questions I put to Anna, and what information this brought forward. I was left curious to hear that Kendra had a position against 'being pushed' in relation to this problem. I therefore asked some questions about this:

- 'You've told me Kendra has said "Don't push me" – is that right? At a guess, is this a kind of declaration Kendra is making against being pushed to talk?'

To this question, Anna replied that, yes, Kendra didn't like to be moved ahead against her will.

- 'I'm confused – being the kind of girl who can read up to level 25, I'm guessing it's not all kinds of moving ahead she doesn't like? Exactly what kind of pushing does she object to?'

Anna reported on what she saw as Kendra's life-long love for a challenge. My ears pricked up when hearing about the particular circumstances that invited Kendra into a spirit of challenge – how she loved to solve puzzles, and outsmart and outwit, as discernable from conditions that evoked a sense of panic and dread – like being taken by surprise or being in a spotlight. This had me thinking very carefully about how to influence our first meeting.

- 'So, does all of this say something about how she might prefer to do new things with other people?'

This had Anna reflecting, with some puzzlement, on times she would see Kendra recoil in the face of what Anna saw to be encouragement. Instead of being spurred on by public accolades like 'Well done!', or 'I heard you speak then – that's fantastic!', Kendra responded as though she couldn't bear it. At this point in the conversation, Anna had begun to wonder if even these kinds of well-intentioned encouragement could be

experienced by Kendra as a kind of 'pushing'. It was helpful for Anna and I to consider Kendra's expressions of 'not liking to be pushed' in this way. By considering Kendra's recoil as an action, we could start to wonder about Kendra's intentions, and Kendra's knowledge about what kind of adult response might be less likely to open the door to the problem. This shaped many of the therapeutic endeavours we undertook in the coming months. You may recognise resonance between these questions and what is known as 'absent but implicit' enquiries (Carey, Walther, & Russell, 2009), which informed my approach here.

I sent a letter to Kendra following this phone conversation, as another way to invite more than the problem into the room<sup>1</sup>:

*Hi Kendra!*

*My name is Lisa – I hope it's okay that I'm writing you this letter.*

*I work at a place called Dulwich Centre and I am a counsellor, so I get to meet with lots of children and parents about lots of different things.*

*Usually, kids come and meet with me because there is a problem that has been making some things difficult. And then we try to find ways or clever tricks to shrink the problem. Your mum told me that maybe there is something that tries to make some things at school, like talking, a bit tricky sometimes – is that right? If it is, I would love to know more about this – because I know of other kids with this kind of pesky problem.*

*Mum told me that maybe you know about some clever ways to stop problems: like the 'stinky cheese and elephant's underpants' trick. Mum also told me that you have fun with lots of people on Skype! Is that right? And mum told me that you are on level 25 in reading? Wow! What things do you like reading about the best?*

*Mum said that maybe you might come and visit me soon? I hope so! Maybe you could*

*even bring something along to show me – like a favourite drawing or book or photos.*

*I am really excited about meeting you and your mum soon.*

*From Lisa*

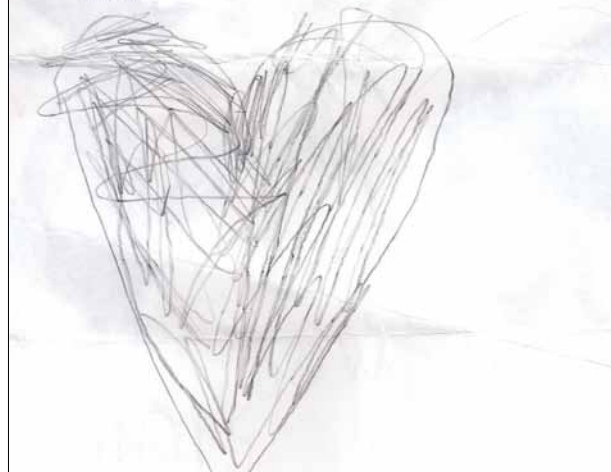
*P.S. Other kids have said that problems that make talking tricky seem to get really big when they meet a grown-up for the first time. Does that ever happen to you? If it does, I wonder what we could do to out-smart it. Maybe you could bring someone along who could help out with the talking. Maybe we could do lots of drawing – I wonder, could stinky cheese or elephant underpants help? I will see if I have some in the cupboard ...*

To my delight, I received the following replies in the post, and had a sense that more than the problem would enter the room when we first met:

**TO LISA THANK YOU FOR MY LETTER ABOUT WHAT**

**STINKY CHEESE AND ELEPHANTS  
UNDIES I HAVE SEEN WALLE  
AND EVE I'VE GOT WALLE  
CHOCOLATE DESSERT  
I BEING SAYING TO MUM WALLEEE  
AND I HAVE A WALLE MAGAZINE  
I LIKE THE MR MEN SHOW AND**

**I HAVE THE MR MEN TOYS  
FROM Kendra**



TO LISA . HAVE YOU EVER HEARD  
 BEN 10 BEFORE? I LOVE BEN 10  
 AND HOT WHEELS . MR .HAPPY  
 IS ALLRIGHT AND OK.  
 I LOVE MY MR MEN BOOKS  
 CALLED MR. HAPPY.  
 LITTLE MISS CHATTERBOX.  
 MR. SILLY. MR. FORGETFUL.  
 LITTLE MISS BOSSY.  
 LITTLE MISS CHRISTMAS.  
 MR. NOSEY. PAAVO 'S MY BEST  
 TOY. FROM Kendra

## MEETING 'MORE THAN THE GIRL WHO DOESN'T TALK'

I first met Kendra as she entered the room, walking behind her mother, her two small feet between Anna's strides – and carrying two bags, bulging with mysterious items. I began by explaining that I really didn't know a lot about Kendra, but was so excited to learn a bit more from the letters she had sent, and was very curious about the bulging bags. Kendra took this as a cue and began to introduce me to a bag full of characters – including two who would become our strongest allies and colleagues.

The characters in the bulging bag acted like a platform for questions about who and what were the precious people and characters in her life. Kendra responded to my questions with a whispering voice, covered behind her hand and into her mother's ear, and Anna repeated these whispers out loud. I heard about how she swapped Transformer robots with her friend Peter of a morning. I asked what Peter might know about Kendra that would have him willing to hand over his precious Transformer for the day; Kendra replied that she was good at looking after things and people.

I expressed curiosity about the things that Kendra enjoyed with her friends, and wondered what kind of a talking voice was needed for these different kinds of activities. Kendra named this a 'talking nicely' voice. I wondered if 'talking nicely' was a term given to Kendra at some point, and if Kendra would have a different, more experience-near name to describe the kind of talking when

playing 'enemy' robot games with Peter. Kendra, however, was adamant that 'talking nicely' was the appropriate description. Kendra reported that Talking Nicely was a preferred phenomenon in her life, stating it made her happy – a 'Mr Happy' variety of happiness. Wondering what was silencing this Talking Nicely at other times, I attempted to bring forward what Kendra knew about the problem:

Lisa: So, I'm just wondering is 'Talking Nicely' really easy and fun – like playing Transformers, or is it a bit tricky sometimes?

Kendra: No, it's not like playing Transformers.

Lisa: Oh. So it's not like playing Transformers ...?

Kendra: No, it's very hard. It's very hard to find the words.

Lisa: Oh, so is it only at school that it gets very hard to find the words?

Kendra: I don't know.

Lisa: Do you have any idea what happens to the words when things get really hard?

Kendra: [no response]

Lisa: I wonder – is it like the words disappear, go invisible, or fly off, or does something else happen?

Kendra: [no response]

It was becoming clear that these questions were not answerable at this point in time. Perhaps they were placing too great a burden on Kendra, demanding that she put words to something out of her reach. Or perhaps these felt like a kind of pushing to Kendra – by not answering, was Kendra distancing herself from my unhelpful attempts to engage her? Kendra then asked, 'Can I go to the toilet?' Perhaps Kendra needed the toilet, or perhaps this was an act of generosity – allowing me some time to collect my thoughts and find a different way!

When she returned, I attempted to make it possible for Kendra to evaluate the effects of my questions: 'You know, sometimes I ask kids questions that are really not very helpful, or a bit boring. Would it be okay for you if I tried to ask some different, more helpful questions?' Kendra

looked interested again. ‘Do you think you would know if a question I asked was an okay kind of helpful question?’ Kendra shook her head, so I asked, ‘Do you think Mr Happy would know if my questions were helpful or interesting?’ To this, Kendra replied, ‘Yes’, and so rejoined the conversation. I expressed my gratitude to Mr Happy and wondered if we could formally recruit him into our conversations as an official ‘barometer’ of sorts for the conversation. Kendra, Anna, and Mr Happy thought this was a great idea, and Mr Happy redirected us back to researching the skill of ‘Talking Nicely’. This led to a plan in which Kendra would put her novelist skills to the task of a book about Talking Nicely – which was underway by the time she left.

You may have noticed that Kendra and I renegotiated the conversation away from naming the problem. This was unfamiliar, and had me concerned. Was I skipping over a vital first chapter? Would this forever undermine our efforts to co-author a new story? But in this experience, it did not. In fact, it wasn’t until the very end of our therapeutic journey that Kendra named the problem. This has not diminished my interest in supporting a rich telling of the problem story. Instead, it reminded me that the path these conversations take are negotiated, and are therefore rarely linear. It had me paying more attention to what guides this negotiation, and the importance of creating the space for children to make known to us the effect of a particular enquiry.

## SECOND MEETING

We met again a few weeks later and Kendra arrived with many drawings. A little hesitantly, Anna explained that Kendra had started a book about Talking Nicely, but perhaps this hadn’t worked out so well because it had ended up being a book about superpowers. I let them know I was delighted about this; after all, so many fabulous authors have surprising twists in their stories, and I was excited that Kendra had the book with her. She dug it out beneath a new large Mr Happy (whom she placed on his own chair) and various other characters.

Referring to the pages of her novel, Kendra began to describe a phenomenon that had begun from the idea of Talking Nicely, but was now named ‘Super Powers’. I gained an immediate impression that this was of some considerable interest to

Kendra as the whisper voice was occasionally very loud and there were no multiple toilet breaks this time. I interviewed Kendra in a particular way to further research this phenomenon:

- Are there different kinds of super powers?
- Do they have different names?
- Do characters always know they have super powers, or do they have to be very clever and discover their powers?
- How do they turn them on and off?
- Do their powers come out all the time, or are they a bit shy and only come out with a magic word, or a magic costume?
- What kind of difference do these powers make in the world?

Towards the end of our conversation, I asked Kendra:

Lisa: Are powers only for grown-up characters or kid characters too?

Kendra: No – they are for kids! Ben 10 is really just a kid!

Lisa: So Ben 10 is really just a kid and he has powers ... What other powers can kids have?

Kendra: Kids can have ‘really being good’ powers, and all powers.

Lisa: I wonder when a kid would use her powers?! Can you think of a time when a kid, maybe a little girl at a school like yours, might need to use her powers ?

Kendra: Well, they can help kids have their photo taken.

I had learnt from the initial phone call with Anna that Kendra had evoked an image of stinky cheese and an elephant in underpants in order to succeed in the challenge of having her school photo taken – so I put this connection to Kendra in a wondering and tentative way:

Lisa: Ahhhh! Do you think – now I am may be jumping a little ahead here, but – [whispering] did you manage to somehow take out and use a kind of power when you did the stinky cheese and elephant’s underpants trick at the photos?

Kendra: Yes!

I was interested in paying considerable attention to this – could this be an ability that Kendra had already used to overcome the problem that silenced her smiles? Was there a longer history to this ability?

### **STRONG POWER, CHATTERBOX POWER, BRAVE POWER, STINKING POWER, AND MORE**

Before our next meeting, I received a joyous phone message from Anna, which went something like this: ‘Kendra has done some very surprising things. She smiled at someone on the street and told me her heart was beating very fast but she wasn’t scared. I don’t know if she will want to talk about it, but she was very proud’. The next interview heralded some big news from Kendra. Coming through the door, Kendra was in full flight retelling this news to her mother so her mother could then tell it to me. The words were coming out so quickly Anna seemed struggling to keep up! However, this time, Kendra’s voice was loud enough for me to hear.

Kendra explained that kids can indeed conjure different types of power, and Kendra could give us examples of times when she had seen these powers in action. To use a phrase coined by David Epston, we were heading for imagination hills! Kendra educated us on the merits of Strong Powers – how these help you lift heavy things, like when Kendra needed to wheel the white recycling bin out of her classroom earlier in the week. There were Ticklish Powers that were brought about by tickling and Dad’s expert skills at being silly. Of particular interest to me and Anna was Kendra’s knowledge about Chatterbox Power and Brave Powers – these powers helped Kendra to have fun and talk with people. Anna joined in this news declaring that she too had seen Kendra using these powers and provided some recent examples. This got me very curious:

- Lisa: How did you come to start seeing these powers, Kendra? Did they come to you in a dream or something?
- Kendra: I learnt them – I learnt to see them, with my eyes.
- Lisa: Ahhh – so you see them ... Do you think anyone else in your life, apart from me and Mum, knows about how you have

learnt to see these powers with your eyes, Kendra?

Kendra: I don’t know.

Lisa: Do you think anyone else would be interested to know?

Kendra: Yes. They might start to see powers too. Maybe their own powers!

Kendra and Anna developed a list of people who they thought would be most interested to hear about Kendra’s ability to see powers. It would become significant that one of the characters she would choose to share it with was the Transformer, Optimus Prime – defender of the universe. I undertook to write a draft letter, which the family approved and then delivered copies to the agreed parties.

In this narrative of Kendra the brave ‘power see-er’, Kendra is an active protagonist and her knowledge and skills are foregrounded. There is more than a glimmer of possibility that the status quo with the problem could change. By documenting this in a letter, I was intending to spread this preferred narrative and begin to recruit a wider audience to this preferred way of seeing Kendra (Epston & White, 1992; Freeman et al., 1997).

### **THE BRAVE POWER DEFENDERS’ ASSOCIATION**

In the next three conversations, there was a twist in the plot and some developments that left us more than a little surprised. Kendra arrived with evidence of astounding power-producing skills. A school report stated, ‘Kendra has shown a great development in confidence, sharing stories, and asking questions in class’. I asked Kendra, “Shown a great deal of confidence” – what do you think the teacher saw you doing that had her noticing confidence?’ ‘No, not confidence’, Kendra corrected me, ‘She saw me doing Brave Power’.

Evidence for the phenomenon of Brave Power was mounting. Kendra held forward a missing tooth she had pulled out, and I heard about a Show and Tell session in which she spoke aloud, and a friend’s mum she had spoken to. With the intention of strengthening this alternative story, we again used a letter to spread the news of these notable

developments. This letter shared some hints for others about Kendra's preferences for how others could join her:

they help her to do things that have been very tricky for her – like chatterboxing. Some times when Brave Powers have been around lately included when Kendra has been....

- Waving at people
- Pulling out teeth
- Chatterboxing with people
- Smiling at people
- Having her photo taken at school

Kendra thinks it will help her use brave powers if she can:

- Tell mum, dad and stinky the bunny about times she has noticed Brave Power during each day
- Kendra's teachers could tell Kendra when they think they might have seen a glimpse of Brave Power popping out – but not in front of other kids, just when Kendra is on her own.

Kendra is hoping that Brave Powers will make it easier to put up her hand in class, use good manners, smile and maybe even do chatterboxing with her teachers one day.

Kendra and her mum would be happy to talk some more about Brave Powers with you.

Kindly,

I saw a dilemma in relation to Kendra's agency as this story about powers was unfolding: how could my questions safeguard against Brave Power being storied in a way that rendered Kendra as a lucky bystander or passive recipient of its goodness? This was tricky, and I tried a lot of different questions:

Lisa: Where is Brave Power kept – in your pocket, in your mind, or hiding behind your skirt ...

Kendra: I don't know.

Lisa: Is Brave Power always around, just waiting for you to whip it out, or do you need to do something special to bring brave power to action?

Kendra: I don't know.

In an effort to take the heat off Kendra, and relieve her from the burden these questions may have been placing on her, I asked her mum. Anna speculated that perhaps it had never really left Kendra's side, but that Kendra could now call on it when she needed it. When I asked Kendra how might she call on it – does she whisper or think something in her mind – Kendra's response was 'it just pops out'. Again, I was holding in my mind the

question of agency – how could I bring forward Kendra's agency in the 'popping out' of Brave Powers?

At the time, instead of more questions, I looked towards the idea of gathering Kendra's knowledge with the intention of circulating it within a community of people struggling with similar dilemmas. This kind of community is described by Madigan & Epston (1995) as a community of concern. I put this to Kendra: 'So Kendra, I know of other young people who have been really pushed around by problems – problems which have tried to keep them really quiet. And I wonder what it might mean to them if they knew there was a little girl out there who knew about Brave Powers. And more than that – she could see Brave Powers, and bring them out to help her talk in front of the class'.

Kendra and her mum were emphatic in their response. We decided to go with the possibility that maybe Kendra could be the founding member of the Brave Power Defenders' Association. Kendra thought this would make Optimus Prime 'feel good and proud' that Kendra was 'also working for the good side'. I invited Kendra to wonder about her readiness for such a position: 'How would you know you would be ready to be a member of the Brave Power Defenders' Association? I wonder, how did you know you were ready to be a member of the Student Representative Council?' This started a conversation in which we documented a range of actions that one might observe a Brave Power Defender doing, and Kendra decided that, in consultation with her parents and Mr Happy, she would decide when she felt she was ready for membership. Piggybacking on the enthusiasm of this proposal, Kendra declared that there would be certificates – at least four! This idea rapidly brought forth a series of emails between appointments like these:

**Subject: A question for Lisa**

*Dear Lisa,*

*are you allowed to get a medal from Australian and New Zealand Association of Brave Power Defenders if you wave at someone?*

*Kendra*



*... Which brings me to a very exciting piece of news. Kendra was talking to one of her teachers yesterday for the first time!!!! AND she did it again today and even said something to the swimming instructor ... Could this mean that Brave Powers start popping out everywhere ...? Kendra is wondering if she could get a gold medal for this effort? ...*

*Anna*

## DEFINITIONAL CEREMONY

About five months after our first meeting, the story of Kendra the Brave Power Defender had caught on, and evidence of Kendra employing Brave Power and releasing her voice and smile had mounted. Kendra and Anna were certain that Kendra was ready to assume her position as the founding member of the Brave Power Defenders' Association. I was in awe of the transformation in Kendra's life at this point, and wondered about how this membership could be rendered significant in a way that could strengthen the roots of this new story. I was aware that the story of 'the girl who didn't talk' had on its side a well-substantiated history to back it up – it had laid some claim to two-thirds of Kendra's life. How might this new story hold up in the face of a hiccup or unpredicted comeback?

I put forward the idea of a structured ceremony, in which agreed invited guests would be an audience to Kendra telling a story about her abilities in conjuring Brave Power, based on the narrative practice of outsider-witness conversations and definitional ceremony (White, 2007). In the planning for this, I was grateful for Anna's earlier tips about Kendra's resistance to well-intentioned praise. This had me preparing the outsider witnesses in a particular way to release them from contemporary practices of applause. The intention of this ceremony was for Kendra and her family to re-appear on their own terms and be seen by others through the lens of the preferred story. But I wondered what the problem would think about all of this. I wondered what strength it would regain if it

managed to publicly silence Kendra at this ceremony, and what effect this could have on her. To address this concern, I put forward a kind of smorgasbord of ways Kendra could tell her story; she chose to have me pre-record an interview and edit a ten minute section from this. This formed the basis of the telling at the ceremony.

Interestingly, during the ceremony, Kendra's voice was loud and clear as she interrupted her own recording to add and embellish her story! Did Kendra's choice to play a recording manage to cut the problem off at the pass on the day? I can't know for sure. However, this experience has moved me to think more creatively about the conditions in which I meet with young people, and what ways there might be to outsmart or pre-empt a problem's presence in the room.

## CONSULTING KENDRA ... HEARING MORE THAN 'IT JUST HAPPENED'

For me, there is a thrilling end to this story. Now that she was an established Brave Power Defender, I invited Kendra and Anna to meet with me. However, on this occasion, Kendra was not invited to attend in the role of 'client' but in the role of my consultant. In this meeting, I was hoping to interview Kendra in light of what I considered to be a surprisingly sudden, loud, and enduring return of her voice. So far in our discussions, Kendra had wholly attributed the welcomed return of her voice to the phenomenon of Brave Powers 'just popping out'. However, I had to assume there was something more to this dramatic turn of events than such a description accounted for. Her family and I suspected this was a result of Kendra's modesty and reserve over her accomplishments and abilities. After all, kernels of anything rarely pop out of their own free will – someone needs to heat the pan, know the ingredients, and respond appropriately when they start popping. I intended my queries in this meeting to support a far more detailed and expansive telling of Kendra's agency and how this was brought to bear on this 'popping out' of her so-called 'Brave Power'.

The conversation began with the warmth and energy of old colleagues coming together, compared to her diffidence and discomfort that I recalled the very first time we met. Kendra talked loudly about the problem she had come to name the 'non-Brave

Power devil', and then began to recount the day she uttered out loud her first words to her teacher. 'Great,' I thought – I was beside myself with what seemed to me to be a revelation – 'Now is my chance to help bring forward a story of the precious knowledge and skills implicit in Kendra's actions leading to her speaking aloud for that very first time at school'. But then things got wobbly. Questions that were familiar to me failed to engage Kendra's interest whatsoever. The tone of the conversation that once was rising in its enthusiasm was falling flat, although my enthusiasm was undiminished. I asked with gusto, 'Where were you on the day that Brave Power first popped out? How did you get ready for Brave Power? What did you say to it to coax it to pop out?'

Kendra responded to my wild enthusiasm with a series of wildly *unenthusiastic* replies such as: 'I don't know', 'It just happened', 'I just did it' ... and then, I suspect to indicate that she might seek some relief from my queries, 'Can I go to the toilet?'

Upon reflection, this struggle in getting the story of Kendra's expertise going at all is a testament to how unfamiliar it is in our culture for young people to be genuinely consulted about their expertise, particularly within a professional realm. I concerned myself with how I might re-invigorate this conversation at the same time as relieving Kendra of what I suspected might be the burden of being the source of information for a professional. I looked to a different way of scaffolding in the hope of returning to the familiar sing-song rhythm of storytelling that tells me we are back in the conversation together (Jureidini, 2008; Vygotsky, 1986).

## THE 'ANTICIPATED PETITIONER'

I tried a way of collaborating that was new territory for me, but dates back to a tradition of narrative therapy practise for consulting young consultants (see Epston & White, 1995a, 1995b).

Lisa: Well, I am getting really interested in this story about how you spoke that very first word to your teacher. And I can see Mum on the edge of her seat too! And Kendra, I think lots of the other children I meet right here in this very room would be interested in this story too.

Kendra: Are they coming right now or something?

Lisa: You never know, but it seems just when I meet a little girl who gets Brave Powers, I meet another who is having the fun squeezed out of her life by some problem scaring her. So, you can see why I am so interested in how you might be able to help out the next child who has problems like the one that used to bother you when we first met.

Kendra: Do they have to come right now or something?

Lisa: No, they're not coming right now. But what I thought was that there's going to be a time, Kendra, when a little person walks in here, it might be another little girl –

Kendra: [interrupts] ... Is she cute?

Lisa: I think she'd be really cute. And I think she'd be a little bit younger than you, I guess she'd probably be about six, and she might have a wobbly tooth like you had but she hasn't lost her tooth yet. And she's going to come in here and she's going to tell me that she's got a pesky problem that's really scaring the pants off her. And this problem is really trying to scare her out of doing all sorts of things that she wants to do; it's really trying to mess up her life.

Kendra: [interrupts] She should talk ...

Lisa: Exactly. Maybe this little girl has a problem that is trying to scare her out of talking. And you know what I'd like to say to this little girl? I would say to her, 'Well, I know someone and she's a bit older than you, she's seven, but do you know what? She actually has Brave Power ...'

Trisha: [interrupts] What kind of Brave Power does she want?

Lisa: What a good question –

Kendra: [interrupts] No, I just need to know right now!

Lisa: Okay. So I would ask this little girl, 'What kind of Brave Power would you like to

have?' She says to me, 'Powers to help me talk at ...'

Kendra: [interrupts] ... Talk at school? I can talk at school already!

Lisa: Exactly! And she asks me, 'When did it begin with Kendra? I really need to know when the story of her Brave Powers started ...'

Kendra: At school.

Lisa: It began at school. Where did it begin at school?

Kendra: Uh, to a teacher.

Lisa: Now, was it just any old teacher? Did you just randomly choose any old teacher?

Kendra: No, she lived in our street – in [...] street.

This collaborative storytelling continued for another forty minutes. Kendra told a rich story with detailed descriptions of what to look for in choosing the first adult – such as a kind face, and some evidence of the adult's genuine and keen interest in soft toys. Kendra also offered to donate 'knowledgeablenesses' that her consulting person might deploy. She suggested a list of words to keep any worries at night at bay and, perhaps most significantly, what to look for in a toy who will 'warm the kernels of braveness and have them popping into Brave Power'. She also mentioned her mother who would leave notes with reassuring messages tucked into a tissue box beside her bed.

At times, the flow of the story would slow and I wondered if the demands of the conversation were becoming too arduous for Kendra. At these times, I would give Kendra a rest by posing a question to Anna, such as, 'What else was next to Kendra's bed that she might have used to recharge her powers overnight?', and Anna happily took up the flow of the enquiry. Or I would go out in front, using questions and wonderings on behalf of who we have come to name an 'Anticipated Petitioner' (Marsten, Epston, & Johnson, in preparation). I would continually 'bring in' this little girl who was so earnestly and eagerly 'seeking Kendra' and her knowledgeablenesses, with questions such as, 'Our little girl looks at me a little confused – and asks, "But how will I know when it's time to charge up

my powers? Would Kendra do X, or Y first?' I noticed that questions on behalf of our Anticipated Petitioner could construct a tighter trellis for the vine of our conversation to climb more easily.

For example, I observed how readily and wisely Kendra would consult to someone somewhat younger who suffered in similar ways as she had from her position of 'veteran' of a shared problem. Queries posed on behalf of our Anticipated Petitioner brought forward stories of Kendra's expertise quite differently from how questions on my own behalf could. Instead of 'looking' up to a professional a generation or two her senior, she now looks across to an Anticipated Petitioner who is desperately seeking her 'knowledges' out. Children 'often need a partner to tell a story' (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 66), and every young person would have had numerous experiences and 'can devote a great deal of energy and ability to collaborative storytelling with their friends' (Engel, 1999, p. 51; see also Ochs & Capps, 2001). Despite this being a 'consultation', our involvement of an Anticipated Petitioner locates our conversation within the context of such histories of story-telling.

On account of these conversations with Kendra and her family, and ongoing collaborations with David Epston and David Marsten, I have been moved to consider more rigorous questions such as:

- What are the particular skills required to support young children in developing a narrative and telling a story?
- How can we relieve the burden on young people when they are the main source of information in an adult/child conversation?
- What can become more possible when our questions are on behalf of a different audience?

## AND THE KERNELS KEEP POPPING ...

Reflecting on narrative ideas in action with Kendra and her family leave me convinced that roads travelled in these conversations are rarely linear. There is more than one map book open at any time, the practices bump into each other, and the most familiar of paths can develop potholes. Orienting my thinking in this way encourages me to face the most daunting of problems with a playful, hopeful, and adventurous spirit. At the same time,

I am cautioned against having absolute faith in any therapeutic practice without constant and ongoing reference to its effect on the particular experience of the children I am consulting. Along with other children and young people I continue to meet, meeting with Kendra and her family has stretched my thinking. It has reinvigorated my commitment to creatively find ways of inviting children's know-how to the important, sometimes dire, tasks at hand. And Kendra's generosity moves me to consider new ways to relieve the burden this invitation can place on our young consultants. Of course, I should hardly be surprised about how Kendra's travels spur mine on – after all, when one kernel pops in the pan, it is only the start of many more to follow it!

## NOTE

1. While letter-writing practices can be extremely supportive in some work with children and families, rigorous consideration of a number of factors are required – see Fox, 2003; White, 1995; Winslade & Monk, 2007.

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