



Exploring feminist narrative practice and ethics in a school setting

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Abstract

This article recounts an example of working with a young female student who'd been referred for 'needing to build resilience' after being subjected to male peer abuse. The article explores ways of honouring the intent of the original referral, and broader family concern, while also broadening out the conversation from one of working with an individual young woman, to working with a group of young women students, to then engaging a group of young men in respectful conversations about abuse and harassment. In the process, the young men find ways of speaking about abusive actions they have taken, while the young women create a platform for taking broader cultural action on issues of gender and sexuality diversity in the school. Along the way, subtle dilemmas of feminist and narrative ethics are explored.

Key words: *school counselling, harassment, abuse, feminist ethics, gender accountability, 'un-invitations', therapeutic documentation, outsider-witness conversations, externalising practices, double-story development, narrative practice, narrative therapy*

This paper documents a therapeutic pathway that hasn't ended. I hope it will provide resonance for those interested in using narrative or poststructuralist ideas in school settings. This account of practising narrative ideas begins with a referral request to solve a problem that was described as an internal, individualised concern (a student 'needing to build resilience'), and moves towards the broadcasting of skills and knowledge that came from various therapeutic interactions with this student and others, to the wider school student community in which I work.

Numerous narrative articles have documented the dangers and injustices of siding with the idea that problems reside in individuals (Epston & White, 1992; White & Epston, 1990). This article will outline the ways I apply the many options and practices narrative approaches provide us to respond to this cultural injustice. This includes the thinking I undertake in relation to decisions made about who I meet with and why, the narrative micro-skills I practise (supported with the use of transcripts), and the politics they are couched within. This is never a seamless endeavour. In terms of the ethical considerations, I also describe disappointments and challenges along the way. Sharon Welch's words are a source of support here: 'Responsible action does not mean the certain achievement of desired ends but the creation of a matrix in which further actions are possible' (1990, p. 2).

My intentions as a narrative therapist in a school community

A colleague in another school described working in schools as, 'it's all about the relationships you forge along the way'. And, as Tina Besley (2001) described over a decade ago about narrative ideas and school counselling,

Narrative therapy not only presents a ... form of counselling that is applicable to school counselling, but also provides a different way of dealing with students in the wider school environment. It can be enabling, empowering and educative in the way it models a different way of addressing power-sharing in relationships and so can positively influence the whole climate of a school. (p. 73)

In my professional life, I work in three workplaces. In this paper, I will primarily focus on my position as a school counsellor. In this position, I consult with students 8 to 18 years of age and, at times, their families. The school I work within has created a position where the counsellor meets with students, staff, and families of students. It is a discretely therapeutic position. In many schools, the role of counsellor can be coupled with teaching or student career pathway advice. My work focuses on families and students whose lives are disrupted by a range of social problems common

to most communities. These include abuse and violence, family separation, stress and anxiety, eating concerns, effects of death and loss, sexuality and adolescent relationship concerns, bullying, drug and alcohol issues, and, more broadly, the effects of traumatic events. Teaching staff also have pastoral care responsibilities that are intertwined with their teaching loads, and this is a great support to the counselling position. Often, a family's first point of contact is a key teacher. Teachers therefore often refer to me directly or I consult with the teacher to work with the child – particularly if 'they don't want to see the counsellor'.

A primary intention in my work is to position the school counselling role as a type of conduit that translates requests are commonly situated in dominant discourses (such as western individualism) into a range of responses that promote, or give more space to, subjugated insider-knowledges, and also meet the intersecting intentions for the student, the teacher's request, and the family or primary carers' hopes. An awareness of the impact of cultural ideas that promote these requests support and shape the action I take. The writings of Rachel Hare-Mustin, (1994) reflect this:

The dominant discourses both produce and are produced by social interaction, a particular language community and the socioeconomic context ... language structures one's own experience of reality as well as the experiences of those with whom one communicates ... because dominant discourses are so familiar they are taken for granted and even recede from view. It is hard to question them. They are part of the identity of most members of society and they influence attitudes and behaviors. (pp. 20)

'We're worried about her': How the referral begins and the problem is situated

It's often the first point of contact: a staff member speaks to a parent who is 'at their wits' end'. In this situation, Sally, a fifteen-year-old student, was being harassed by a male student in a more senior year. Some of the effects for this student can be seen as responses to trauma (White, 2000). For example, the student had refused to attend school, which made more apparent the seriousness of the harassment. However, due to prevailing dominant gendered ideas, it's not unusual for women recipients of harassment to be asked to receive skills (commonly called 'resilience') training. As Baber and Allan remind me:

... through recurrent day-to-day practices and meanings the discourses of gender difference are maintained ... patriarchal relations cannot be explained solely by the

intentions both good or bad, of individual women and men. They exist in social institutions and practices of society. (quoted in Hare-Mustin, 1994, p.22)

So it's vitally important that I hold these requests for resilience training, while part of a broader dominant discourse, as ones of hope and care; I respect the intentions of these claims highly. It's also important for me to remember it is an educational privilege to be aware of poststructural ideas and deconstruction – and even feminist critique. If this knowledge has the effect of being disconnected from the compassionate intentions of colleagues, this can erode the ethic of partnership that promotes students' wellbeing. More broadly, I know that claims about skills training for recipients of harassment are situated at a time in western social history when there 'is an explosion of narratives about child development and its stages' which Michael White infers has us focussed on what adults can offer a child in an educational institution, rather than the focus being placed on 'consulting children about these actions' (White, 2000, p. 15). I therefore try to clarify in my mind the actions I can take that would embody respecting the intent of the request and feminist ethics: 'A feminist approach is concerned with how certain kinds of negotiated meanings operate to subjugate, marginalise or trivialize certain people's experience or conversely allow it to be more fully represented (Weingarten, 1995).

In regular 'students of concern' meetings, duty-of-care responsibilities require me to disclose which students I am consulting with, but not necessarily the reasons why. When a concern is raised about a female student being subject to male bullying, I am more alert to how feminist ethics guide and direct the process to ensure that 'the responsibility for acts of ... abuse are not located with those that have been subjected to it' (Russell & Carey, 2004, p. 111). I believe it's possible to do this *and* concurrently respond to the required purposes of providing communication skills for the female student which are:

- for the harassment to stop
- to enable the student to feel hopeful when they come to school
- to reduce a sense of self-criticism.

Positioning the first meeting

With these intentions in mind, I contacted Sally's parents to let them know what I would be interested in in our first meeting. For example, it was a meeting when we could discuss the impact of what had been going on, but it was also a time where, Sally (and her mother) could 'suss me out' and ask about my role. It was also a time where I could find out a range of things about Sally's life, her interests, and passions that didn't have to do with the harassment.

Not surprisingly, families and students sometimes find it a little unusual to not have the counsellor primarily focus on the problem. As Michael White (1991, personal communication) described, 'the questions that invite family members to address unique outcomes are often initially experienced as strange'. To me, this also resonates with an idea from Paulo Freire: 'We must endeavour to create the context for people to challenge fatalistic perceptions of their circumstances' (Freire, 1999, p. 37).

I usually give the student notice of 'this strangeness' by stating in a brief email, or at the beginning of a session, something like this:

I know that you may be expecting that I'll ask you to speak mainly about some pretty unpleasant (I might say crap) stuff that's been getting in the way of enjoying school, but I also wondered if I could just find out a bit more about you what you love, what you're into? Why might I bother to do this? Because my guess is that in finding out more about you and the stuff you like, there will be things that you know about that might help to make the crap stuff get better – maybe not entirely better, but it might shift a few things ... so I'm not the kind of counsellor who will tell you directly what to do, but that doesn't mean we can't find an answer to end this crap! Would that be okay? Also, given your Mum's here, is it okay if I ask her some of the questions as well?

I have always received permission to ask about these preferred territories or subordinated domains of knowledge.

Counselling in the holidays – Meeting with mother and daughter

As Sally and her mother had requested to meet with me as soon as possible, our first meeting occurred during a two-week school holiday period. The intentions that backdropped my meeting with Sally and her mother included:

- **Responding quickly to the mother's distress** and checking if Sally was consenting to attend at the same time as her mother.
- **Acknowledgement:** believing them, and hearing about the effects of the bullying directly in ways that were not re-traumatising.
- **Re-presentation:** Providing opportunities for each of them to be positioned as an audience to each other (Weingarten, 1995, p. 2) – specifically in relation to hearing what they were doing, or had done, to respond to the harassment. This is the second story – the ways people respond to the trauma – and so often this is the story that is neglected (White, 2004).

- **Providing a conversational context** where people who consult me perceive through my questions that I understand them as having multi-storied lives, and that my questions do not embody an idea that they are seen as 'victims of', or that female parents are 'mothers who are too protective'.

What helps to get kids and young people telling, or offering?

When students first enter the counselling room, they often choose to sit on a couch which is opposite a collection of words attached to the foliage of a graffitied tree on my wall. At the end of each branch dangles skills and instructions, phrases, and poems from other students who are keen to pass on their knowledge. I ask students to 'have a look' before we start to talk. This serves as great support to me to decentre my expertise and yet still be influential by linking lives according to shared themes. For example, some of the things written about are 'dealing with sadness', 'how to talk about death', 'how to say "sorry"', 'what to do when you're new at school', 'how to do homework when you hate it', 'why get into a relationship', 'dealing with anxiety', 'advice to divorced parents', 'flicking the switch on panic', 'when your parents fight', and many other topics.

After Sally had a look at these, and I had explained the mandatory understandings of limited confidentiality between us, I asked some 'soft entry' questions to begin our conversation:

- What might you usually be doing today, Sally?
- What would be your favourite thing to do during the holidays when you're not sleeping? (Most young people I know answer the more generic question about 'favourite things' with 'sleep', which I find at times difficult to get a rich description of!)
- What did you think of the idea to come into school in the holidays?
- What subjects are you doing this year? Are they okay? Is there anything that you do in them that you find particularly boring or too easy?
- Are you into music? I noticed you've got your phone – what kind of music do you like listening to?
- Would it be okay if we played that now, in the background?

Many of these questions are experienced as strange, and I often am met with a look of incredulity when I encourage that young people's favourite music be played. I have compiled a list of songs on my pin-up board chosen by other students.

Sometimes, this list can prompt students to choose a piece. For this conversation, we spoke with the music from the Arctic Monkeys in the background. Recently, I was introduced to the band Alt J, the theme to the *Lego* movie, and introduced to a Dinka Bor traditional song and dance (from Southern Sudan). I talked about some phrases on the wall from other students about music: 'The music takes me away', 'I get lost in it', 'It's something that brings the community together'. Sally said she agreed with some of these sentiments. These practices embody an ethic of repositioning of children that will provide a safe context for them to give expression to their experiences of trauma (White, 2006). The young people are invited to talk about things that are familiar and favoured, to provide a 'known and familiar' platform. Sometimes this is referred to in narrative practice as the 'riverbank position', a concept offered by Caleb Wakhungu, a Ugandan narrative practitioner, based on the idea that standing on a riverbank allows one a 'one-step-removed' position from which to review one's life (White, 2006).

Rendering the context of gender accountability visible

Once Sally had spoken about what she loved about the holidays, favoured music, and friends (some preferred stories in her life), I asked a question about gender accountability in an everyday way: 'I wonder if the boys involved are taking time out in their two week break to think and talk about the effects, or the impact, their actions have had on you and others? I don't want you to think, though, that I only think of them as "bullies" or "all bad" – as that'd be unfair as well'. That resulted in this comment accompanied by Sally's laughter: 'Yeah, right ... thinking about this? God no, they're probably still asleep!' (It was about 2 pm.)

In this brief exchange, Sally and I were therefore able to 'bring the boys back in' to the issue at hand, and create a context in which to explore this more fully. However, I was keen to not to stereotype the boys in a 'single-storied' way. I am mindful that as a female counsellor, we can be easily positioned as siding with 'women's' ideas and being seen to be against others. I did not want to polarise my position into a pro-girl/anti-boy stance. I also believed that the boys were far more than their reported actions and what thin conclusions (for example, of being 'bullies') could potentially reflect.

Talking about 'un-invitations' for students to have to learn skills

I then provided a further context of an 'un-invitation' for Sally to have to 'learn skills':

I know that often in a school when there's bullying or sexual harassment going on from boys towards girls, the person that has been on the end of it is often asked to make appointments to work on things to do with them. Things like 'self-esteem', or just ideas that you're the one that has to somehow do something to get better at something. Of course, I'm happy to meet, but not so much to look at giving you skills, because often I find that people already have a heap of skills that may have been dulled or overshadowed by the crap that's gone on – but they are there. We might instead think about the question, 'What's in our world that has the guys thinking that it would be okay to do that towards female students – their peers – in the first place?'

The response I received to this 'un-invitation' for Sally to receive skills training was, 'That's good! The boys should be spending more time thinking about this'. I then continued to ask questions that would bring forward stories of Sally's various responses to the harassment:

Carolyn: What I'm more interested in speaking to you and your mum about is what you've done in the face of this.

Sally: What do you mean?

C: Well, when Peter made those comments repeatedly, what did you think about in your head, where might you have gone?

S: Well, I started by just trying to ignore it, but I couldn't. He would obviously say crap things then exclude me.

C: So, okay, [writing Sally's words] 'trying to ignore' ... what did that take?

S: I don't know ... part of me knew it was bullshit but then I got more depressed – stayed at home. Some days, I just thought about it and didn't go to school.

C: So, at some point, a bit of you knew these words were ... bullshit? Would you say staying at home was a caring thing or uncaring thing – for you or something else?

S: I don't know... a bit of both.

C: When you woke up in the morning, how did you know whether it was a day to go to school or not, or maybe to go for part of the day?

S: I don't know, recently I just haven't come.

C: Okay ... is that alright for you, staying at home or not coming to school? I don't want you to think I'm asking this with some kind of trick, or thought that I think you *must* come to school – maybe it is really okay to stay at home; maybe it isn't?

S: Well, it gets a bit boring at home. I would prefer to be at school – I've missed so much – but it's not

that easy. It really affects me, though, thinking about coming in.

C: So you got yourself to school. Did some of your friends – like Ellie and Brough – did they wonder why you weren't at school?

S: Yeah, I told them.

C: So you told them – did that make a difference knowing that someone else knew?

S: Kind of – they know what he can do.

C: Did they get what you were up against?

S: Kind of.

The role of documentation

As Sally and her mother answered, I wrote their words as quickly as I could on a large pad on the table in front of them, to capture precise phrases from both the preferred and the dominant stories. (I remember watching Michael White commenting once, while reviewing an interview with a child, that if we could only have people speaking as fast as we can write their words down, it may assist in the reconstitution of new, or preferred, meanings!) I think recording people's words is a useful and respectful practice, because it implies they are important enough to be written down, read out, and to be made visible in being re-presented to the student. When I meet with people, I usually don't explain the 'methodology' of narrative practice, because I think this can distract from the centring of clients' stories, and can centre the technology of the work. However, I might say something like,

'As you talk, I'll write down some of the words you're telling me, particularly things you're preferring or things that are important to you. You can see what I'm writing. You might want to take some of these words with you. We'll talk about how later.'

With regard to how students 'take their words with them', we might compile lists of skills that they have named. Or, as the session finishes, I sometimes ask students to look at the sheet and pick out which phrases stand out the most. I may ask something like, 'Of all the things we've spoken about, what do you think would be important to hold onto that might help when you go to your next lesson, or to home?' These phrases might then be copied onto sticky notes and put discretely in a pocket, or sent by text or email to the person. This practice of 'capturing the said from the saying of it', is beautifully described by David Newman (2008): 'Much of people's initiatives and accounts of these can be lost through "perishing occasions", or can simply "fly by", and not be taken up into the accounts of people's lives' (p. 26).

I regard this visible and overt mode of taking notes as slightly subversive, in contrast to solely taking notes that go into a concealed file. This is in line with other ethics a narrative perspective supports, such as ideas of expertise, the narrative therapeutic posture, objectification of problems rather than persons, and an ethic of transparency. I also think handing back people's words to them is aligned with the hopes of an investigation that Michael White (1988) proposed 'is the greatest gift to persons seeking therapy ... to help them become their own writers' (p. 40). [Not in references list – MT]

From one to many

In the interest of both recruiting an audience and broadening the social context for Sally's experience, as we finished the first interview, I asked Sally, 'If we spoke again, do you think it would be possible if you brought some of your friends who were around when this happened and chose not to go with that group? Do you think they might be interested to talk?' Sally responded, 'Sure, I'll bring them; what time? Can it be in double maths?'

There can easily be ways in which meeting with and hearing from girls would transgress feminist ethics and align with culturally-dominant patriarchal ideas. This could include things like:

- Positioning female students so that it would seem as if it were up to them to educate male students about how 'wrong' they were and how they had to 'change their behaviour'.
- Instructing girls in a prescriptive set of skills (that are often adult-centric and experience-distant) which implies that this will stop the harassment. This can risk inferring that they have a 'lack of skill' and are therefore vulnerable to harassment: a double injustice.

In my position of school counsellor, I instead base meeting with a group of girls on principles that are about giving the voices of students a collective space and visibility. As Patti Lather (1986) describes, 'the overt ... goal of feminist research is to correct both the invisibility and distortion of female experience in ways relevant to ending women's unequal social position' (p. 68). So instead of male peer abuse being defined as a skills deficit (of 'confidence' or 'resilience') in a woman, we can instead bring to the forefront the impact on the invisibility of female students' experiences.

Considerations in engaging young men in the work

When I met with the group of girls and Sally, I asked them who they thought the boys would be most likely to listen to when it

came to being in trouble. They quickly suggested a particular male teacher. I met with that teacher and suggested that given his connection with these boys, he could ask them some questions that I adapted from the work I have done with men who perpetrate violence (see Jenkins, 2009):

- How did their actions fit with how they want to be seen?
- What kinds of reputations are built by these actions? (There may be some reputations that are hoped for: macho, humorous, self-centred.)
- Who likes these reputations? (To draw out ideas of different audiences in the school and in whose interests they serve.)
- Get them to evaluate these reputations:
- What do they know about the impact these words had on the girls?
- What would they guess?
- What would it take to hear more about the impact?

Facilitating young men's responses to the young women's concerns

I also wanted to ask the teacher his thoughts about the kind of consequences that had been given to the boys who had harassed girls. What did he think of the current consequences? What difference had he noticed it makes? How did it support what the teachers want and what was in the students' interests? Were there any structures that support noticing improvements in the treatment of girls?

At the same time as the conversations with Sally and her friends, I had been a part of a Year 9 'gender split' program that focused on transition from adolescence to adulthood called The Rite Journey (Lines & Gallasch, 2009). The boys' class was about to begin a section on relationships. For this session, I was asked to consult with a group of female students about 'the things they hate or they get annoyed about the boys'. Knowing what can build a foundation for young men to speak about and face up to the harassment they are perpetrating, I knew this task had to be modified. My experience co-facilitating groups for men who are ashamed of the violent acts they have perpetrated using narrative and invitational ideas equipped me with ideas to draw upon (see Jenkins, 1990, 2009; White, 2001). In particular, I suspected the male students would likely be more open to listening to an interview that included girls talking about the things they *liked* about the boys, and the ways they have respectful relationships/ friendships with girls, in addition to what girls get annoyed about. So I arranged to interview the girls about these topics and film the session to then show the boys' group. Two brief

interviews were viewed by the boys: one of girls commenting on 'what tells you that a guy is respectful and friendly' and another about 'what annoys you – or what they know they could do better'. Covering both topics helped in setting a foundation for the boys to discuss – and not just get defensive about – the critical things the girls said about some of their actions.

Before facilitating the conversation with the group of Year 9 boys, I let them clearly know that I was more interested to research their views and opinions about what the girls had to say, and that I wasn't in the room to just observe silently, or to report back anything to the girls:

As most of you know, I'm Carolyn, the school counsellor. I attend many Rite Journey classes. I'm here so I can get a sense of how both the girls and your class are approaching the various topics in Rite Journey. I'm interested to hear what you have to say in this discussion on relationships that Mr Lavercombe is going to run. What I'm not here for is to report back anything you say to any other student outside of this class. I know this is an important agreement that you have; have I got that right? My understanding is that Mr Lavercombe will have some questions for you to think about in regards to how you already get on with some of the girls in your year and also what you know doesn't help.

As the school counsellor, I wanted to be more known to the boys in ways that didn't fit with disciplinarian notions. I wanted to make sure that when boys were 'owning up' to acts of aggression or harassment that they didn't believe I would sum them up 'as just that' in a single-storied way – as merely a perpetrator of harassment. I then asked some broad questions about

- the effects of the external context (naming of a certain kind of culture) that inducts young men into disrespectful practices towards girls
- how they are beginning to notice the impact of taken-for-granted ideas or expressions of masculinity that are demeaning of women (like boys calling each other 'bitches' on the sports field in a joking manner)
- events they've been a part of that potentially are shameful. This only happens after the boys have had opportunities to speak of what they know to be 'good ways' to get along with girls
- what they have done and contemplating the impact of their actions on the girls, in the presence of their classmates
- being an audience to their friends, especially those who have done some shameful things towards female students.

Then, rather than ask boys to evaluate what they did (the abusive actions), instead attend to their ethical stances in relation to having named these: 'What do you think it took for Pathak to describe the things he's not happy about like x, y, and z?'

Listening to boys with their mates listening in

To reflect on any abusive actions they had engaged in, the boys were asked what they did or said that was 'very ordinary' towards girls (an Australian colloquialism for 'bad behaviour'). They were invited to remember any 'bad actions'. To my surprise, about six boys owned up to verbal abuse they had used towards girls and described it in detail. This was no doubt an effect of the good relationship the male teacher had established with the students in the class. They were respectfully thanked for these contributions by the teacher. The class was then asked to think of something they'd done or seen that contributed to friendship. Eventually, a few gave examples of praising girls' appearances. I then interrupted to use a skill called 'talking about the talking' (Jenkins, 2009):

I just wanted to go back to a few things that the boys said before ... there were quite a few of you that spoke out about what you'd done that you know fits with this thing Mr Lavercombe calls 'very ordinary stuff', or disrespect, towards some of the girls. I really thought it was quite something that you could describe what you did here. I wonder – what did it take to say it here, in this group, with your mates around? How come you bothered to let the others know?

My guess is it's a whole lot easier to just sit and listen, but some of you didn't. Also, I'm not suggesting that the guys who listened have done stuff and didn't say, so that's fine for them to listen. But what do you reckon it may have taken for Pathak to say the things he did?

Three students offered a response. This provided the naming of intentional states that underpinned their actions:

- 'I think it took knowing you might be embarrassed.'
- 'You might feel it's risky to admit it.'
- 'You might regret it or feel guilty.'

The conversation continued:

Carolyn: Okay, I wonder what it would mean if guys who said these 'ordinary' things didn't ever experience any regret, or risk, or guilt at all, or weren't embarrassed by having to describe what they did? What might that say about you if you didn't feel it was risky, or embarrassing, talking about the not-so-good stuff you do or say at times to the girls?

Chris: Well, if they weren't embarrassed, it's like saying you don't care about anything they'd done at all ... don't care about them, I mean.

Carolyn: In hearing about this ... How does knowing that they are embarrassed to talk about it or taking a risk here ... What affect does that have on how you might see them? Might you have more respect for them, or less, for saying it here – or something else entirely?

Chris: I think they are better, because it's not like they are showing off about it or bragging about it. They are admitting it.

By 'talking about the talking', I was hoping to place the focus on the ethics that underpin the kind of talk happening here. As Wally McKenzie described through his experiences as a skilled groupworker, 'it was also my responsibility as a group facilitator to work with someone who has done something hurtful to find ways for him ... to do some research' (Crocket, Drewery, McKenzie, Smith & Winslade, 2004, p. 62). My sense is that working in a group context with young male students connected through a conversation about bullying and harassing girls also enables an openness to the creation of knowledges because, as McKenzie asserts, 'It's harder to dismiss what you hear when you hear it from someone in your own networks' (2004, p. 62).

This has also been my experience in co-facilitating groups for a number of years at Unitingcommunities in Adelaide, where men who may have attended the group for more than a year are invited to be outsider-witnesses to the conversations of recent members, responding to different aspects of the journey to take full responsibility the abuse they have perpetrated against their female partners.

In this class of Year 9s, I also positioned the boys as outsider-witnesses in a very casual way. I asked the four categories of outsider-witness questions (White, 1999) as boys reflected on what it took to own up to 'bad stuff' they had done towards the girls. I particularly highlighted the questions of resonance ('What's standing out to you as Pathak says this?'), values ('What might it suggest about what Talisker thinks is important to be able to talk about this here?'), and transport ('What difference might it make for you when you go out into the yard at lunchtime to have heard these things; how might you be different having heard them?').

The unpredictability of planning a conversation

One of the delightful aspects of narrative practice is not being able to predict exactly where conversations will go. When I subsequently planned to meet with the girls to talk about the effects of the Year 9 boys viewing the interviews, the

girls began to speak about something else – the currently ubiquitous use of the word 'gay' in a derogatory sense. While this might seem like a departure from discussing men's verbal abuse of women, the themes of disrespect, language use, and the politics of harassment and marginalisation were still very relevant:

Carolyn: So, I was just asking you about the differences it's made in coming together as a group and talking about the Year 12 boys' actions towards Sally. Also, I wanted to find out any feedback you've seen or heard regarding the Year 9 boys watching the video of the Year 11 girls.

Kirri: I think we became friends, we became a group it – was the start of last term.

Carolyn: And what was the main reason?

Kirri: We all had a mutual feeling like how things work.

Carolyn: What would you call that mutual feeling?

George: We're all very outspoken ... the Year 12s were being really horrible to you [Sally] and I said, 'You should say something to them, to the other Year 12 girls, or I'll say something to them!' Then a couple of the girls said, literally, to us, 'No you can't!'

Carolyn: Oh I see, so some Year 11s didn't support that you seek help from other Year 12 girls to tell the guys to kind of suck it up?

George: Yeah. And we all thought the same, that Sally came first and then the Year 12s.

Carolyn: And what were you speaking out against with this 'mutual feeling'?

George: Just a mutual feeling that regardless of what others thought, Sally would come first.

Julia: I think, as well, that we didn't care what the boys would think about us, whereas the other girls would be very cautious about what they would say and do around them. There's something about just being in a group. When we're all together, we don't care what other people think ... we can do whatever we like.

Carolyn: What is it about being together that kind of reduces that caring about what others think?

Julia: We just know others really well.

Carolyn: So is this a preferable thing or not?

Julia: Yeah, definitely.

Carolyn: Is there a recent event that you can think of when you might have been all together, and they said something you thought was a bit shit, and you had that experience of 'we don't care what others say'?

Lydia: It's just the small things, yeah, sure, they're the things that matter.

Carolyn: Okay, so someone can say something and when you're in a group, it doesn't have that effect?

Lydia: Well, it's still bad, like, but it's different.

Kirri: The other thing is that we have a group on Facebook for Year 11s; it's really good. Someone said, 'It brings everyone together', and he said, 'That's so GAY; yeah, it is really gay'. And we said 'How is that gay? It's just a Facebook group!'

Carolyn: Do you think you'd have said that to him if you were on your own?

Kirri: Yeah, maybe.

Carolyn: Not to mention what that word means anyway ... is that what you're pointing out, too?

Kirri: Meaning that it's lame, pathetic, you don't need to use that word.

Carolyn: I know that this is a bit of a different another topic, but in a group, does anyone pick anyone up for using 'gay' in that way?

Sally: No, not really. The Year 12 boys love that word; a lot of people are using it. It's being used a lot more.

Carolyn: What would that mean to gay students in Year 12 or, you know, the students that haven't come out?

Sally: I know that it's a bad word, but everyone says it. I don't know how you can stop it, really.

George: Everyone says it.

Ellie: I don't say it, guys. [whispers quietly in the background]

George: Don't you?

Pema: I try not to. Especially when I'm around someone it could personally affect. I was always conscious not to say it around Derek because both of his brothers are gay.

Carolyn: So, Ellie, you just said quietly, 'I don't say it. Is that by chance or ... what's the thinking behind that?'

Ellie: I just think it's the wrong word to use.

Brough: Yeah, it is.

Ellie: Yeah, I know it's a really common thing to do, word to use, but I just made a personal choice not to.

Carolyn: What was that based on, what was that about in terms of what's important to you?

Ellie: Well, I have a lot of family members that are gay. They wouldn't necessarily find it offensive but it's just ...

Sally: It perpetuates that being gay is bad.

Ellie: Yeah, yeah.

Carolyn: What would these family members think, knowing what you have just told me ... you know, these very precious connections you've got ... what do you reckon they'd think about you doing that?

Ellie: They'd think it's great!

Carolyn: Would they know that you do that?

Ellie: No.

Carolyn: And I wonder what it would mean ... you know, how you were suggesting before, Sally, an idea for next year that it's really important to you that there wasn't the same kind of bad feeling between Year 12 and 11. Also about what you are saying, Ellie – this is quite a clear stand that you've taken, that you're not going to say, 'that's so gay'. What would it mean for others to know how you've come to that, or to tell other kids about that somehow? What do you reckon is more effective in getting messages across to others?

Sally: I think it's better coming from students or people you respect a lot. At the same time, I don't think people take it seriously.

Kirri: I try to say 'lame' as much as possible, instead of 'gay'.

Ongoing action

Our discussion ended with some seeding ideas for what the girls could do when they moved into Year 12. The following week was Wear it Purple Day, which celebrates gender and sexuality diversity. The girls' conversation prompted me to contact the chaplain and to ask if he would speak about the significance of the day. Of course, this was not a local student-led scenario in the school, but it was prompted by student concern. An inspiring outcome was that two Year 7s approached the chaplain after he'd spoken. They asked if they could make sure that more awareness of the day could happen for the whole school next year. Subsequently, I have contacted those students and invited them to be part of a new student research team whose goal is to reduce the use of the derogatory use of the word 'gay' in the school. The team are also keen for Wear It Purple Day to become a day of significance in the school, and the issue one of significance on every school day.

Conclusion

In this article, I have emphasised the ways in which I have applied narrative concepts that are driven by a feminist politics in a school community counselling context. I have focussed on how I de-individualised well-intended invitations to equip a female student with 'skills' as a response to being harassed. I pursued this by repositioning this request (a product of dominant discourse) to become one of many opportunities to research and broadcast students' collective knowledges about ways to reduce gendered violence, as well as the derogatory use of the word 'gay' within the school. This gradual transition occurred with a rigorous use of deconstructive practices that

- alerted people to the broader contexts that their problems are embedded within
- used externalising practices that also contextualised harassment as a cultural phenomenon
- explored double-story development to move between 'self-as-victim' to ideas of 'self in connection to other (students) as agents of social change'
- linked students' lives according to common themes, through meeting with groups and the Year 9 classes rather than only individuals
- ensured students were not re-traumatised in their talking about the experience of being subject to harassment
- ensured boys were not shamed while facing up to shameful acts they had perpetrated
- attended to, and gave more space to, stories of identity that were not related to the problem.
- These practises were and still are being applied with the challenging discipline to decentre my views, hopes, and frustrations, and craft questions that centre and reveal students' ideas, directions, and meanings.

Afternote

To preserve anonymity of the school and students, all names in this article have been changed. As this article is going to press in 2015, students have led a number of school-wide events that address the effects of discrimination that they feel need a greater profile – in particular, activities on National Suicide Prevention Day and Are U OK Day . These are also leading to a student-led online wellbeing noticeboard that will be connected to the school's website.

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