

# The Tree of Life Project

## Using narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa

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This paper describes the use of narrative ideas in work with vulnerable children in Southern Africa. How can the lives of children who have experienced significant losses be responded to in ways that are not re-traumatizing and that bring to light children's own skills and knowledge? What sorts of exercises can be used in camps for vulnerable children? How can children be provided with significant experiences that do not separate them from their families, values and cultural norms? This paper describes a creative adaptation of the 'Tree of Life' exercise informed by narrative therapy principles and practices.

Keywords: children, southern Africa, HIV/AIDS, camps, grief, loss, trauma

## INTRODUCTION

I have been working with orphans and vulnerable children for at least six years now. Anyone working in this field in Southern Africa will have many heart-breaking stories to tell about the hopelessness and desperate situations of illness, parental death, and the subsequent suffering of millions of children who are faced with the reality of living their lives without their parents. HIV/AIDS has robbed numerous families of their joy and zeal to live fulfilled lives. I have worked as a child and community counsellor as well as a trainer for a number of organisations within Southern and East Africa whose purpose is to support the most vulnerable children, families and communities falling through the traditional safety nets. In this work, I have found myself not only having to grapple with helping vulnerable children and communities but also being overwhelmed by expressions of burn-out, defeat, struggles, and feelings of incompetence often expressed by practitioners working in this field. This sense of incompetence has been further complicated by our struggles to identify suitable tools, means, and methods that enable us to effectively counsel and provide support to children and their families in ways that are fulfilling to them and ourselves as the helpers. I have always been confronted with questions about how practitioners in the field should respond to the crying and wailing that they often experience when having conversations with children and communities about their losses. I have found myself struggling to come up with satisfactory answers and ideas to such questions. My colleagues and I have often spoken about our experiences of defeat and incompetence particularly when faced with such challenges and dilemmas.

It is not easy to deal with a sense of failing individuals who you know have faced significant struggles in their lives and who have come to seek support from you. I have, however, come to realise that a lot of the struggles and limitations that we experience in our work are linked to structured approaches to counselling that often trap practitioners and people seeking counselling services into problem-saturated accounts of life. Such accounts often leave both the people seeking help and the counsellors feeling drained. For individuals seeking counselling support they find themselves

trapped in the territories of life that made them to seek counselling in the first place.

Looking at the work that we have been doing with bereaved children and communities, I now realise that part of our problem was basing our practices on the western notions of catharsis. Some of our work has been informed by ideas that bereaved children and communities are not given platforms to express their grief and therefore have feelings and emotions trapped deep inside them which need to be vented out. This kind of thinking has been very dominant in our work. We have for a long time seen ourselves as playing a role in providing the space for trapped feelings and emotions to come to surface. The reality of such expressions, however, has been clearly overwhelming for both the individuals that seek our help and the counsellors providing support services.

This paper documents a way of working with children using the 'Tree of Life' tool which we have adapted through our engagement with narrative ideas. Before I describe this, however, it may be helpful for me to provide some background information about the work of Masiye Camp which is where we will be using this new way of working.

## MASIYE CAMP

Masiye Camp is a Christian based organisation in Zimbabwe that focuses on life skills development for orphans and vulnerable children. Children who attend the life skills camps are identified from various communities and referred to Masiye Camp by different community based initiatives all around Zimbabwe and even beyond the borders. What has made Masiye Camp a unique initiative has been the involvement and participation of young people in providing counselling services to their peers. Masiye Camp's dream was, from its conception, to enhance the coping capacity of children affected by HIV/AIDS and other emergency situations. Furthermore, Masiye's vision has been to provide opportunities for disadvantaged children to develop life skills and experience equal opportunities in the social world. The majority of young people who serve as camp counsellors have experienced significant losses themselves. They are keen to provide support to their peers through sharing their own personal experiences and journeys as orphans. The peer-to-peer support takes place largely through group

therapy. An average camp has the capacity to take at least fifty children in a given time and runs for about ten days. Children attend the camp in different age groups; 6-11, 12-16, and 17+ including child-headed households. Masiye's work has been shared and emulated by several organisations working with vulnerable children in East and Southern Africa.

## **A SUMMARY OF SOME OF THE ACHIEVEMENTS OF MASIYE CAMP**

- Masiye Camp provides a place and opportunities for children to talk about their personal realities and experiences in the context of HIV/AIDS. This is not usually possible in their families and communities due to cultural beliefs and practices that inhibit communicating with children on difficult issues such as death and HIV/AIDS. Such topics are usually viewed to be taboo.
- Children are provided with opportunities to share problems with their peers and learn coping skills from each other. The camp is a place where new relationships and good memories are formed.
- Masiye Camp provides children with a rare opportunity for fun and play that is not always possible in communities where most children have to deal with taking care of ill parents and have numerous household responsibilities.
- The camp program is designed in such a way that children have opportunities to receive career guidance, practical lessons on day-to-day living such as the art of budgeting, first aid, development of skills in arts, etc.
- Masiye is committed to breaking the silence around HIV/AIDS and focusing on loss and bereavement especially in the lives of children; this makes it a unique initiative as these issues are usually seen as not important for children's lives.
- Young people in the Masiye program are seen as active agents of change in their lives and their communities.
- Children experience life skills development through play, outdoor experiential learning activities. Support is also provided to children who are heading households.

- Children who come to the camp are linked to support services such as legal services, medical treatment, food security initiatives, etc.

## **DILEMMAS AND CHALLENGES**

The children who attend the camps are often struggling with the effects of loss and bereavement, abuse and neglect, family breakdown, and extreme poverty. Involving young people in offering peer-to-peer support has made many things possible, but it has also raised a number of challenges and dilemmas:

- The young people involved in offering counselling services to their peers have experienced significant losses themselves. If camp counsellors have to continuously revisit loss and listen to painful stories, their involvement in camps can be re-traumatising for them.
- We have noted with concern how young people who have been through the camp, and who are then viewed as role models, are often unable to sustain preferred ways of living. We have observed young camp counsellors struggling with alcoholism, prostitution, poor planning, and having difficulty in taking steps to shape their lives and their future.
- Many of the children who come to camp are in conflict with their families and struggle to fit in when they go back home after the camp experiences. Are our programs that work with children outside the context of their families and communities having the effect of alienating children from their families and communities? If this is a possibility, the question to ask is: How can children be effectively supported without separating them from their families, values and cultural norms?
- How can such a camp experience go beyond just having a good time but also meaningfully assist children to take steps in shaping their lives and future?
- How can the camp program ensure that the diverse experiences and personal desires of children in a group context are catered for?
- How can community ownership of programs be achieved? Currently the larger responsibility for

orphans and vulnerable children's programs seems to rest upon organisations and is not linked back to local communities as it could be.

- In most of our communities there is a strong belief that young children are passive recipients of life and are not affected by issues of death. Our experience has differed. How can narrative practices enhance the work we do with children?
- Because the program works with a lot of children at any given time, we feel that group approaches are critical. We would like to explore how we can use narrative ideas in working with children in groups.

## THE 'TREE OF LIFE' AT MASIYE CAMP

One of the key tools we have been using in our work with children at Masiye Camp has been the 'Tree of Life'. I introduced this tool to Masiye Camp in 2003 during a training program that was run at the camp for practitioners who are involved in the care and support of children affected by HIV/AIDS in East and Southern Africa. I had been introduced to the 'Tree of Life' by a colleague and friend, Jonathan Brakarsh, and we had used it to learn from children about the kinds of concerns they had about their lives during times of change, such as HIV/AIDS.

In this exercise we would invite children to draw their 'Tree of Life' with particular attention paid to the following themes:

**Roots:** Children were invited to think about and write on their Tree of Life significant figures from their ancestry, origins and family history.

**Trunk:** The trunk of the tree was a prompt for children to draw representations of significant events that had shaped their lives: these were either positive events or events that could be regarded as difficult or that evoked a painful memory.

**Leaves:** The leaves of the tree represented important people or significant relationships in an individual's life. At Masiye Camp we introduced the metaphor of fallen leaves to represent important people that had been lost to the child (e.g. parents who had died).

**Branches:** The branches of the tree were a prompt to elicit the child's thoughts, ideas and wishes about the direction which he/she would like go in life.

**Fruits:** The fruits stood for the achievements that the child had accomplished in his or her life; the things that he/she was proud of.

**Bugs:** The bugs of the tree, which would sometimes eat parts of the fruit and destroy the leaves, were designed to represent the problems and challenges that children were facing in their day-to-day lives.

Children were introduced to each of these metaphors as they drew their own 'Tree of Life'. Once children had completed their drawings they then presented it in front of the other children. Sometimes the camp counsellors would ask questions to draw out each of these themes.

I was quite drawn to this 'Tree of Life' exercise for various reasons:

- The children who were initially introduced to the exercise became quite engaged in thinking through and reflecting about their lives.
- The Tree of Life seemed to engage all children and, because it does not rely on the spoken word, all children (even those who were shy) were able to come up with stories and rich descriptions about their lives.
- It made story-telling possible and the children seemed to be proud about various aspects of their stories e.g. roots (origins, ancestry, etc) and their achievements as expressed through the fruits of their trees.
- The Tree of Life brought out the creative abilities of children. It was a fun experience and the children enjoyed drawing.
- I felt educated about children's lives and their experiences without putting in too much effort.
- The children were also able to talk about the difficulties that they had experienced in their lives.

For these reasons I encouraged Masiye Camp and other organisations to use the 'Tree of Life' in their work with children. Masiye Camp has been

using the tool for well over a year now. They have expressed that they prefer it much more than the re-telling of grief and loss stories that had been a common feature of the bereavement work that is done with children during previous life skills camps. Such story-telling often led to a lot of crying and wailing that changed the fun mood of the camp into a gloomy mourning atmosphere. Camp counsellors expressed a sense of being overwhelmed by the sad stories they heard from the children. The 'Tree of Life' was preferred in that it evoked positive elements of the children's lives. It did, however, still lead children to speak about sad elements such as 'bugs' (problems) and 'fallen leaves' (people who have died). Children would often be distressed when talking about the 'bugs' and 'fallen leaves' and the camp counsellors were not sure how to respond to children when they began to express intense grief.

## **INTRODUCING NARRATIVE IDEAS INTO THE 'TREE OF LIFE'**

In November 2005, a team from Dulwich Centre (Michael White, Cheryl White, Shona Russell and David Denborough) visited Masiye Camp for one week. We had specifically invited the Dulwich Centre team to explore with us ways of responding to children who have experienced significant trauma and loss. During the week, many discussions took place about considerations of 'safety' in conversations with children. In the course of these discussions, I became very interested in our role and responsibility as counsellors to ensure that our practices enable children who consult us to have a safe place to stand; a place that allows them to experience a preferred identity in order to change their relationship with the problems and challenges that they are facing in their lives. From the discussions that week, I realised, more than before, how re-traumatising it can be for people to simply tell and re-tell a single storied account of loss or trauma as these single-storied accounts result in people dwelling only in the problem-saturated territories of their identity.

The Dulwich team had an opportunity to sit-in and witness the group work that was being done with children using the 'Tree of Life' metaphor. After this experience, the Dulwich team expressed considerable appreciation for the work and

commitment of the young camp counsellors, and particularly their willingness to share their own stories with the campers in their groups. We then discussed ways in which the 'Tree of Life' exercise could be made more effective as a means of enabling children to develop a second story about their lives and ensure that they had a safe territory of identity in which to stand before speaking about difficulties in their lives.

I will now focus on how we have incorporated narrative ideas within the 'Tree of Life' tool so that it enables a safe place for children to stand in relation to the problems and challenges that they face in their lives.

## **A 'TREE OF LIFE' TO PROVIDE A SAFE PLACE FOR CHILDREN TO STAND**

### *Roots of the Tree*

The roots of the tree are a prompt for children to speak about: where they come from (i.e. village, town, country); their family history (origins, family name, ancestry, extended family); those who have taught the child the most in life; their favourite place at home; and a treasured song or dance.

### *The ground*

The ground represents where the child lives at present; and some of the activities that the child is engaged in during their regular daily life.

### *Trunk of the tree*

When the focus turns to the trunk of the tree, this is an opportunity for children to speak about, and represent in drawing, some of their skills. These include: skills that may have become apparent when the child was talking about what they do in their daily life; or skills that the child has demonstrated during the camp or support group.

In the days leading up to the 'Tree of Life' exercise, the counsellors working with the children note different skills that children display. These might include skills in physical acts, skills of caring, kindness, and so on. During the 'Tree of Life' exercise, the counsellors can then draw attention to how the child has demonstrated these skills, and can assist the child to include these on the trunk of their tree. During this process, counsellors can also ask questions about the histories of these skills,

how long the child has had them, and did they learn these skills from anyone in particular. This enables stories to be told about these skills, and the information from these stories can also be recorded on the tree.

While drawing the trunk, discussions also take place about special memories that the child can recall in his or her life. These are valued memories that the child holds precious.

### ***Branches of the Tree***

The branches of the tree represent the hopes, dreams and wishes that the child has for the direction of their life. While the child is drawing the branches, camp counsellors can ask questions to learn about the history of these hopes, dreams and wishes, and how these may be linked to significant people/adults back in the child's home. When the counsellors get to hear about how long these hopes and dreams have been alive in the child's life, they may also ask about how the child has managed to hold onto these dreams and what has sustained their hopes.

### ***Leaves of the Tree***

The leaves of the tree represent people who are important to the child. The counsellor makes it clear that these can be people who may be alive or may have passed on: just because people are no longer alive, it does not mean they are not still very important to us. Counsellors may ask the children questions about why these particular people are the most special to them. If, at any time during this process, children talk about some people who have died and they are upset about this, the counsellors can ask the following questions:

- Did you have lovely times with this person?
- What was special about this person to you?
- Would this person like it that you remember them in these ways?

These questions invite the child to tell stories about what was significant about their relationship with the person who has died. This can contribute to an honouring of this relationship. It may also lead to stories about how the child continues to think about and remember those who have passed away.

### ***Fruits***

The fruits of the tree represent gifts that the child has been given. These do not have to be material gifts but could be acts of kindness, or care, or love from others. At this time, the counsellors may ask:

- Why do you think the person gave you this?
- What did they appreciate about you that would have led them to do this?
- What do you think you might have contributed to their life?

If the child has difficulty in identifying any gifts, the camp counsellor can draw upon the conversations that have been shared with the child earlier in the 'Tree of Life' exercise.

This new version of the 'Tree of Life' exercise was developed to be used as the first step in a four-part process<sup>1</sup>. Later in this paper I will outline the further three steps. Now, though, I will discuss how we have applied this new version of the 'Tree of Life' in Soweto-Jabavu, South Africa.

## **SOWETO-JABAVU**

Having been given the task by my colleagues to try out the suggested new version of the Tree of Life exercise, I travelled back to South Africa and set out to work with children who attend structured bereavement group therapy sessions at Jabavu Clinic in Soweto. Hope World Wide runs these groups for children between the ages of six to eighteen years and occasionally also organises life skills camps for orphans and other vulnerable children using the Masiye Camp methodology. Out of a group of about forty-three children who were excited to spend the day with me, I decided I'd try out the exercise with a maximum of twenty-two of them! I was assisted to carry out the exercise by two counsellors who usually conduct the support group meetings.

Before we began, I consulted the two counsellors about any concerns they had about their work with these children in this context. They mentioned the following issues:

- The counsellors expressed that they were aware that children enjoyed coming to the support groups but they were not sure if they were providing effective and sustainable support to the children, especially in assisting them to cope with parental loss and moving on with their lives.

- They also mentioned that there were some children who had been attending the group session for quite a while now (over a year) but they were concerned that these children did not seem to be responding to the therapy. Special reference was made to an eleven-year-old boy who had lost both his parents and was now living alone with his seven-year-old brother in a child-headed household. They also particularly drew my attention to a ten-year-old girl who was abandoned by her mother as a baby and had been placed under the care of her aged grandparents. These two children were specifically invited to take part in the revised 'Tree of Life' exercise.
- The counsellors also had a concern that they were running out of ideas about how to work with children. They spoke about their hopes for more tools and ideas that would ensure that the children attending support groups benefited from the meetings.
- Finally, the counsellors drew my attention to the multiplicity of problems and challenges faced by the children in their day-to-day lives. They spoke of how it was sometimes difficult to know how to respond to these issues.

Having listened to the concerns raised by the counsellors, I took time to explain the ideas around the revised 'Tree of Life' exercise with particular reference to issues of safety and second-story development. One of the counsellors described that in most situations they are aware and concerned about physical safety, and they appreciated this attention to 'emotional safety'. I explained in detail the metaphors of the roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves and fruits, and invited the counsellors to co-facilitate the exercise. The counsellors were greatly excited about this possibility. They were particularly drawn to the idea of enabling children to have a different territory of identity in which to stand in relation to the problems that they experience in their day-to-day lives.

## **WORKING WITH THE CHILDREN ON THE 'TREE OF LIFE'**

And so we began! As I mentioned earlier, the process consisted of four parts:

- Part One:** Tree of Life
- Part Two:** Forest of Life
- Part Three:** When the Storms Come
- Part Four:** Certificates and Song

### **PART ONE: TREE OF LIFE**

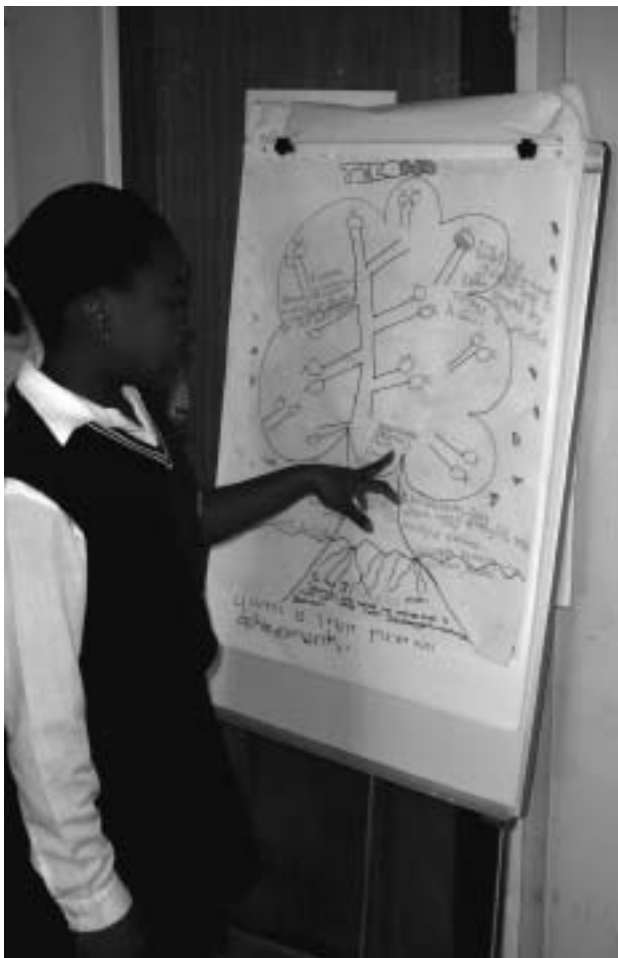
The aim of the first two parts of this process (Tree of Life and Forest of Life) is to build and acknowledge 'a second story' about each child's life. This second story consists of the skills, abilities, hopes & dreams of each child, and the histories of these.

I began the meeting with a brief discussion about trees in general. The children energetically talked about the kinds of trees that they know and see in their communities. I then explained that we would spend the day together talking about our lives and experiences assisted by our knowledge of trees. At this point the children were quite excited. I then asked them to come up with a song to show me that, just as trees are alive and give life, so do they as children. The musicians in the group quickly came up with a song that we sang and danced to. After this hectic dancing and singing, it was time to start the exercise. I presented the 'Tree of Life' metaphor to them and explained its various parts. I then presented my own 'Tree of Life'. The children listened with fascination and intrigue as I told my story. After I had completed my presentation, I asked the group of children who among them was keen to draw their 'Tree of life'. Twenty-two hands went up. This represented one hand for every child in the room including those who often struggled to participate of becoming involved in larger group activities.

As the children drew their trees and developed their stories, it was quiet in the room but there was also a sense of energy and concentration.

### **RE-TELLING**

When the children had finished drawing their trees, I invited them to stick them up on one of the walls. This created a forest of beautiful trees. We then called for a few volunteers to share the stories of their trees in front of the group. Several hands went up again in response to this invitation. The enthusiasm that the children were demonstrating spoke volumes to me. Usually in group counselling processes it is a struggle to get children to speak out and share their experiences with one another.



Understandably, sharing painful stories filled with guilt and shame is not as exciting as talking about things that give one a sense of pride. The willing volunteers that came up to the front to tell the stories of their trees were happy to share these. They were also happy to teach the group their favourite songs.

As each child spoke, we were educated about their hopes and dreams. Throughout their

presentations, I asked various questions about the history of the hopes and dreams that were expressed; how the children had managed to hold onto these hopes and dreams; and who else in their families and lives would know or would have known about these hopes and dreams. In response to these questions, we listened to heart-warming replies. I have included an extract of one such conversation here.



## AN EXTRACT FROM A CONVERSATION WITH MARY (12 YEARS OLD) WITH REGARDS TO HER HOPES AND DREAMS FOR HER LIFE

**Interviewer:** ... thank you Mary for sharing with us the hopes and dreams that you have for your life. I have learnt that you want to study hard and grow up so that you can start your own business. As the eldest in the family you want to be able to take care of your young brothers and sisters so that they can also make it in life. You also hope to get married and have children. Mary, I find myself quite drawn to the hopes and dreams that you mention. Can you tell me how long you have had these hopes and dreams and what influenced or brought them on?

**Mary (taking time to think):**

My mother always encouraged us to work hard at school so that we could have good lives. Before she died in December 2003, she told us to always take care of each other, that is why I want to take care of my brothers, Anthony and Joshua ...

**Interviewer:** So would you say your dreams and hopes for your life are linked to what your mother wanted for you?

**Mary (taking time to think):** I guess I have not thought about it like that before. Yes, I want to make sure I do well in life. My mother was a Christian; she taught us a lot of good things.

**Interviewer:** It sounds like you treasure the things that your mother taught and told you. Is that so?

**Mary:** Yes, very much.

**Interviewer:** Do you mind telling me Mary, how have you managed to hold onto these hopes and dreams? How do you manage to keep them alive?

**Mary (taking time to think):**

My mother left us a special memory book where she wrote down a lot of

her thoughts and wishes for our lives. I sometimes take the book and read it to my brothers and it reminds us of our mother and what we need to do to live a good life. Some people say I think a lot. I think that helps me not to forget important things.

**Interviewer:** Is it okay that I am asking you all these questions Mary?

**Mary:** Yah, it is okay because it gets me thinking about important things that I have not thought about before.

**Interviewer:** Such as ... ?

**Mary:** Mmmm, my mother and the important things she taught us.

**Interviewer:** Mary, who else in your family or in your life knows of these hopes and dreams that you have spoken of?

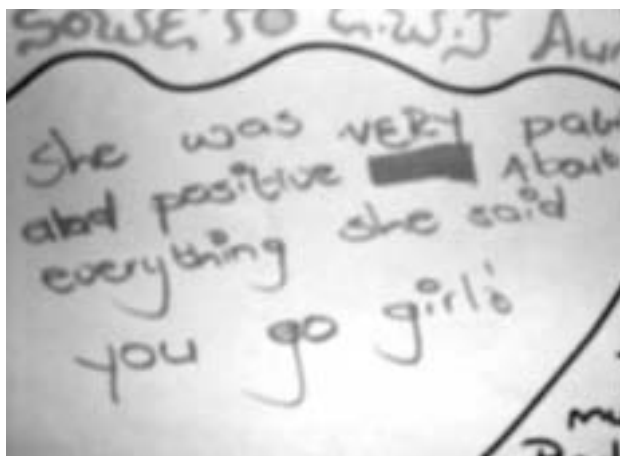
**Mary:** (Chuckling, she points at her friend sitting across the room) Mavis knows because we talk and share a lot together.

**Interviewer:** What does it mean to you Mary to be talking about your hopes and dreams in these ways?

**Mary:** It makes me happy because I have had a chance to remember my mother, and whenever I talk about her I feel very happy. It also helps me to stick to what I want to achieve in my life. It is not easy to do that because sometimes you have bad friends who want to teach you wrong things and life is sometimes hard, so this is quite good for me to remember.

There was a sense of quiet and fascination among the children during this brief conversation with Mary. You could almost feel and touch different thoughts floating around the room. After my conversation with Mary, I continued to invite other children to share their Trees of Life.

When the children finished talking about their trees, I asked them all to come forward and write something positive that they had heard about their peers/friends when they presented their tree. This was a fun activity. A lot of encouraging words were passed and shared among the children. When I asked a few of the children how they felt about what was expressed, the children offered sentiments such as: 'It makes me happy', 'I feel wow', 'I have never thought that about myself', 'It encourages me', 'I feel happy that I have friends', etc.



## PART TWO: FOREST OF LIFE

With the 'Trees of Life' stuck up next to each other, we took some time to reflect on this forest of beautiful trees of all shapes and sizes. We sat down together to appreciate our forest. At this point, I offered a re-telling to draw attention to the strong and firm roots that we all seemed to have. I also mentioned the dreams and hopes that we had for our lives. I spoke of the people we are connected to who have taught us a lot of things in our lives and

continue to take care and support us in different ways. I gave examples of some of the people who had been mentioned by children including parents, friends, pastors from church, our community counsellors and social workers, teachers, grandparents, siblings and other relatives. During this re-telling I also acknowledged that some of these precious people have died but we still hold them in loving memory for the many wonderful things that they did for us. I spoke of how the relationships that we shared with them still support us in many ways as we continue to live our lives.

After my re-telling we then spoke together about trees in a forest. We discussed about what trees may have in common and also some of the differences that they have. This led to a conversation about some of the things the children in the group and the adults in the group have in common, and the ways in which we support each other as trees belonging in the same forest. At this point, the mood among the children was very light, warm and friendly. There was a lot of shared laughter. We then took a short tea break before we continued with the exercise.

## PART THREE: WHEN THE STORMS COME

Having established a different place for the children to stand, we then wanted to create space for children to speak about some of the difficulties they may be experiencing in their lives, but in ways that would not be re-traumatising. We hoped to find ways that they could collectively speak about some of these experiences. We also hoped that we might be able to acknowledge the effects of abuse and harm on their lives. We planned to make it clear that children are never to blame for this abuse. And, importantly, we hoped that we might be able to unearth and acknowledge some of the skills and knowledges that children demonstrate in trying to respond to the hazards in their lives. Through this conversation we hoped that individual children might feel more able to speak with us or each other about experiences in their lives, and also that their own skills and knowledge would be more visible to them.

We assembled together again as a group to resume our conversation about trees and forests. In this part of the exercise I wanted to draw the children's attention to the hazards that trees and forests sometimes face, as well as to talk about the effects of these hazards on trees and forests.

I started this part of the discussion by saying: 'We have lovely trees which have strong roots, beautiful leaves and fruits. As beautiful as our trees and forest are, can we say that they are free from danger?' The children quickly responded with a chorus of 'NO'. I then invited the group to mention some of the potential dangers that beautiful trees experience. They mentioned the following potential hazards: burning of trees, cutting trees down, weeing (urinating) on trees, kicking trees, too much rain, lightning, aging: trees can get old and die, and having no water.

This conversation on the hazards faced by trees allowed a safe entry point into a discussion about children and the dangers and problems that they face in life. 'We have likened our lives to those beautiful trees in a forest. Would we be right to say that, like trees and forests, children also face dangers and troubles in their lives?' Collectively the children responded with a loud 'YES'. We then spent some time naming the problems and dangers that children experience. These included: rape, being abused, abandonment, swearing at children, neglect, denying food, chasing children away from home, keeping children in tins, kidnapping, killing and eating children, children living on the streets, children smoking glue, children having to sell their bodies for sex, and children not listening to their parents and caregivers.

We then discussed at some length the effects of such hazards on children's lives. The children spoke about sadness, physical hurt and harm. They spoke of fear and being 'troubled in one's heart'.

Throughout this discussion, I was amazed by how the children were able to name all these problems and their effects with seemingly no shame or any sense of being defined by them. The children were single-voiced. They stood in solidarity as they gave voice to the bad things that people do to innocent children. Surprisingly, the energy and enthusiasm that they started the meeting with was still present even as we spoke about these hazards. This was despite the fact that it was very clear some of the children were speaking from direct experience of some of the mentioned hazards. An eleven-year-old boy heading a household and taking care of his seven-year-old brother particularly mentioned that children are sometimes chased out of their homes by relatives to live in the streets.

## HOW CHILDREN RESPOND TO THE STORMS OF LIFE

Having come to a point where the storms of life had been named, and the effects of these had been thoroughly traced, we then spoke about whether or not it was children's fault that such things happen to them. Again, there was solidarity in the children's response as they shouted out 'NO'.

I then asked the children: 'I wonder what children do when these problems and storms come into their lives? Are there ways that they respond? Are there things that they can do? If there are, I would love to know what kinds of things they do or can do.'

A whole lot of hands went up as the children were burning to share their knowledge about what children can do in response to the storms of life. As I listened to different children, the knowledges that they have around protecting themselves became clearer. They spoke of the ways that they share problems with caring adults and friends. They also spoke about a range of initiatives that children can take to protect themselves:

- Talk to someone they trust
- Talk to their neighbour
- Run away to protect yourself
- Talk to their teacher
- Pray about the problems
- Ask for help
- Talk to a social worker
- Make a report to the police
- Talk to a friend
- Talk to Aunt D  
(one of the counsellors present)
- Talk to your friends about the problems

As the children made these different suggestions, everyone was listening intently. It was as if special knowledge that might one day be very important was being exchanged. In future discussions I will also be interested to ask how children hold onto their dreams and visions for their lives during the storms. I suspect they would also have a lot to say about this.

In this instance, we then turned to focus on three questions:

- Are storms always present in our lives?
- Are our lives sometimes free of storms?
- What do we do when the storms have passed?

I divided the children into groups of five so that they could spend time reflecting on these three questions. As I went round the groups I heard the children talk about the joyful times that they spend with their friends, and at school. There was a general agreement within the larger group that storms come and go. I asked the children to include in their conversations stories about people who make them happy and who offer them support. I also asked the children to talk about how they contribute to other people’s happiness. Walking around the room I had the sense that the children were enjoying and valuing their conversations with each other.

**PART FOUR: CERTIFICATES & SONG**

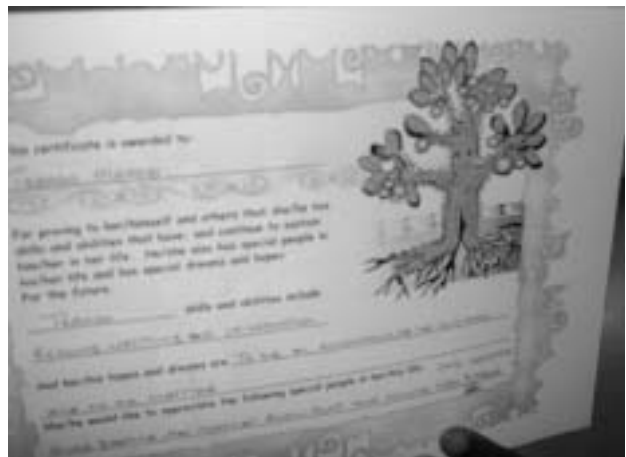
Whilst I had been talking with the children about ‘When the Storms Come’, the community counsellors had been busily preparing certificates for the children. They had taken notes about what the children had said during the ‘Tree of Life’ exercise: about their hopes, their dreams and their skills. And these had all been recorded on specially made individual certificates. These certificates also honoured the contributions of the special people in these children’s lives.

In this final part of the day, we invited a range of workers from within Jabavu Clinic to witness the certificate giving ceremony. While the conversations during the day had been wonderful, the certificates can be said to have been the icing on the cake! The children were extremely excited and couldn’t wait to show them off with pride to friends and family.

Tandiwe, one of the girls in the group, was covered in smiles as she expressed that she would hang her certificate on the walls of the family lounge. It would be a reminder to her that she has a lot to live for in life.

**WRITING A LETTER TO CAREGIVERS**

Prior to this day with the children, the counsellors and I had spent sometime talking about the challenges that we experience with regards to involving parents and communities in our work with their children. There is often a huge gap between



what children experience during support groups and the context they return to in their homes and communities. It can be a great challenge to work out how to respond when children are returning to situations in which there is a high risk of abuse. It can also be a challenge to ensure that the work we do with children does not alienate them in any way from loving families and relatives.

We wish to find ways of including and involving caregivers in our work and, where possible, to extend our support to children’s families. We spent some time thinking through how we could enable children to share their experience of the ‘Tree of Life’ exercise with their caregivers and families. We decided that perhaps giving children an opportunity at the end of the day to write a letter to their caregivers about their experience of the ‘Tree of Life’ exercise might create an opportunity for the children to speak about what they value in their lives in the context of their families. We also thought it might be a way that the children could acknowledge and

appreciate the support that they have received from their care-givers in a way that would be sustaining to them.

We asked children to identify who would be the person who demonstrates care to them that they would like to write to. We then encouraged the children to include in their letters descriptions of their values, skills, hopes and dreams that they'd spoken about during the day. We also encouraged them to acknowledge the contribution of the caregiver to their life, and to extend an invitation to the caregiver to visit the support group when they had time to do so. As many of these children's care-givers would not be able to read, we mentioned to the children that it would be respectful and helpful if they could read their letters aloud to their care-givers.

Kennedy gave me permission to share the letter he wrote to his grandmother.

Dear Gogo (Granny)

To day we did a very nice thing. It is called the tree of Life. In the tree, I said that I want to grow up to be mechanic. You know that I like fixing things, like that day on Monday I fix the Ty when it was not working. If I am a mechanic, I will be like my father because he used to fix lights. Gogo I want to grow up and be strong so that I can take care of you and Sandie. Gogo thank you for the new uniform that you got for me and the nice things you get for us always. You are good and special. I invite you to support group.

From  
Kennedy

## TREE OF LIFE SONG

We had planned to end the day by singing a special 'Tree of Life' song. But unfortunately the day for the meeting arrived before we had a chance to come up with the song! The children, however, were quick to come to the rescue. They suggested that we all sing a special song that they all knew in order to end the day on a very high note!

## CONCLUSION

Embarking on this process of re-working the 'Tree of Life' exercise has been a very positive experience for me. It has provided an opportunity to practically apply narrative ideas into my work with vulnerable children. I have now begun to look at the other tools and exercises that we have been using to facilitate conversations with children and communities, and to consider how these can be made safer and more focused on second story development. As I conclude this paper, I have a major sense of being transported significantly as a counsellor and trainer.

It seems appropriate to end this paper with the words of a group of early childhood and education practitioners who have experienced the revised 'Tree of Life' exercise and who will now be using this in their work. Their words seem to indicate that engaging with the revised 'Tree of Life' exercise might also be of value to adults. This was certainly the case for me! Here are their words:

- We are often looking at our lives from the negative side. It feels good when we can see our lives from a different perspective, from a more positive point of view.
- Our last experience with the original 'Tree of Life' exercise was very emotional. It felt like we had opened old wounds that we did not adequately address. This did not occur this time around.
- Having a sense of hope for the future enables you to look forward to living each day.
- It is not often that we get an opportunity to appreciate our skills and competencies and to openly speak of them within a group.



- *Clarity of one's hopes and dreams helps you to have a sense of where you are going in life and why you do the things that you do.*
- *There are many people who have done a lot for us in our lives but sometimes we forget this and we rarely acknowledge them. From this experience, I look forward to going back home and acknowledging certain individuals before it is too late.*
- *I prefer this version of the Tree of Life to the original version that we had been using with children and communities. In this revised version there is likely to be less crying and limited risks in opening wounds that we can not help to heal. When children's circumstances are not easy, it cannot be mourning and mourning all the way. Children need a chance to celebrate life*

#### **NOTE**

- <sup>1</sup> This four-part process was suggested by David Denborough after he had witnessed the work of camp counsellors during the Dulwich Centre team's visit to Masiye Camp.