

PART 2

**His story re-authored:
Young men responding to anger, trouble
and hopelessness in urban schools**

For the past two and a half decades it has been a joy working in schools as a social worker alongside children and young people of all ages and from a multitude of cultures.

As described in the first chapter, I engage in more counselling conversations with young women. However, in this section I write about my work with young men to reduce anger and trouble – and hence prevent violence. This stems from conversations with young men and women who have been harmed by male aggression and affected by dominant masculinity. Working with the multiple stories of oppression that affect young men's lives and schooling has increased my commitment to addressing and acknowledging the injustices faced by some of our most disengaged and marginalised youth. Additionally, as a mother of two sons, my hopes for them, and all young men, are to have a space to talk about gendered discourse and oppressive experiences, and for them to have good and peaceful futures as men in the world.

This section has four chapters. The first sets the context of my work with young men in urban schools. It explores multiculturalism, education and the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy. Chapter 7 poses questions for consideration when working with young men and boys around themes of anger and trouble. It suggests collaborative practices that move beyond punishment. Chapter 8 focuses on the micro-practices of counselling conversations. Michael White's (2007) statement of position maps are described, along with lines of enquiry that can assist young men in moving towards their life preferences. In Chapter 9 a story of a young man named John is shared to illustrate possibilities for moving from despair to hope, and from individual to collective narrative practice.

Chapter 6

Urban schooling

Setting the context

I am a school social worker in multicultural Toronto, which is often described as a city of new immigrants with a mosaic of multiple languages. Although school settings are often hectic, I enjoy being a part of the daily context of young people's lives, and am particularly drawn to the vibrancy and diversity of urban schooling. Many children and youth likely spend more waking time in school than in their own home or anywhere else. For this reason, schools offer a natural and accessible helping environment for young people.

The majority (67%) of Toronto District School Board (TDSB) students are from immigrant families with two parents who were born outside Canada. An additional 11% have one parent who was born in Canada and one who was born in another country (TDSB, 2013). My own parents immigrated to Canada from China and Hong Kong in the 1950s as a result of the Chinese revolution, and, like many newcomers, they renegotiated their understandings of life in a new culture. I am a Chinese woman born in Toronto and I grew up in a working-class family in a predominantly white neighbourhood in the suburbs of Toronto. My lived experience of straddling Eastern and Western cultures, and experiencing and witnessing oppression during my school years, has contributed to my wish to support the diversity of students I meet with day to day.

Working with young men in urban schools

When I first met with Paul, he had just returned from a suspension from school for hitting another student. Although we only had a few conversations together, some significant things stood out to me. Paul took a position of not wanting anger and violence to interfere with his schooling and relationships. He shared with me the effects of poverty and hopelessness on his life and family, and spoke passionately of his preferences for his future. He allowed me to scribe a short letter, using his thoughts and words, to share with other young men. Through this he hoped to make a contribution that would help them step away from

anger and trouble. However, after a few meetings, I never saw Paul again because he was absent from school. My own time constraints, with an overloaded referral list, allowed only a couple of attempts to track him down. A few months later, I unexpectedly received a call from Paul saying that he had been kicked out of school for selling drugs. He asked if he could see me and we agreed on a time to meet in the days to follow, but he never showed up.

As a school social worker, I never quite know what lies ahead of me in the school day. I have had to develop in-the-moment skills for working with unpredictability in a fast-paced environment. Paul is just one of numerous adolescents with whom I have lost touch who have made efforts to restory trouble and to get on track in school. I am always prepared that any session I have with a young man may very well be the last. I often work with youth who are struggling to survive in dire financial circumstances. One young man staying temporarily in a shelter aptly described his poor living conditions: 'I am so sick of eating baloney sandwiches!' Another exclaimed, 'I have a mad-on all the time because there's *too* much on my plate!' He explained to me that he was holding two jobs to help his parents, and all the while attempting to stay afloat in school. At other times I hear stories of hurt or betrayal. Some of these stories include the trauma of witnessing their mothers being beaten by their fathers and being helpless as children to stop the terror within their homes, or having lived with abuse and degradation themselves. Youth violence and gang violence, and at times the deaths of friends or family members, have deeply affected the lives of some of the young people referred to me.

For young men of colour, interwoven in school stories are the complexities of race, stories of racism and effects of marginalisation. I recall a young Muslim man expressively recounting a childhood story of being attacked in the school playground following 9/11: 'This random guy came up to me while I was playing and stabbed me in the arm screaming loudly at me "You guys killed my family!" I was terrified and to this day I still have the scar.' Many years after the incident, as he showed me his scarred arm, I realised that I was the only person with whom he had shared this painful experience.

In order to convey the context of the lives of the young men with whom I work, I wish to recall a one-off meeting with another young man that took place several years ago. Nathan, a Caribbean-Canadian student, was referred to me as part of a 'safe schools transfer'. Before learning the specific details about his situation, I was aware that any such transfer is the result of safety issues typically involving violence at the preceding school. When I first met Nathan, he sat in silence, barely shrugging his shoulders in response to my questions and staring out my office window. I let him know that it was okay if he didn't want to talk, after all he didn't even know me. He seemed indifferent when asked whether it would be alright if I continued talking, so I described my role and approach as a school counsellor. I really don't quite remember what it was that engaged him, but eventually he slightly turned my way and began to share with me that he had seriously assaulted a 'sort-of friend' in his previous school. When I asked whether it was common or not common for him to use violence, Nathan said, 'No, that's not like me'. He proceeded to explain that, for several months within his peer group, he endured jokes about black skin colour. 'The jokes weren't directed to me', he clarified, 'even though I was the only black guy in the group'. When asked how he responded, Nathan said he would either not react, change the subject or, on occasion, he would act as if he were okay with the jokes by laughing slightly. Sometimes there were joking statements that included the word 'nigger' from his friend. After taking it silently for a while, Nathan shared with me that one day he couldn't take it anymore, and he ended up punching his friend repeatedly and severely. He was charged and later wanted to apologise, but was prohibited by court order to have any contact. He had heard through the peer network that his friend also wanted to apologise to him for not realising the effects of the jokes. When I asked Nathan how the racism was dealt with and addressed in the safe school transfer process, he looked at me for the first time in our conversation and said 'It wasn't'. I stared back at him asking 'Really?' I never did see Nathan again as I heard he had moved to another region the week after I met him.

In writing about 'negotiating the dilemma of rage', Hardy and Laszloffy (2000) discussed rage as a response to pain and injustice:

When a person or group is systematically silenced and their beinghood degraded and denied, rage is inevitable. For people of colour, the dilemma that rage presents is that few socially sanctioned opportunities for its expression exist ... Rage is an intense and potentially threatening emotion ... The task facing children and families of colour is not a matter of how to avoid feeling rage, or how to eliminate rage, but rather how to find ways to constructively channel rage. (Hardy & Laszloffy, 2000, pp. 118–119)

I never did have the chance to more fully explore with Nathan the meaning of the oppressive events that transpired for him before the violent assault on his peer, nor his regret at having expressed his rage by violently attacking his friend. I continue to speculate about what might have been made possible (or prevented) had space been created for Nathan to constructively channel his rage.

Considerations of race

Ken Hardy (2008) described race, reality and relationships as being complexly entangled in ways that are difficult to discern:

Race, perhaps more often than we can imagine, operates as a kind of invisible fence. For those who are oppressed by virtue of their racial identities, the boundaries are tightly restrictive, whereas for those who are privileged, the boundaries are far more fluid and expansive. (Hardy, 2008, p. 77)

When the phenomenon of racism acts as an invisible fence, children of colour often see no way out of the deplorable conditions they have to contend with because they understand the implicit rules of racial participation. This leaves them striving for little and settling for even less.

Lisa Delpit (2006), whose work is dedicated to providing education for marginalised communities, has raised the issue of child-deficit assumptions in teacher education. Such assumptions, she contended, lead to teaching less instead of more when failure is linked to socioeconomic

status, cultural difference and single-parent households. 'We say we believe that all children can learn, but few of us really believe it' (Delpit, 2006, p. 172).

With the above in mind, it's not surprising that many diverse cities like Toronto have been faced with declining high-school graduation rates for young men of colour. Nevertheless, the broader power relations of race are often ignored within school institutions. What instead invariably gets named and noticed in relation to disengaged young men are acts of anger and aggression, low attendance, or perhaps apathy and lack of motivation. Hence layers of discouragement may have many giving up on school. It is defeating in itself when young men of colour have a lack of belief in their own learning abilities. Yet it can be even more disheartening when they sense that others do not believe that they can learn. A good example is the not-so-uncommon suggestion made to young men of colour to seek an athletic scholarship. With such suggestions, resentment and rage may build at the inferred message of sporting (rather than intellectual) ability being the only possibility for attaining their future education (Dexter Abrams, personal communication, May 2011). At other times, even if there is an individual plan and desire to finish school, existing systemic obstacles (which will be discussed below) and despairing life circumstances can make the goal of graduating seem desperately unreachable.

Multiculturalism and education

Despite the contemporary focus on multiculturalism in our society, particularly in education, there is not nearly enough practical discussion of ways classroom settings can be transformed so that the learning experience is inclusive. (hooks, 1994, p. 5)

bell hooks, feminist, teacher and social activist, wrote in *Teaching to transgress* (1994) about education as a 'practice of freedom'. She emphasised 'critical thinking' as the primary element that allows the

possibility of change. Creating a context for critical thinking requires connecting what students are learning with their overall life experiences.

Similarly, the Centre for Urban Schooling here in Ontario has proposed culturally responsive and relevant pedagogies:

We need to insure that the curriculum in our classrooms speaks to the lives of the students who attend our schools. We can no longer allow the government to mandate a one-size fits all curriculum that we know is based upon a white middle class societal view. All children must be able to see their lives represented in the materials, the books, the pictures, the teachers, the administrators, etc. within the classroom and the school. (Kugler, Murray & West-Burns, 2010, p. 1)

Significant developments have occurred within Toronto schools where student diversity programs have been implemented and initiatives have been coordinated that reflect the demographics of the city, such as Islamic History Month, Black History Month and Aboriginal Month. However, so much more is required in relation to the daily school routine.

Time and again I hear high-school students making statements that reflect a lack of interest in much of the curriculum, and expressions of utter boredom at school. They ask, 'How is this relevant to what I will do after I finish high school?' More pointedly, I hear, 'I don't like how some teachers just talk at you'. Such responses have me thinking of Paulo Freire (1998) who insisted that the purpose of teaching is to create possibilities for the co-construction and production of knowledge, rather than to engage simply in a game of transferring knowledge (1998, p. 49).

Effective learning and emotional calmness

In this chapter I have tried to describe the context of my school-based work with young men. I have also discussed some considerations of race and the need for a culturally responsive and pertinent pedagogy to

address the declining graduation rates in our culturally diverse schools. On reflection, it is apparent that events on both micro and macro levels can hinder or derail young men's focus on academics.

Any student who is affected by or involved in ongoing conflict and trouble, or overtaken by anger or irritability, or affected by circumstances such as loss and injustice, is going to have far greater difficulties with academic learning in the classroom. As Winslade and Williams (2011) aptly stated:

Effective learning takes place in a context of emotional calmness and enjoyment, not one dominated by anxiety, anger or fear.
(Winslade & Williams, 2011, p. 3)

So how can we, as counsellors or social workers in schools, respond to this situation? The following chapters provide ideas, from a school social work perspective and a narrative practice approach, about ways we can effectively respond to stories of anger, trouble and oppression.

Chapter 7

Considerations and complexities: Discourses of gender and discourses of punishment

Before I go on to describe my practice with young men, I wish to mention two broader social discourses that add complexity to work with young men: discourses of gender and discourses of punishment.

When working with young men who are attempting to step away from anger and trouble, I am aware of multiple factors influencing their lives. These include powerful discourses of patriarchy and dominant masculinity. Developing practices that can assist in the examination and deconstruction of dominant stories of men and masculinity (see Denborough, 1995; Gray, 2007; Jenkins, 1990; McLean, 1995; Slattery, 2003; Trudinger, 2000) is therefore an important aspect of work with young men. When young men are invited to examine how they may have been recruited into dominating practices that may lead to gendered harassment, violence and abuse, they are more likely to see how such practices can have serious consequences.

David Denborough (1995) outlined a useful step-by-step approach to developing respectful and effective ways of working with young men to reduce violence. As part of this approach, gendered messages and the beliefs of dominant masculinity are identified and explored with young men. Similarly, in her work with adult men, Nancy Gray (2007) used the migration of identity map and the re-authoring map described by Michael White (1995) to enable men who have enacted violence to chart a movement away from dominating practices and towards different forms of masculinity.

In addition to the influences of dominant masculine culture, there are other broader social factors to consider that also have effects on the lives and actions of adolescent boys. One of these relates to discourses of punishment.

Moving beyond punishment

While working in schools, I have continually witnessed students negotiating their identities within existing power relations between adults and youth. With regard to school incidents involving trouble,

anger and violence, strict disciplinary measures are often enforced with consequences that are routinely punitive. These may include detentions, being sent to the office, suspensions, school transfers or eventual exclusion. Many schools operate with the expectation that such punishments will cause students to change their ways, and there seems to be a misguided belief that the harsher the punishment, the more likely that there will be change in harmful behaviour (Zammit & Lockhart, 2001). In my school social work experience, however, I have found that such punitive measures do not necessarily lead young men to change their harmful actions. In fact, if anything, when young men are responded to with blame, shame and constant reprimands, it seems this is more likely to build resentment and hostility. The School Community Safety Advisory Panel (2008) similarly found that punitive approaches were not successful in ridding schools of violence, and instead led to a high number of incidents of youth victimisation. What is more, punitive approaches were found to deeply hurt the city's most disenfranchised.

Collaborative practice with young men

It is in this context that young men come to talk with me as a school social worker. I include here a list of some of the reasons that male high school students might be referred to see me:

- talking back and giving 'attitude' to a teacher
- continually refusing to comply with school rules
- bringing a weapon to school and threatening to use it
- 'another student got in my face and I was cussing at him'
- 'I told a teacher "I'm not fucken listening to you!"'
- 'this guy brushed up against me in the hallway so I punched him'.

When first meeting with young men who are 'in trouble', it is common for them to be unforthcoming with me. Understandably, I may be viewed with mistrust as yet another school disciplinarian they need to account

to, or as the counsellor who is meant to 'fix' their angry or acting-out behaviour at school.

With this in mind, I am always interested in finding collaborative and respectful ways of working with young men who are in trouble, without excusing their actions or minimising the effects of their actions. I seek to join with other school personnel to consider:

- how we can engage in conversations with male students in ways that will have them ultimately taking a position against the effects and influences of anger and trouble on their lives and relationships
- what approaches are more likely to personally motivate young men to want to get the upper hand over anger and trouble, and thus prevent anger from leading to violence
- what questions can be asked to allow young men to attribute their own significance to nonviolent actions (as opposed to centring our adult agendas about what we might think would be significant for their life)
- what enquiries will invite young men into explorations of various gendered messages and how we can assist them in identifying various beliefs and practices of dominant masculinity.

Using these questions as a guide, I hope we can collaboratively move beyond punishment, while at the same time inviting young men to examine the effects of their harmful actions. Ultimately this positioning can also create pathways to territories of preferred identity and to stories that counter anger and violence.

Chapter 8

Moving towards preferences for life

Whether it is a problem-saturated story of anger, despair, trouble or hopelessness that dominates a young man's view of himself (or others' views of him), there are always subordinated stories in the shadows (M. White, 2007). These may include stories of hopes for a better future, of not hurting or harming others, or, commonly, stories of just wanting to finish high school. But these subordinated stories of young men's intentions and preferred ways of being are often obscured by totalising descriptions of them as 'oppositional', 'lazy', 'troublemaking' or 'angry'.

Externalising conversations about anger and trouble

As described in Chapter 4, externalising conversations can provide an antidote to these internal understandings by objectifying the problem (M. White, 2007). This makes it possible for young men to experience an identity that is separate from the problem. For example, instead of referring to male students as 'angry young men' or 'problem students', we can separate them from such totalising identity descriptions by saying: 'He is a student currently overtaken by anger, frustration or trouble'.

When students' anger, frustration or trouble is externalised, it becomes more possible for them to take action to diminish its influence in their lives. As M. White (2011) emphasised,

I think it's possible to develop externalizing conversations that increase a sense of responsibility, or develop a sense of responsibility, rather than diminish it. And I think the important point is that it's not the externalizing itself that enables this, it's what happens next.
(M. White, 2011, p. 118)

Once externalised, it becomes possible to explore how Anger and Trouble are affecting the young man and/or others. Through externalising conversations, I find that young men are more likely to join in examining how such problems have managed to get a hold on them. The statement of position map (M. White, 2007) has been particularly helpful in guiding

me in relation to asking questions in externalising conversations to assist young men to take a position on the influences and effects of Trouble and Anger.

Statement of position map

The statement of position map (M. White, 2007) consists of four stages. I will outline these stages and include common responses from the young men with whom I work.

Stage 1: Naming the problem

This stage involves negotiating a definition of the problem that fits with the particular experience of the young man.

Here are some examples of young men's definitions of their problems:

- Anger, Frustration, Temper, Irritability
- Attitude, Disrespect, Diss-respect
- Trouble
- The Talk-back Voice
- The Screwface
- Conflict
- Blow-ups
- The Fight Mode
- The Cussing Voice.

Stage 2: Mapping the effects and influences of anger or trouble

A key element in this second stage involves exploring in detail the real effects and influences of Anger or Trouble on the young man's life, relationships, school and future. Some questions that can be asked in this stage include:

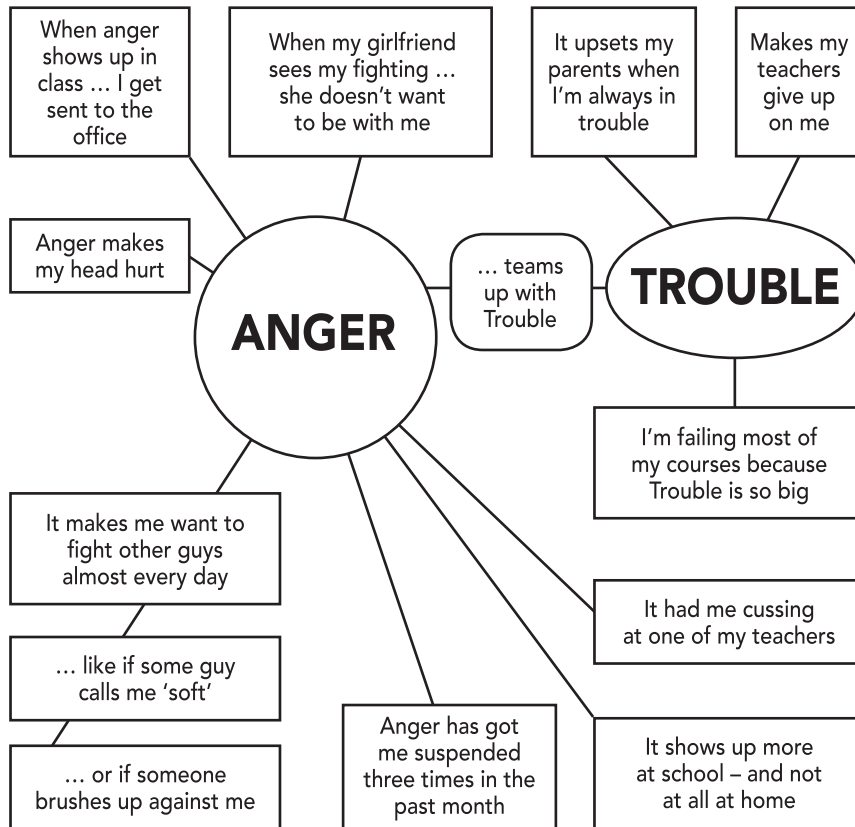
- Where does Anger/Trouble/Disrespect appear most? (e.g. at home, school or with friends)

- What kinds of words does it get you to say? Does it have you saying good words or not-so-good words, cussing words or disrespectful words?
- What kind of voice does it give you? Yelling? Mean? Hurtful? Harsh?
- Does the Talk-back Voice interfere with any of your relationships? Which relationship(s) does it affect the most?
- When Anger gets you in its grasp, how does it have you thinking about other people?
- Does the Fight Mode get in the way of school? How?
- Do Anger and Trouble team up?
- If you were to continue following Trouble, how would it affect your future in high school and beyond?

The following are some responses to the above questions:

- If some guy brushes up against me, it has me saying 'Wanna fight?'
- It's had me threatening to 'get back' if someone disses me.
- The constant fighting has got me suspended from school five times in the past few months.
- Trouble makes my teachers give up on me.
- Anger interferes with how I get along with my mom. It gets her frustrated and there is always tension at home between us.
- Irritability makes me have a screwface on all the time. It makes me snap at everyone.

In counselling conversations, I often draw a circle on a piece of paper with 'Anger' or 'Trouble' in the middle. As the student answers questions about the influences of the problem, I record these responses and draw lines to make connections between them.¹ This provides an externalisation of the problem and its effects that can be seen on paper. I have found this method very useful in helping young men to visualise the effects of Anger and Trouble (or whatever name is given) on their life and relationships.



Thoroughly detailing the effects of the externalised problem in conversation and on paper allows young men to step outside and look in at their actions. In Stage 3, we can then invite young men to reflect on and evaluate these effects, which often leads them to take a position in relation to Anger or Trouble.

Stage 3: Evaluating the effects of Anger or Trouble

In this stage we enquire about the young man's own evaluation of these effects: whether these effects have been good or bad, okay or not okay for him to have in his life.

- Are you okay or not okay with how much Anger is getting you into trouble, or a bit of both?
- When are you okay with it and when are you not okay with it?
- Are you okay or not okay with how much the Cussing Voice is interfering with your relationships with your parents/friends/teachers?
- Do you think it's good or not good that Trouble is getting you suspended from school so often?
- Is Anger useful or not useful to you, or sometimes both?
- When is Anger useful and when is it not?
- Are you satisfied with Trouble staying the size it is, or are you interested in shrinking Trouble in your life? Why? Where in your life are you most interested in shrinking Trouble's influence – at home, at school, when you are with friends?

This line of questioning centres the knowledge, experience and evaluation of the young man, rather than me as a social worker being the author of his position on the problem. Some examples of young men's responses where they are taking a position against anger have included:

- No, I'm not okay with how much Anger is getting me suspended and in trouble.
- No, I don't want Trouble to stay so big because it makes my mom upset.

It is also important to expect responses at this stage that indicate that the young man has not yet taken a position on anger or trouble. He may respond with 'I don't care', 'they deserved it!', or perhaps, 'it doesn't matter'. Such responses indicate that I need to spend more time at Stage 2 and to explore more fully the varied effects and influences of Trouble on specific relationships and places. I may trace the history of when the problem made an appearance in his life. Or I might take some time to explore what or who is important to the young man, as this may

open space to learn just what he might take a position on, where and with whom. If in Stage 3 the young man does respond by saying he is not okay with the effects of Anger and Trouble, this allows us to move to the next stage of enquiry.

Stage 4: Justification of the evaluation

This stage focuses on the *why* of people's evaluations: why are you not okay with what Anger is doing in your life? This enquiry is usually initiated with questions such as:

- Why is it not okay for you?
- Why do you feel this way about this development?
- Okay, you said you don't care about Trouble's influence at school, but I am curious about why you are not okay with how it affects your relationships at home?
- Why are you taking this stand/position on Anger's influence on you at school?

Responses to these questions have included:

- I'm not okay with Anger ruining my relationship with my mother.
- I don't like that Trouble keeps getting me suspended. I'll never be able to finish high school if it keeps going.
- I don't want to be the kind of guy who doesn't care and hurts people all the time.
- I have a future ahead of me and it wouldn't be worth letting Anger take it away from me.

Such responses render visible subordinated stories of young men's preferences for life. Often, these are stories about hopes for better relationships with family members or school personnel, or desires about finishing school and having a good future.

I hope this description of the use of the statement of position map helps to illustrate possibilities for engaging in externalising conversations that create a reflecting space that makes it possible for young men to take

responsibility for addressing and preventing the effects of Anger and Trouble on their lives and the lives of others they care about. Moreover, such enquiries can open gateways to rich story development. In the shadows of dominant masculinity are often stories of caring, humility, compassion and a sense of justice.

Exploring unique outcomes to assist in stepping away from anger, trouble and violence

In my work with young men 'in constant trouble', it is not uncommon for me to hear totalising descriptions from school personnel such as, 'He's always getting suspended because of getting in fights with other students'; 'He's continually defiant and disrespectful to his teachers' or 'At the rate he is going, he will never end up finishing high school'. Understandably, these scenarios can be incredibly stressful on school personnel. Not only is there frustration but there can also be hopelessness about things ever getting better.

Some young men may also feel that anger is always getting in their way, and that it has the upper hand over them. They may express that they can't walk away or that they feel constantly angry at injustice or unfairness. Anger in these situations may turn to violence, and sometimes young men are unsure how to diminish the influence of volatility. Thus I am always on the lookout for unique outcomes or exceptions. Even in the face of ongoing everyday trouble there is often one class or one teacher where a young man feels an absence of Trouble, or at least feels Trouble less than elsewhere. In the case of Anger constantly overtaking young men, I know that it is possible to discover a time when they have been able to stop letting Anger get the best of them.

Unique outcomes can be identified in which the young man has been less under the influence of Trouble and Anger, and times when he has been living outside tough-guy masculinities. There are always exceptions waiting to be found. Significantly, these unique outcomes can be openings to alternative stories of responsible actions, stories of redress, care and compassion. The following questions can help to elicit unique outcomes:

- Since I last saw you, was there a time that Anger could have got the best of you but you didn't let it?
- Where and with whom is Anger least likely to appear?
- Was there a day this week when you could have got in a fight and you didn't?
- Was there a point when Anger could have turned to violence but you didn't let it? What did you do instead? How did you manage to not let Anger turn to violence?
- Could you tell a story about this? Who was there? What was happening? What did you say to yourself?

Statement of position map version 2

The second version of Michael White's (2007) statement of position map consists of the same basic categories of enquiry included in the first. However, instead of generating externalising conversations by focusing on the effects and influences of problems, this map generates alternative storylines by focusing on unique outcomes and exceptions. Here I will offer an example involving Steve, a senior student.

Stage 1: Negotiation of an experience-near definition of the unique outcome

Steve referred himself for anger management as he described his anger as 'getting out of control'. He shared that Anger was getting in his way every day at home and now at school. When I enquired about the times that Anger was less likely to get the best of him he replied, 'Sometimes I get so mad at my parents and I cuss loud and threaten to hurt them. But when I see that my anger makes my little sister cry and she looks so scared, I stop and I leave'.

In this example, Steve had identified a unique outcome in which Anger did not get the best of him when he saw that it made his little sister cry. As a result, instead of allowing the anger to escalate and turn to violence, he stopped and left.

Stage 2: Mapping the effects of the unique outcome

In this stage we explore the effects of the unique outcome.

I asked Steve, 'What effect does stopping and leaving have?'

In response he said, 'My little sister stopped crying and it made her feel better when the yelling and fighting ended'.

Stage 3: Evaluating the effects of the unique outcome

In this stage we ask:

- Is that significant, not significant or something in-between?
- Is that positive or negative, or a bit of both?
- Was that a good decision or not really?

I have found this stage of enquiry particularly helpful as it allows me to maintain a decentred position, refraining from making assumptions about what I think might be a positive development. Significantly, this process privileges the meanings attributed by the young man.

Angel: Was that significant or not significant or something in-between that you made your sister feel better when you stopped the anger and left and the fighting ended?

Steve: It's significant.

Angel: How significant, a little, medium or a lot?

Steve: A lot!

When the person has attributed significance, we can move to the fourth stage.

Stage 4: Justifying the evaluation

In this stage we ask, 'Why is this significant or positive to you?'

Steve: Because I want to be a good big brother who is there for my little sister. I don't want her to be scared of me. I want to be there for her when she gets older.

Anger and Trouble can have a powerful grip on some young men's lives and actions, thereby making it difficult for them to notice changes. In my experience, even one unique outcome can become an entry point to thicker and richer identity conclusions. Small changes may seem inconsequential, but this second version of the statement of position map helps to render visible significant events that could have otherwise been skimmed over. In our conversation, I asked Steve meaning-making questions to help him reflect on certain neglected aspects of his experience. As the conversation unfolded, we learnt what the unique outcome reflected in terms of Steve's intentions as a big brother and how he valued a future of 'being there' for his younger sibling. Exploring the effects of the unique outcome also drew attention to important skills that might otherwise have remained unacknowledged, for instance, Steve's skills in managing the problem successfully.

The following short transcript illustrates a counselling conversation utilising both versions of the statement of position map.

Externalising the problem

Stage 1: Naming (and externalising) the problem

Angel: You said that you have been talking back a lot to your teachers and this has resulted in you getting sent out of class and to the vice-principal's office. And it is also the reason you were told that you had to see me.

Mark: Yeah.

Angel: Would you say that a talking back voice has been getting in your way lately?

Mark: [Shrugs]

Angel: Is it okay if we call it the Talk-back Voice?

Mark: Yeah.

Angel: Could I ask you some questions to find out more about the Talk-back Voice? My guess is that the Talk-back Voice is having effects on you and others – but that there are also times when it isn't getting the best of you? So would it be alright with you if I learnt about when the Talk-back Voice shows up and when it doesn't?

Mark: Okay.

Stage 2: Mapping the effects and influences of the Talk-back Voice

Angel: When did the Talk-back Voice start this morning?

Mark: When my teacher got mad at me for not having my homework done. And then he kept going on about how I never do my homework. I told him to just give me a zero for my homework and to stop bugging me.

Angel: So the Talk-back Voice got you to tell your teacher 'Stop bugging me'?

Mark: Yeah.

Angel: What else did it get you to say to your teacher?

Mark: I said 'Your class is so boring and the homework is boring'.

Angel: Does the Talk-back Voice get you into trouble in other classes?

Mark: Yeah. It got me sent to the office every day this week. And three of my teachers called my father this week and now he's really fed up with me.

Stage 3: Evaluating the effects

Angel: Are you okay or not okay with how much trouble the Talk-back Voice has been giving you lately?

Mark: I don't really care. My teachers are always hassling me but not any of the other students.

Angel: What about with your dad? Are you okay or not okay with how it's affecting him?

Mark: No, I'm not okay with him getting upset.

Stage 4: Justification of the evaluation

Angel: Why are you not okay with how much your dad is getting upset?

Mark: Cause he is always mad at me lately because the calls from school interrupt him at work. And he doesn't want to talk to me when he gets home because he's so fed up with me getting in so much trouble.

Angel: Can you say more about why you're not okay with this?

Mark: Because me and my dad usually get along. He works really hard and long hours in a restaurant and I don't want him to be more stressed out because of me.

Angel: If the Talk-back Voice weren't hanging around your classes as much, how might it make things better for you and your father?

Mark: My dad would be less stressed and we'd be talking.

In this conversation, although Mark does not care about the effects of the Talk-back Voice at school, he does take a clear position on how it affects his father. When asked why he is not okay with how his father is affected, we discover more about Mark's caring for his relationship with his

father. Thus an opening had been created to a counterstory, and further explorations could be made concerning Mark's hopes and intentions for his connection to his father.

Exploring the effects of a unique outcome

Stage 1: Negotiation of the unique outcome

Angel: Does the Talk-back Voice appear in all of your classes? Or are there any classes where it is less likely to show up?

Mark: It never shows up in my geography class.

Angel: The Talk-back doesn't happen in geography, but it does happen in all of your other classes?

Mark: Yeah.

Stage 2: Mapping the effects of the unique outcome

Angel: What's it like to have one class that's free of the Talk-back Voice?

Mark: It's good. Geography is the only class that I like.

Angel: What's good about it?

Mark: The teacher is nice. Even when I deserve it she never gets mad at me or yells at me.

Angel: Anything else about what's good about the Talk-back Voice not being in your geography class?

Mark: It's just a break from arguing all the time.

Stage 3: Evaluating the effects of the unique outcome

Angel: Do you think it's a good thing or no big deal that you manage to keep the Talk-back Voice out of geography class.

Mark: It's good.

Stage 4: Justifying the evaluation

Angel: Why is it good?

Mark: Because I wouldn't want to upset my teacher by talking back to her. She's always nice – not just to me, but to everyone. She respects us all.

Angel: So when people are nice to you and respect you it makes a difference? Respect and niceness matters to you?

Mark: For sure.

Choices for nonviolence: Effects on relationships

It is worthwhile to note that not all unique outcomes in relation to not getting in trouble or not using anger and violence will be seen as significant. There have been many times when young men have responded with indifference: 'It doesn't matter to me.' At times, when enquiring about nonviolent actions or choices, the response may be, 'It was no big deal that I decided not to hit him'. And although I myself might be pleased to hear about decisions to not enact violence, I want to be mindful of not centring my thoughts and values. In such instances, we can ask about who in their life might be supportive of actions to get the upper hand over anger: 'Who might be proud about your decision to step away from Anger, Trouble and/or Violence?' Just as aggression, trouble and violence have considerable effects on the important persons in young men's lives, choices for nonviolence can also have a significant impact on relationships.

I can recount numerous images of parents and loved ones being distressed, angry or disappointed to find out that their son, grandson or nephew has emotionally or physically hurt or harmed another person by anger or violence. Thus it is not surprising that those nearest and dearest to young men are likely to experience immense happiness or relief when hearing that young men have chosen to not use violence.

I remember a conversation with a student named Tyler who initially shrugged at me saying 'it was no big deal' that he decided at lunch time to not hit another guy who was provoking him to fight. But, on reflection, he speculated that his mom would probably be happy:

Angel: Are you happy that you didn't fight?

Tyler: Not really, it was no big deal.

Angel: Is there anyone who you think might be happy that you didn't let Anger get the best of you? And that you didn't fight?

Tyler: My mom.

Angel: On a scale of one to 10, with one being not happy at all and 10 being really happy, how happy would she be?

Tyler: Nine.

Angel: Your mom would be at nine happiness? What's that like for you to think of?

Tyler: It's good. It makes me happy.

Angel: Can I ask why it makes you happy to think that your mom would be happy?

Tyler: Because my mother doesn't want me to fight and get hurt, or for me to hurt others or get in trouble.

- Angel:** What do you think your mom hopes for you?
- Tyler:** To finish school and to have a good future.
- Angel:** Are these hopes that just your mom wants, or do you also have these hopes too?
- Tyler:** I do too.
- Angel:** What else do you want for your future?
- Tyler:** I want to go to college and be a business man. I want a good job so I can buy my mom a car ... so she doesn't have to take the bus to get groceries.
- Angel:** What do you think will bring you the kind of future you hope for – violence or nonviolence?
- Tyler:** Nonviolence.
- Angel:** Why?
- Tyler:** Because no matter what happens ... people will always have stuff to say about you in life. But you can't fight them over what they say because it just causes more problems. And I don't want to get charged or go to court again and I don't want to keep upsetting my mom.

In this conversation with Tyler, we witness his emerging preference for nonviolence, which is in accordance with (and a result of) the hopes and wishes of his mother. Interestingly, this became a turning point for Tyler. He started to work hard to get the upper hand over Anger and the urge to fight. He did so knowing it would most likely make his mother happy and relieved. In these sorts of conversations, I have learnt that many young

men's relationships with their mothers offer alternative possibilities for their lives and identities (see Yuen, 2007b).

I have offered here some practice-based ideas that can assist young men to move towards their preferences for life. Although individual counselling conversations are important and useful, I am also aware that they are often not enough to help young men involved in youth conflict or gang affiliation, and living and struggling with oppression, to fully step away from trouble or to succeed and stay in school. For example, a year after the above conversation with Tyler, I sadly learnt that he had transferred from the school after a ten-day suspension for fighting, and had also been caught with drugs in the school. One of his teachers informed me that he had broken down, saying how hard everything was and that 'no matter how hard you try you can't just break away from it all!' Unfortunately, this is not an unfamiliar statement of helplessness and hopelessness. I have heard similar expressions from other young men who sense no escape from the depths of poverty and turf fighting.

The following chapter offers ways of working with stories of hopelessness that involve linking the lives of individual young men using collective narrative practices (Denborough, 2008).

Note:

1. This idea came from Alice Morgan (2000), who documented the problem of Panic that was wreaking havoc in a man's life.

Chapter 9

**From hopelessness to stories of
hope, connection and social justice:
From individual to
collective narrative practices**

Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings.

(Freire, 1994, p. 2)

One wintry afternoon when I stepped outside of my home in the quiet suburbs of Toronto, I was taken aback to see multiple police cars and bright lights flashing at the end of my street. The road was cordoned off and a tree had been knocked down in what I guessed at the time must have been a car crash. The surrounding neighbours pieced together the events, sharing how earlier there had been a fight between two groups of young people just a few hundred metres away in the neighbourhood park. Later in the news we learnt that most were young men from the core of Toronto who had met up in the suburbs for the 'planned fight', and that a 17-year-old boy was charged with fatally striking two male teens with his vehicle after the brawl. The following morning our community woke up to the tragic news that both young men had died overnight within hours of being airlifted to hospital. In the weeks that followed, every time I turned into my street I would notice the absence of the tree and the flowers placed where the two young lives were lost. With every new set of flowers I found myself wondering about the people who brought them.

At times it seems that there are too many tragedies in which young men lose their lives as a sudden result of violent altercations. When I first wrote the stories within this chapter it was the fourth anniversary of the death of 15-year-old Jordan Manners. He was found dying in one of Toronto's schools and his murder in the middle of a school day was profoundly shocking, and shook our city and school board. Jordan's memory continues to be honoured with a tribute that remains in the main hall of the school titled 'One bullet wounds many'.¹ In relation to my work in schools, I think of the young men whose lives have been taken needlessly by violence – some who attended the schools I have worked in, others who have been friends, brothers, sons or cousins of students and parents referred to me. Individuals and communities are not only affected by ongoing violence but also by severe poverty, indignity and other acts of oppression that can seem impossible to ever escape from. Not only young men but counsellors too can be overwhelmed and left

with a feeling of hopelessness. How can we as counsellors respond when we know that our role is not enough to offset contexts of injustice?

Working from a narrative counselling and collective practice approach has been helpful to me. It enables hope to find its bearings again. The following story of John provides an illustration of moving from despair to hope, and from individual to collective narrative practice.

John's story

John is a young man with whom I had conversations for over a year. We met when he was 17 years old, and during a couple of poignant moments he stated that he was unsure whether he would live to his eighteenth birthday. He was born in Canada with strong connections to his roots in Ghana. A couple of days before I met John, his best friend Jayden had died due to violence. As my school counselling role involves responding to crises, I was asked to meet with and support John and other friends of Jayden.

When I met John, he was in shock and bereft at the unexpected and devastating death of Jayden, who was gunned down in their housing project, most likely in a case of mistaken identity. In response to my questions, he replied, 'I don't know, I just don't know'. With the trauma and disbelief of the sudden loss of Jayden, John found it difficult in our early conversations to put his experience and feelings into words. He also conveyed helplessness about how to deal with senseless acts of violence resulting in death. It clearly was not the first tragedy John had experienced in his community.

As I often find it helpful to share other young people's experiences, I read John some phrases that came from Paul. Paul, who I mentioned in Chapter 6, had co-created a document with me to make a contribution to other young men struggling with hardship. I read some of Paul's words to John:

It's going to seem like every time the sky clears up that there's going to be another storm. But just remember that after every storm there's always a clear day.

When I read Paul's quote it very much spoke to John, and he was instantly sparked by the metaphor of 'storms' (see Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006). I therefore asked the following questions:

- What are the storms of life for young people?
- Are all storms the same?
- What happens at the end of a storm?

John thoughtfully responded to the questions, first stating that young people experience many storms and that life wasn't easy. But that not all storms are the same:

Some are more violent than others, like a friend being murdered. In these kinds of storms there are aftermaths. In the aftermath we feel the disaster with everything all over the place. There can be so much confusion. But, like Paul says, at the end of the storm there's always a clear day. Things start to slowly get better and make sense again, and the sun eventually comes out again.

Although just two brieflines, Paul's words became an important metaphor for John to hold on to in the months to come.

Re-membering² Jayden

While meeting with John over the following months, I learnt about the value and importance he placed on friendship. His friendship with Jayden was one that he treasured as the two had often spoken of their hopes and dreams for when they grew up. Although Jayden had passed on and was no longer physically with him, John found comfort in keeping his relationship with Jayden alive (see Hedtke, 2002). I was interested in assisting John to remember Jayden's phrases of encouragement. The following questions guided my enquiry:

- What do you remember about your friendship with Jayden when you were younger boys?
- Did you have shared hopes or goals while living in hardship?
- How did you try to help each other? What would you say to each other?

- If Jayden knew that you didn't let rage or revenge overtake you about his violent death, what would he think?
- If Jayden knew that you were worried about passing high school, what do you think he would want to say to you?

Based on John's responses, and using his words and phrases, I scribed the following document for John to assist him in holding on to the relationship and friendship for years to come.

My best friend and brother is always with me

When I was a boy, I met my friend Jayden. We would laugh a lot together and talk about our dreams and goals. We would wish for luxurious cars and a beautiful girl when we were older. Most of all we were going to get out of the struggles and violence. As teenagers, we dreamed even more. Both of us were going to finish high school and accomplish success in life. Violence and trouble were all around us, but we told each other, 'We will pull it off and be able to do it'. We said we were going to go to college. I was going to work on cars as a mechanic and he was going to be a lawyer.

And then one night, he was killed right in front of his home. The sadness went so deep. Revenge, rage and thoughts of retaliation. The rage goes so deep and when it comes you can't think clearly. But I didn't let it take over me. I know Jayden would be happy about this. We were like brothers.

Jayden was respected and a really good basketball player. He would make fun and joke while we were playing ball. He motivated me and always had words of encouragement. His words are with me all the time. If he knew I was worried about finishing high school, I think he would want to say to me, 'John, you can do it! Just do your thing and be your own man'. I can hear him saying 'It'll be okay, just keep going'.

In keeping Jayden's voice and words with him, John very much wanted to fulfil the hopes they had together for a better future. 'Jayden would want me to do well and finish school and fulfil our dreams.'

By the end of the school year, John expressed feeling better and more hopeful, particularly knowing he was honouring the special friendship that he had with Jayden. However, in catching up with John just a couple of months later in the following school year, he began by saying that 'the summer wasn't good' and that 'too much had happened'. Compared to when I had last seen him, he showed no smiles, was barely audible at times, and seemed distraught as he struggled to find words. He eventually said a few times, 'I just can't believe this keeps happening'. When I asked 'What keeps happening?' he shook his head. He shared that two acquaintances from his community had been murdered just weeks apart during the summer months. 'But it's not just that!' he emphatically stated. As I sat with John gently enquiring and pausing as needed, I heard the following story.

One summer afternoon while walking home, John noticed a boy from his housing complex riding his bike. All of a sudden the boy crashed into a car and flipped in the air and landed harshly with his head hitting the windshield. In panic, John went rushing over to find him bleeding. He was scared that he might have been dead. John explained that thankfully the boy wasn't unconscious but that he was pretty hurt. John helped the injured boy to walk his bike towards home. While they were walking with the bike, a police officer stopped the two and began questioning them. John tensed up while recounting 'He asked us ... Where are you going? Where did you get the bike? Then he started to ask all kinds of other questions about what we were doing and where we lived'. After a long pause John finally stated, 'I couldn't believe it!' I asked John, 'Do you think he thought you had stolen the bike?' John nodded to me and eventually when he found his voice again said, 'The boy was so hurt and needed to be looked after, and he made us stop and wouldn't let us go!'

Angel: You were pretty worried about the boy?

John: Yeah. When he crashed so hard I didn't even know if he was going to live. Or what if he needed to go to hospital?

Angel: How long have you known the boy? Tell me more about him and why you care about him so much.

John: I actually don't know him that well, but he's a nice kid. And he's just a boy! I could tell he was so scared.

I sat with John knowing that there was a multiplicity of expression in his rage and I was interested in enquiring about what was absent but implicit (M. White, 2000b) in his intense upset. I wondered what might be on the other side of what had been violated – perhaps a belief that any scared or hurt child should be helped and comforted by older youth or adults. Also unstated in the rage was intense upset at being questioned about stealing, as John would never steal. Yet most distressing was being impeded from helping an injured and frightened child.

It took until our next conversation for John to share another upsetting police encounter. 'I was walking home at midnight through a dark and unlit walkway. The foot police were there and started questioning me. I asked, "Why are you bothering me? I'm just walking home". In this instance, John described being provoked by being asked 'Do you want to hit me?' by the officer, who then directed John to lie on the ground. When asked how he responded, John said he was furious but took a breath and thought to himself 'I'm not gonna let him put me under his trap'.

Angel: What ended up happening?

John: The other cop realised who I was. It was dark so at first he didn't know it was me. He knew I was furious! I don't even remember what he was saying to me. I wasn't even saying anything, but he knew! I couldn't even talk at that point.

Angel: When he realised it was you, what do you think he was thinking? What does he know about you?

John: He knows I don't ever cause trouble. He let me get up and told his partner I was okay.

At my attempts to enquire further, John just shook his head and sat in silence breathing heavily. How was I to respond to the rage about the injustice that John had struggled to put into words just minutes before? I wondered aloud if other young men might relate to his experience. He nodded. I also asked if John thought it was significant or not significant that he didn't allow himself to get provoked. He thought it was significant, but was unsure how much more he could take. I sat for a while with John and the rage. Eventually, I asked John whether he thought it was a good thing he shared the story of the upsetting incident and injustice with me instead of continuing to be in silence with the rage. John thought it was a good sign that he could finally talk about it all.

Linking and connecting young people's lives

As I continued to meet with John, I wondered whether it would be helpful to share the voice of another young man who had been through similar experiences. I recalled a poem titled 'My philosophy on poverty', written by a young man named Moshin,³ who was living in a community affected by poverty and violence. He had written the poem in the hope that it might be helpful for other young people and, remembering this, I asked John if he would be interested in hearing it. John was immediately intrigued by the title and keenly listened as I read.

My philosophy on poverty

Coming from where I'm from

A community surrounded by Pain, Struggle and Poverty

As I sit back, watching the very people I call friends

Preventing themselves from becoming what they dream of

Because of the spiral of poverty that we live in

The spiral has seized my community

Leaving no broken chain to escape from

*How many more funerals do we have to go to?
Watching the people rest soundly in their graves
How many scenes of the crime do we have to watch?
Seeing them chalk out our broken figures on the concrete
How many tears do I have to shed from my weary eyes?
Before we realise that the only way for us to get out of this hell
is to struggle to survive
Poverty and life needs to be broken down to its inhabitants
For them to reconcile that no-one can help those stuck in the spiral
Until they learn to help themselves
Coming from where I'm from
12 Blocks, is our World
Dominated by motivation, appreciation and dedication
Escaping from the withholding grasp of poverty
There is nothing like the feeling,
When you reach there,
From here
We are those people
Those people who try to get out of the spiral
Stopping at nothing to make something out of our life
Those who have figured the world out
Those that have seen what I have seen
Have begun the journey
The journey to a better life and a brighter future
Every person has to stand on the crossroads of life*

*Two paths that will dictate the way you live, in your life time
Both roads leading to success and wealth
The longer of the two
On its path there is education and hard work
The more cowardly one is shorter
The way of crime
But on its path, there are a lot of dangers lurking around it
No-one has ever made it to the destination, on this path*

*This proves the point, that the pen is stronger than the gun
The gun kills and brings pain
The pen express thought and educates to make a difference
I will make it
Through the heat of the noon
I will survive to see the cooling sunset
Through the darkness of the shadowy night
I will survive to see the dawn, once again
To leave, this place one day, with a weapon
Then to return, one day, with a weapon
I shall give back to the place I once called home
Because I hold the greatest weapon any person can have
EDUCATION!*

As I read Moshin's poem to John, he nodded when hearing, 'How many more funerals do we have to go to?' He continued to nod, softly saying 'yeah' at various parts. When I finished reading, I looked up at John to see him in thoughtful reflection. I asked what stood out for him. He could relate to the pain and struggle to survive, and the helplessness of not knowing how to escape the spiral of poverty, constant crime, deaths and tears. John sighed stating, 'Really we're the same in many ways'. When I asked his thoughts about 'EDUCATION' being the 'greatest weapon', he agreed that education was vital and what many young men needed to fight with in order to survive. 'Yeah ... education comes first!'

As I witnessed the effects of the poem on John, it became clear that Moshin's story was not just an individual story. Their lives were now linked even though they would never meet each other. Moshin's story represents the experience of many young men like John. With John relating to Moshin's words, they became joined in something broader – effects of poverty, friends from the hood dying, gun violence, the pen offering a different kind of weapon, and the vital importance of education.

Knowing Moshin's writing had a powerful resonance for John, I asked if he might be interested in also creating a poem for other young people who have been experiencing similar difficulties. John was intrigued but

uncertain about his ability to write poetry. In response to his interest in hearing more about my idea I explained, 'I could put together a poem using your words. Would this be of interest to you, knowing it could benefit other young people who have also gone through hard times and faced injustices? Just as Moshin's poem helped you, you too could help others. What do you think?'

John was sparked by the idea of making a contribution to the lives of other young people. And so we started to plan the writing. John decided which themes would be important to include and very much liked the thought of using the metaphor of 'storms' throughout the writing. Thus from my counselling notes reviewing our conversations together, and John coming up with words and phrases of hope to help others to prepare for and resist 'storms', the following poem was produced.

At the end of the storm

*The storms of life ... there are many
Some more violent than others
Like a best friend being murdered and his future being taken away*

*In the aftermath we feel the disaster
with everything all over the place
Depression, Confusion, Rage.
Don't know who to talk to?
Time passes, things settle ...
At the end of the storm the sun eventually does come out again
But another storm is always on its way and may even hit us harder
More deaths, loss, and acts of revenge
At times suspicion, racism and harassment from police
and just straight injustice
Depression, Confusion, Rage ... Hopelessness
We can't think clearly.
It's all a negative vibe
Black treated unfairly.
Leaves us questioning the world*

*Hopelessness whispers 'Before my life ends,
 just do what you need to do'
 When will the storm end?
 Young people killing young people ... for no reason
 Why take a life?
 Black on black violence
 We think 'there's no place for us in a white world'
 The storms of the past go back to slavery and hatred
 CAN'T LET THE STORM SUCK ME IN!
 Must resist it, move away from the storm
 Use critical thinking, talk to others, stay inside away from trouble
 Make the right choices, think of family
 Violence is not the way
 Violence is not my way!
 I won't let him put me under his trap!
 Pride comes in not getting provoked*

*Do everything for the future, prepare and plan ahead
 Take advantage of the positive energy on the good days ...
 before another storm comes
 At the end of the day, or should I say? ... at the end of the storm
 I can reflect ... Education comes first!
 Do the right thing!
 Think twice, have patience and breathe
 I'm surviving and coming out positive
 Don't want to lose anyone again
 Hold on to future-thinking
 Live simple enough
 We can see the storm coming now.
 We can repel it
 Remember, at the end of every storm there's always a clear day.*

I read a draft of the poem to John and invited him to make any changes.
 John chose not to change anything, and was very pleased with it. And

with the document completed, John looked forward to it being shared with others. Since then, it has been shared with several school and community workers and counsellors who have read it to many young people. The following is from one young man's response to John's words and lived experience:

The poem is really deep and shares emotions through writing. It reminds me of taking things one day at a time, and that there will be good days and bad days. My own best friend was murdered and we also would do things together like play ball outside during the warm weather. I had to figure my way out of the feelings of retaliating after my friend was murdered. I realised retaliation wouldn't bring him back to me. I think that it's cool that John is sharing his word.

John also agreed to be videotaped while reading 'At the end of the storm'. When asked why John was interested in his tape being made available for other young people to view he replied, 'If it can help someone then I'll be really happy. Because losing a friend to murder is hard. But I know it will happen again'. I remember being taken aback at hearing John say matter-of-factly that he knew 'it would happen again'. However, within a couple of months of this conversation, another young man was shot and killed at a party. My heart sank when I learnt that this young man was a good friend of John's; someone he had spoken of fondly in our sessions. Upon hearing this I worried about how John would be coping with yet another loss of a treasured friend due to violence. When we met up he was distraught and teary. Yet in rereading his poem, feeling linked and connected to others experiencing similar hardship, and having conversations about continuing to stay focused in school and 'doing everything for the future' in memory of his friends, John described feeling stronger, knowing that 'at the end of every storm there's always a clear day'. Young men in circumstances such as John's are facing not only loss and grief, but also racism and threats to their own safety. As practitioners, our role can include linking young men around shared experiences, shared sorrows and shared hopes.

Collective narrative practice

In this section, I have shared John's story as an illustration of moving from despair to hope by linking one person's life and story with those of others. Here I will describe some principles of collective narrative practice that were significant in the work and my conversations with John. I sought:

- to conceive of the person meeting with me as representing a social issue
- to enable the person to join a collective endeavour addressing, in some local way, this social issue
- to enable the person to 'speak through us, not just to us' (Denborough, 2008, p. 16).

Although the work alongside John consisted solely of one-to-one conversations, his story connected him to several young people in relation to broader social issues including community violence, loss of friends, and suspicion from and unjust treatment by police. The co-creation of a document for youth affected by similar experiences allowed John to join with others in a collective endeavour addressing these social issues. With regard to the last principle, John was able to send his poem 'through me', and thus was not only telling his story of hardship and survival 'to me'. While John was already speaking to me about his personal experience, once he realised the poem and conversations would be circulated and directed 'through me' to contribute to a collective purpose, our conversations seemed to have a whole different energy. He was filled with commitment, purpose and, more significantly, optimism.

The writing of the poem also enabled John to speak in both an individual and a collective voice about the effects of the difficulties on his life and on the lives of others. As David Denborough (2008) has described, we can listen for both individual and collective speech patterns. For example, 'Black youth are treated unfairly and it leaves *us* questioning the world'. In this phrase, John was speaking in a collective voice. He was speaking of his own experience and he was also suggesting that this is not

only his experience, but also the experience of many young black people. He was speaking in a way that connected his life to the lives of others in relation to shared hopes for social justice.

Ongoing ripples

Although months and years can pass, it is meaningful to know that letters, documents and poems can continue to make contributions. This occurred for John when a couple of letters were written to him by school students at St John's Regional College in Dandenong, Australia, and sent to me via their school counsellor, Milan Colic. This created a wonderful opportunity for John and me to catch up a couple of years after he had finished high school. Needless to say, he was quite excited about receiving mail from the other side of the globe, and very happy and somewhat astonished to hear about the ongoing ripples of his poem. The following letters were written for John by K. and Pauline:

Dear John,

I am a Filipino Australian and 16 years old, writing to you from my school in Melbourne, Australia. Firstly, I send my condolences about Jayden.

Wow ... this is deep stuff. It's the first time I've really listened to someone else's story. I mean, I used to only listen to myself because I couldn't trust anyone, after making the wrong sorts of friends – I think sometimes you've got to be cautious to survive. I used to listen more when I was a kid but once you fall into the gangs you become a whole different person ... Sometimes you get dealt the wrong cards in life but just because you're dealt the wrong cards doesn't mean you're garbage.

You grow sick of it all ... hearing shots – sick of the depression ... sick of the thoughts of revenge. It can all be a bit like a living nightmare. I picture the way you live – surrounded by death. Sometimes it feels too hard to break away from the gangs ... sometimes it feels like you have to stay.

We come from the other side of the world ... but we're coming from the same place. Trust is really hard sometimes ... it would be good to have you here, just to talk, to find out what the similarities and differences are in our lives.

I wonder if you listen to Chuckie? [Chuckie Akenz, a Vietnamese-Canadian rapper who grew up in the notorious Jane and Finch neighbourhood of Toronto, Canada] His goal was to make a difference to people that are struggling in the gang world. He made a difference to me and you are also making a difference with the words that I have now read.

Education! That's what I'm trying to get at ... to get out of the struggle. Sometimes I fall back but I'm trying hard not to get back to the violence. I'm trying to be diplomatic with everyone.

Your words leave me thinking that I don't care if I'm a big shot or if I get big money. I want to show people that are in gangs or wanting to join to consider that violence destroys lives. I think many kids don't get this. I want to tell them that there are other options, like education ... because, if it wasn't for education, we'd probably still be deep in it ourselves.

Thanks for your words, Brother, and again, my deepest condolences.

K.

John then responded to K.:

K.

Hey brother hope everything is alright.

I first want to say I can almost fully understand your situations that you are going through. I've had really close friends that were in gang related activity and I've been around it for a while.

I hope this poem really helps your situation, which happens to many people all over the world. The things young men go through in situations like this are almost impossible to get out of. I hope you stay strong and believe that you can achieve anything you put your head into. There are storms that we just got to face and the aftermath of the confrontation decides your purpose in life. I hope you stay strong, K. Also, yes, I used to listen to Chuckie Akenz and understand the things he has been through. I hope you take it as motivation to help you. Thanks again for your response.

John

Another letter was sent to John from Pauline:

Dear John,

I am writing to you from my school in Melbourne, here in Australia. I am a 14-year-old young woman and come from Sudan.

Thank you for sharing your poem because you write about things that are true for me too. I think that the things you are saying are happening everywhere, not just in Canada – They are also happening here, in Melbourne. But I hear your pain. It sounds like there is too much violence there.

When I think about the violence around you it's too much to even say ... it is so confusing because sometimes it feels like there is

nothing you can do but it sounds to me like you're trying hard – trying to get away but it is everywhere.

I picture you stuck in the middle of trouble, like a gang surrounding you, with people wanting to keep you there no matter what direction you look ... but it's not where you want to be. It sounds like you want a life where good things happen ... where you don't have to do what others tell you to do.

Your poem has me thinking about my father who died in violence when I was four years old and how the police used to harass him when we were living in Egypt. It was all a negative vibe with racism, depression, confusion and hopelessness. When you're treated so unfairly you really can't think. Why does everything have to be so hard? Why does there have to be so much violence?

Your words have me thinking about my own life and how I can change things at school. I'm in a lot of trouble at the moment for fighting. I want a good life too, away from trouble.

Best wishes, Pauline

John sent the following response back to Pauline (and K.)

Pauline,

Thank you for your response and I would first like to say sorry about your father.

I hope your family is well and wish the best for you. I have been through a lot and where I am mentally is the best it has been in years. As I got older I realised what's really important in life and what's not. I've done a lot of changes for the better and it's really paying off for me. I hope this poem really helped you and guides

you as you grow to be a great lovable person. And like K. said, 'education is the key which opens many doors'.

Thanks to both of you ... K. and Pauline! I wish the best for you.

John

In catching up with John, he was touched to receive the letters from K. and Pauline. Although worlds apart, a connection of experiences was apparent as K. wrote 'we come from the other side of the world ... but we're coming from the same place'. It was moving for John to realise his poem could continue to help youth who were experiencing hard and despairing times.

Summary

Throughout this section, I have attempted to address some of the many complexities and dilemmas of working with young men's multiple stories of trouble, oppression and despair in urban schools. Whether a young man is attempting to step away from anger, make choices for nonviolence or respond to hopelessness, it is always possible to discover his preferred ways of being or dreams for something different. When working in schools alongside young people, I believe we have a shared responsibility to engage students, not only academically but also in generating richer stories of their lives.

As John says, 'the storms of life ... there are many and we know well that another storm is always on its way'. The hopelessness associated with multiple storms has the potential to convince young people that their life circumstances are unchangeable and that they do not have anything to offer to others. Thus it has been significant to me to see young men such as John and Moshin sharing their skills and knowledges to assist themselves and other young men to face the hardships and injustices of their lives.

I hope these chapters might assist practitioners in enabling other young men to respond to anger, trouble and hopelessness, and to remember that the difference between a young man staying in school and dropping out may end up being one interesting and stimulating class, a little sister's tears, a mother's hopes or a friendship, whether the friend is alive or no longer alive.

Notes:

1. The tribute to Jordan Manners titled 'One bullet wounds many' was reproduced as the cover of the executive summary volume of *The road to health: A final report on school safety* (School Community Safety Advisory Panel, 2008).
2. For a description and illustration of re-membering practices and conversations, see M. White (2007).
3. Moshin's poem was shared with me by Toronto school social worker Joanne Hale. Joanne had been having conversations with Moshin while he was living in Regent Park, Toronto.