



The River of Life safety map: Narrative journeys in a school-based setting

by Clare Kempton Sladden



At the time of writing this paper, Clare Kempton resided on the unceded lands of the Djab Wurrung and Jardwadjali peoples. She works across multiple schools in a rural context, and seeks to hear students' expertise in matters relating to their own lives. Clare has a specific interest in finding micro-opportunities to unsettle practices of power within a duty-of-care context. Clare was born at home on Bunjalung Country and spent her formative years on Awabakal Country in Newcastle. She is proud to locate herself within a big blended family, and was raised by her beautiful mother. Clare spends much of her time swimming in wild places and cooking with friends. clare.kempton55@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the use of narrative practices in a school-based setting to approach safety planning with young people. The article proposes an alternative safety planning tool: The River of Life safety map, which draws on the migration of identity metaphor. The author explores opportunities for collaboration in safety planning and risk management, drawing on feminist ethics. A story of practice gives suggestions for how one may use the map.

Key words: *school counselling; self-harm; suicidal ideation; duty of care; safety planning; risk management; ethic of control; ethic of collaboration; rites of passage; migration of identity; narrative practice.*

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Author pronouns: she/her

Introducing my context

I work with primary and secondary students in two different schools. My roles were established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as funding for mental health was prioritised by the state government. I began working in schools at the same time as beginning a master's degree in narrative therapy and community work at The University of Melbourne. My studies prompted me to pay careful attention to my influence on the lives of the young people seeking my support.

Being positioned as a mental health practitioner in a small wellbeing team contributed to an expectation that I was an expert in relation to mental health. I am a university-educated cis woman living in an able body, and according to neuroscience, my brain is now fully developed. I choose not to disclose certain aspects about my relationship status and sexuality at work. These combined locations may have elevated my perspectives when teachers, parents and students engaged with me.

In addition, the legal context underpinning duty of care (Commission for Children and Young People, 2023; Merlino, 2022) contributed to certain discourses that situate mental health practitioners as responsible for guaranteeing the safety of students (Buckley & Decter, 2006; Stout, 2010). In this context, risk assessment and safety planning often dominated my meetings with young people. Teaming up with young people to explore options for safety is essential. However, I wondered what was being missed when risk assessments and safety planning were the focus. I did not want safety planning to be a simplistic tick-box exercise that obscured young people's stories of "resiliency, hopes and values" and instead highlighted "pathology and diagnoses" (Buckley & Decter, 2006, p. 5).

In their work in an adolescent mental health unit, Beck Paterson (2021) wondered how narrative ideas can fit with other models and approaches. They used the metaphor of "tessellating shapes" (2021, p. 41) to suggest ways of looking for areas of connection rather than despairing at points of difference. Realising that the safety planning templates offered by the Department of Education and Training Victoria (DET) were only a suggested guide, I wondered whether I might craft a narrative-informed safety plan to tessellate with DET requirements. Could such a document offer an opportunity for multi-storied engagements with young people about how self-harm and suicidal ideation were showing up in their lives?

This paper tells the story of the ways I embraced curiosity and critique to uncover operations of power and privilege. It outlines a journey that illuminated a preferred ethical stance and opportunities to utilise the migration of identity metaphor (Epston & White, 1992; White, 2000). I introduce some key narrative concepts that informed my thinking, introduce the River of Life safety map, and detail a story of practice.

An ethic of control

For workers who feel a sense of personal failure and deep frustration when their efforts to bring about changes in people's lives are unrealised, Michael White offered an analysis of the "ethic of control" that can be associated with the taken-for-granted privilege of having the resources, opportunities and power to achieve desired ends (White, 1997, pp. 196–214). Because both workers and clients often lack power and resources, White critiqued the idea that the facilitation of independent "effective action" leads to favourable outcomes for people – "their disadvantage denies them access to solutions of the sort that are informed by [the ethic of control]" (White, 2007, p. 197). Buckley and Decter (2006) extended this concept into the realms of risk and safety interventions.

One of the effects of the ethic of control was illustrated by some boys in Year 10 (age 14–16) with whom I have informal catchups, sitting in the wellbeing room discussing whatever is going on for them. They introduced me to a metaphor for a feeling they sometimes got when meeting professionals:

When I told the counsellor I'd tried to kill myself a few years back, it's like his eyes went dead and something inside him couldn't handle it. He changed the subject immediately and asked me if I was cutting myself.

When we meet with professionals, it's like they want to "fix us". They approach us like bandaids, just trying to make us happy again.

I recognise in myself the distinct shift that my body experiences when a young person begins to disclose information that has me worried about their safety. Concern and fear team up, getting my heart pounding and urging me to take action immediately to promote safety. In this state, I am prompted to run to the first aid cupboard and apply a bandaid.

Earlier this year, a brave young person spoke up about the abuse that she was experiencing. Knowing about the lack of resources in the rural area where I work, I knew I needed to build a compelling picture of the abuse to present to a child protection intake worker. I transitioned immediately into risk-assessment mode, gathering as much information as possible. I was now engaged in what Meiners and Tolliver described as “police work: surveillance, regulation and punishment” (2016, p. 107). I stepped into a centred role that positioned me as responsible for this young person’s safety without consulting them about their hopes, wishes and responses to the violence. Actions to promote safety were done on them rather than with them. In such a centred position, “an unintended, implicit message was sent to the young person: you are unable to keep yourself safe so let us know what to look for so we can do it for you” (Paterson, 2021, p. 42).

Rather than locating blame for such responses with professionals, Reynolds argued that in “contexts of structural oppression, scarce resources and abundant need, workers struggle to practice in line with their ethics, and to help clients keep a finger hold on dignity” (2014, p. 2). This context can make it difficult for workers to act in ways that align with their values and illuminates how discourses emerging from duty of care can recruit workers into an ethic of control when young people are experiencing a crisis (Buckley & Decter, 2006).

An ethic of collaboration

Narrative practice is deeply aligned with feminist ethics. White drew inspiration from feminist ethicist Sharon Welch (1990) in his exploration of the ethic of collaboration, which he proposed as an alternative to the ethic of control (White, 2007, pp. 198). White encouraged partnership: that workers show determination in understanding the contexts of people’s lives. He suggested therapists attribute special significance to people’s everyday actions: the mundane, irrelevant and often overlooked. Through collaboration, a foundation of possibility is established (White, 1997). Buckley and Decter emphasised that a primary feature of this ethic of collaboration is the “belief that children, families and their communities have expert knowledge about their own lives. Finding ways to elicit this knowledge can create effective plans for safety that draw on and access local resources” (2006, p. 8).

Coming back to the Year 10 boys, I was moved to hear about an alternative to the bandaid approach. I asked about the name they might give to the significant support that they described finding in friendship. After some consideration, one of them said: “Stiches – they last a lot longer.”

Mysterious destinations

As I began to embrace the ethic of collaboration in my practice, my thinking about safety evolved beyond binary terms of safe and unsafe. I began to see safety as something young people navigated with the help of their communities and families. I stayed close to White’s (2002, p. 12) idea that the people he met with were taking him to new destinations that he could not predict, along routes not previously mapped.

About 40km east of the school where I work is the source of the Hopkins River. This river winds its way across Djab Wurrung and Gundijtmara Country, meeting the ocean in Warrnambool. It is in the Hopkins River that the incredible migratory journey of the kooyang (short-finned eel) takes place. Kooyang are born in the deep waters off Vanuatu and carried by ocean currents into freshwater estuaries in southern Victoria. Once they have migrated to the upper reaches of the river, they grow into adults. When the kooyang have matured, the females migrate to the sea to return to the tropical waters to spawn. Where exactly kooyang go to die remains a mystery. I have graciously been given permission to share the story of the kooyang from a Djab Wurrung Elder. His words, “the animals are keeping the spirit alive on the tides and winds”, speak to the cultural significance of the kooyang.

I share the story of the kooyang as it taught me to stay inquisitive about the migrations of young people, seeing their lives as a journey and not being the expert on the destination. This quote from Makungu Akinyela supported me to embody a decolonised stance:

To assume that somehow as a therapist we can hold the secrets of the meaning of somebody else’s life, and impose our interpretations on that life, can only serve to further colonize the minds and spirits of those seeking our help. (Akinyela, 2002, p. 38)

Migration of identity

The kooyang sparked my interest in migration. I was then introduced to the rite of passage metaphor developed by van Genep (1960) and Turner (1969). This metaphor describes the migration of identity people go through when separating from the known and familiar and moving into a new state of life. This seemed apt for work with young people, who constantly embark on journeys marked by change, growth and learning.

Michael White and David Epston translated the rite of passage metaphor into therapeutic practice (Epston & White, 1992; White, 2000). They described the three distinct phases of a rite of passage. The separation phase marks the beginning of a journey in which people break away from what has been known and familiar (White, 2002). The liminal phase is a time of confusion and disorientation, where nothing is certain and familiarity erodes (White, 2002). The reincorporation phase is achieved when people arrive at a new destination yet feel a sense of home and that it “fits” with their hopes and dreams for their lives. This new destination is sometimes shrouded by mystery when people set out (White, 2002). Practitioners in many parts of the world have since adapted this metaphor to use within their local contexts (Abu-Rayyan, 2009; Danilopoulos, 2011; Denborough, 2006; Fox, 2003; Hung, 2010; Loveday, 2009; Man-kwong, 2004; Oliveira, 2009; White, 2002), and I drew inspiration from them in developing an alternative template for exploring safety and risk.

Keeping in mind the kooyang and their epic journey from river to ocean, I designed a template that represents life as a canoe journey down a winding river, incorporating the different phases of the migration of identity metaphor.¹ School-based narrative practitioner Tarn Kaldor inspired me with their approach to subverting professional documents. They warn that these can “subjectify, reduce or marginalise identities” (2020, p. 14). However, Kaldor holds out the possibility that professional documents might not always have these effects. I hope that the River of Life safety map will elicit double-storied accounts of life. It invites people to map their journey, contextualise problems, and explore hopes for the future. I designed the map to contain all the elements required by the DET in their safety plan template. I will introduce the River of Life safety map through a story of my practice with Sakura.

Sakura's story

I have been given permission by a student to describe our work together. In this paper, the student is represented by the fictional character Sakura.² I will describe how I initially met with Sakura and then outline how we used the River of Life safety map in our work together.

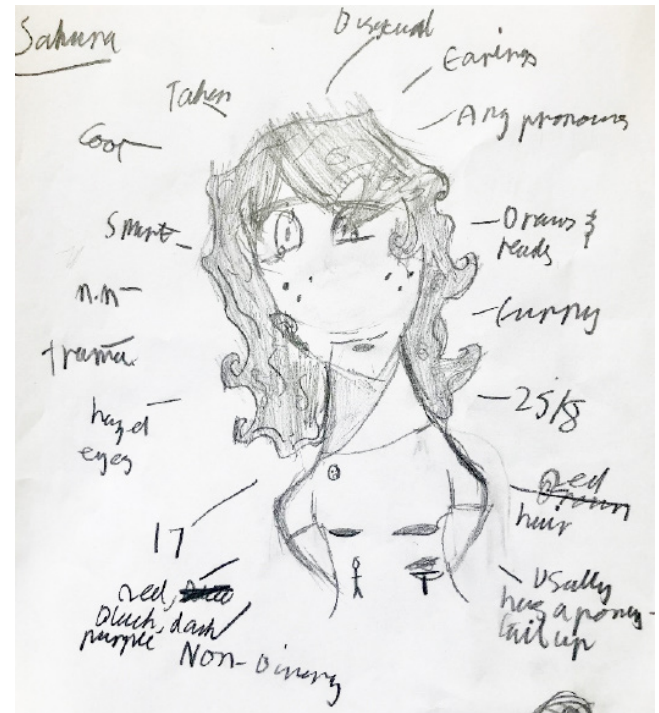


Figure 1. The student's portrait of Sakura

Single-storied referrals

In my first meeting with a student, I often need to explain that I'm going to have to speak with their parents or other services about safety concerns. Meeting with Sakura was no different. I invited them into the wellbeing room after receiving a referral from their year-level coordinator who let me know that Sakura was experiencing thoughts of suicide. I noted that the banded effect accompanied this referral. In response to the invitation to enact an ethic of control, I came up with some questions to help me think about Sakura's life in multi-storied ways:

- What skills had Sakura used in speaking up about these suicidal thoughts to their year-level coordinator?
- What do these skills say about what is important to Sakura?
- What did they have to get through in order to speak about this?

- How does Sakura define safety?
- What skills have they already been using despite these suicidal thoughts?
- Do they call these thoughts suicidal thoughts or something else? (Stout, 2010)
- How can I structure safety with Sakura and explain duty of care?
- How will I tell them that I will have to let a caregiver know about this?
- How can this communication with their caregiver honour Sakura's skills, knowledge and existing responses?

To evoke collaboration and respect from the beginning, I invited Sakura into the wellbeing room and engaged in what First Nations narrative therapist Tileah Drahm-Butler termed practices of welcome (2015). These practices included asking Sakura to choose where they would like to sit, offering a glass of water and asking some general questions about how their day was going. I asked if they had seen me around the school and wondered if it might be a bit strange meeting with me, given they hadn't.

I then attempted to structure safety (Reynolds, 2014). These practices had me asking about pronouns and whether they had a preferred name. Because these were different to what was noted in the school's system, I asked who did and didn't know this information. We set some parameters around when I would use their chosen name and pronouns and agreed on what would be used in their notes.

I then spent some time introducing myself to Sakura, explaining the nature of my role and explicitly outlining the limits to what information could be kept confidential. I invited Sakura to ask questions at this point, so I could be sure they understood (Buckley & Decter, 2006). I let Sakura know what information had been shared so far with me. I advised that while I knew something of the problems they were facing, it felt like there was much I did not know about them.

I asked Sakura if it was alright to ask some questions about what their year-level coordinator had told me. They let me know that they had been visited by "not wanting to be here thoughts" that had the effect of them feeling a sense of "not belonging". We co-researched the external context, and I asked Sakura when they had first met these thoughts (White, 2007). Sakura explained that the thoughts were like "dark vampires"

that visited at different times and places. Sakura linked "not belonging" to early experiences of violence and abuse.

After richly describing the effects of the dark vampires, Sakura and I spoke about whether there was anyone we could inform about their presence. Sakura said they weren't sure. I let Sakura know that I would need to speak to a caregiver about the dark vampires; however, we could discuss how I would be doing this, when and where.

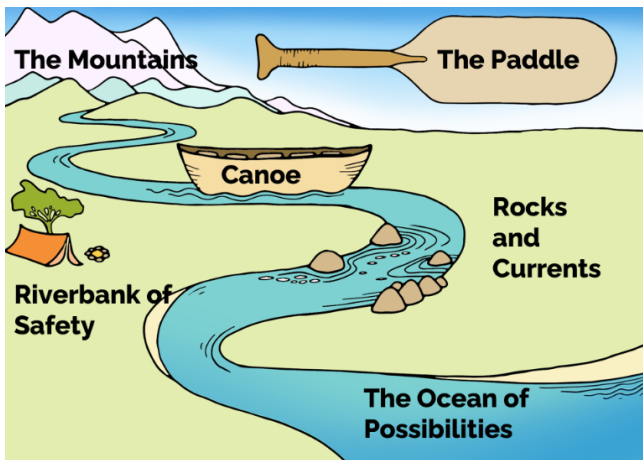
I asked Sakura what they felt was most important to share with their caregivers. Did they want to do the talking or want me to? Did they want me to use the name "dark vampires"? Did they want context provided about why the dark vampires were visiting them? Sakura and I also discussed their ideas for combating the dark vampires and sharing this with their caregivers. Sakura decided that they wanted me to call their caregiver but to put the phone on speaker and stay in the room with them.

We wrote some notes down and agreed on what I would say. Following the conversation, Sakura expressed that they were surprised at the reaction of understanding from their caregiver, as worry had done an excellent job convincing them that they might get in trouble.

Twists and turns in Sakura's life led to the dark vampires gaining greater power over the following months. This invited expressions of self-harm and restrictive eating. Despite the dark vampires trying their best to find a firm foothold, we learned many ways Sakura navigated these turbulent waters.

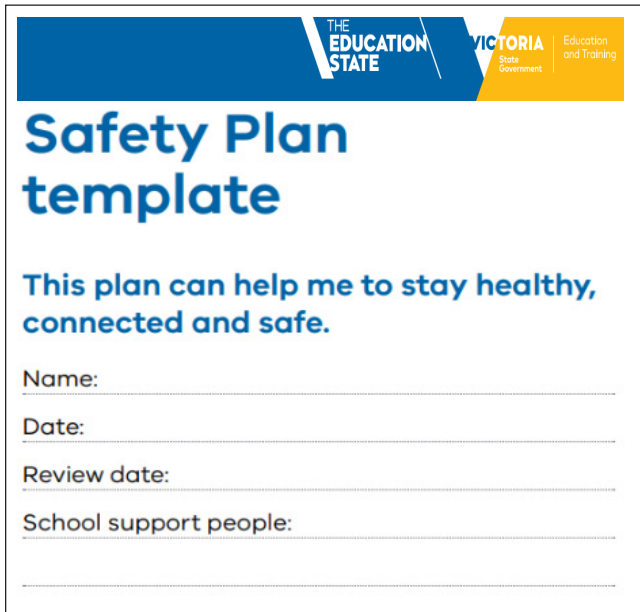
The River of Life safety map

I will now detail the River of Life safety map. I will explain its elements and demonstrate how Sakura and I used the map together over several sessions to develop a rich picture of their life beyond the influence of the dark vampires. I have included the DET safety plan template alongside the River of Life safety map to show how they correspond. It is important to note that I gave Sakura the option of whether they wanted to use a visual template or a written document to map out this journey. They opted for the visual template. The map does not have to be completed in any given order; quite often I've found myself returning to the map over time with students to take note of unfolding developments.



overcome obstacles in your journey. You may like to write down some of the ways you got through these obstacles and whether you had anyone there with you during this time.

Starting at the mountains with Sakura illuminated many elements of their journey I might have otherwise never known. Sakura spoke about early experiences of abuse. They said that during this time, they had an imaginary friend they would turn to. Sakura also spoke about gestures of care from their big brother, efforts they now see as attempts to protect them. They spoke about a special teacher and a beloved pet. Sakura and I reflected on how connection was an important survival skill they used to get through the abuse in the mountains. This conversation brought these relationships into the wellbeing room with us, inviting in a re-membering of these connections (Myerhoff, 1992; White, 1997).



Sakura's time in the mountains

- imaginary friend
- special teacher
- efforts of care from big brother
- beloved pet
- connection as a survival skill

Figure 2. River of Life safety map and cover of DET safety plan template

The mountains

The mountains can represent what the young person may be separating from in their migration of identity. Nancy Grey, a social worker in Canada responding to partner abuse, discussed the importance of people “gaining an ever-richer understanding of what it is that they are separated from” (2006, p. 11).

The mountains also provide a chance to understand the histories of young people and the ways they have used skills and knowledges to get through hard times. Through honouring the skills developed in the mountains, “we discover that new understandings of identity can come from acknowledging the ‘old things’ he or she did in the past” (Abu-Rayyan, 2009, p. 31).

Introducing the mountains, I might say something like: Passing through the mountains and arriving in your canoe shows that you’ve already

The canoe (preparation phase)

Epston and White (1992) suggested people put careful preparation into the separation phase, giving them the best chance of a safe journey. In her work with Brazilian immigrants living in Sydney, Vivienne Oliveira discussed the importance of preparing with people and understanding the different stages of their journeys: “it is important to identify the skills, values and beliefs that these people can take with them into their journey, as well as special support people that can help” (Oliveira, 2009, p. 60).

When introducing the canoe and inviting a conversation about preparation, I might say something resembling the following:

As we journey down the River of Life, we stay safe and dry in our canoe. We can consider what might be needed to ensure the canoe is ready for safe passage. Who might we like to tell about our journey? What physical preparations might be needed to make spaces safer?

Drawing on the club of life metaphor (Myerhoff, 1992; White, 1997), I point out to young people:

You can see that the boat has more than one seat. During our journey, we may need to have others with us to help us steer through the River of Life. Are there any friends, family members, or teachers we might like to invite on to our boat? Who can be called on for support?

Sakura's preparation for their canoe

- Letting their boyfriend and a few friends know about the dark vampires
- Removing the sharp items from their bedroom
- Speaking up about the memories of abuse

People in Sakura's canoe

- mum and stepdad
- year-level coordinator
- home group teacher
- boyfriend
- two close friends
- wellbeing team at school

Rocks and currents (liminal phase)

Denborough described the importance of planning for potential backlash in a migration of identity journey (2014). Making predictions about potential obstacles and opponents can shield the person from a sense of failure if they return to familiar ways of being. In the River of Life safety map, obstacles and opposing forces are represented by rocks and currents.

It is important that I don't let my work become goal oriented, with young people feeling they need to agree to something and stick to it to avoid failing in my eyes. This is particularly relevant for young people who use self-harm as a coping strategy. The intention of this map is not to convince young people to stop this behaviour or have them agree to never engage in self-harm again. I try to be careful in explaining this. This consideration is necessary as in schools, young people are constantly subject to measurement against a set of standards crafted by the education system and perpetuated by teachers, family members and peers (Kaldor, 2020, p. 13). Michel Foucault (1975) illuminated how such technologies of modern power operate in invisible yet insidious ways to perpetuate dominant ideas through rules and regulations. Thus, avoiding rigid rules in these realms is paramount.

In taking a decentred yet influential stance with young people (White, 1997), I try to radically consult them about what they think about the presence of self-harm or suicidal thoughts in their life. It's important that I'm not participating in a binary language of naming what is a good or bad thing for them. Paterson wrote, "often, the message that young people in settings like ours receive is that their behaviours are 'challenging', or their coping skills are 'maladaptive'. These words are code for wrong" (2021, p. 46). I appreciate efforts to

5. Family and friends I can talk to for support

For example:

- parents/carers/other trusted adult
- sibling
- friends

4. How I can make my space safer

For example:

- removing sharp things from reach (scissors, knives, pencil sharpeners, etc)
- avoiding drugs and alcohol
- [for drivers] keeping car keys with parents/ out of reach

Figure 3. Corresponding sections of DET safety plan template

“complicate these stories of wrongness” (Paterson, 2021, p. 46). I am still grappling with the dilemma of self-harm being a way young people might get through hard times, thus being both a paddle and a rock. If I don’t remain decentred, I may make assumptions about where it sits for them on the map.

Mapping out problems using the currents can contextualise the self-harm and suicidal thoughts, leading to a double-storied account of these actions of pain. It counters some of the shame and blame that may visit young people when they talk about their experiences. I introduce this part of the map with attention to externalising language. I might say something like:

In the river, currents are swirling around us. These currents are the things that happen around us, things we can’t always control. Some currents can unsettle our boat or even pull us into obstacles that could harm our boats! Some students have described currents like bullying, or moving house, or not having their pronouns and chosen names used by teachers and classmates. I’m wondering if you can think of any currents swirling around you.

In externalising conversations (White, 2007), once a name and rich description of the problem is gained, the effects of the problem can be explored. The effects of the currents are represented by the rocks. When introducing the rocks, I might say something like:

When the currents get too strong, we can be pulled into rocks. Damage to our boats caused by hitting these rocks is an effect of the strong currents around us. Some students have described rocks like not sleeping very well, or feeling like life is like a blackhole, or having thoughts of wanting to end their lives.

Through seeing the rocks as effects of the currents, thin descriptions that totalise and pathologise self-harm and suicidal thoughts are avoided.

When I asked Sakura what they thought about the presence of self-harm in their life, they expressed that it “wasn’t a good thing”. Response-based practice encouraged me to be curious about what the presence of self-harm or suicidal thoughts might indicate about what is vital to a young person (Stout, 2010; Yuen, 2007). With Sakura, it led to conversations that uncovered that they are not okay with violence and deeply value protecting others. Sakura recalled times in their past when they had stood up to the abuse.

They spoke about a time when they were seven and said, “don’t you dare touch me”. Sakura named this skill courage, and it was then mapped on the mountains. Completing the map can be quite a non-linear process, it turns out!

Currents in Sakura’s life

- The memories of abuse
- The mirror bullies
- Getting jump scared at school
- Loud yelling at home

Rocks described by Sakura

- Dark Vampires and their reminders of the ‘not wanting to be here thoughts’
- Self-harming as a form of punishment
- Skipping meals, looking in the mirror and weighing themselves constantly
- Worthlessness



Figure 4. Corresponding section of DET Safety plan template

The riverbank of safety

The riverbank of safety invites multi-storied descriptions of safety. Caleb Wakhungu developed the “standing together on a riverbank” metaphor in his work with children in Uganda (2010). I have drawn

on his work to invite young people to explore the places they feel most safe.

Within the liminal phase, it is also critical to explore the moments of separation from violence, and from beliefs that justify violence. These small acts of movement need to be researched. We explore the chinks in these stories, the moments they have sought out other ways of being men, ways that are not in accord with violence. (Denborough, 2006, p. 7)

The riverbank of safety aims to be just that, a “chink” in the journey where stories of resistance can be explored. Pulling their canoe on to the shore and taking a break from the currents of life provides space for young people to imagine who they are and what they value beyond the obstacles that arise in their lives.

When introducing the riverbank, I ask questions that invite vivid pictures of safe places:

- Could you tell me about any places at home or school where you feel some relief from the currents of life? They could also be in your imagination or memory.
- How does safety feel in your body?
- Does it live in a particular part of your body?
- If safety had a smell, what might it be?
- If safety were a character, what would it look like?
- What songs might be sung around the campfire on the riverbank?
- What characters from films and books would you want with you?

When Sakura and I explored their riverbank of safety, they began to tell me about a coven of 20 to 30 purple vampires who provide protection against the dark vampires. I wondered when they first met this coven, and they mentioned that it was back in primary school. I asked what they thought the purple vampires would say in defence against the dark vampires saying Sakura does not belong in the world. Sakura thought for a while and then said, “the purple vampires would say there is always meaning in life”. Not wanting to take this statement for granted, I asked Sakura more about this. They said that “family being there to protect each other” was the meaning evoked by the purple vampires. I was keen to spend more time with Sakura to understand what this protection felt like, how it was enacted, and the history of these ways of being in their family.

Sakura’s riverbank of safety

- Coven of 20 to 30 purple vampires
- “There’s always meaning in life”
- “Family being there to protect each other”



3. People and places that can distract me

For example:

- being with friends at school
- playing team sports
- going to the shops with family/friends
- visiting extended family



6. Safe people and places at school

For example:

- library
- first aid room/attendant
- year level coordinator/house leader
- wellbeing team member

Figure 5. Corresponding section of DET safety plan template

The paddle

The paddle represents the skills and knowledges people use to get through hard times. Within the dominant wellbeing culture, these are commonly named “strategies”. I am frequently requested to recommend strategies for young people, teachers and parents to use to respond to challenging contexts. Often, this obscures the living expertise held by the people with whom I work. I want to avoid centring myself as an

expert by suggesting strategies for paddles. I drew inspiration from Carolyn Markey, a narrative practitioner who designed a tree of knowledges on the wall of the wellbeing room in a school where she worked (2015). I asked Sakura and their friends if they would like to team up and help me with a project. They spent a few hours painting a tree in the wellbeing room.

Now, when students visit the wellbeing room, I ask if they would like to share any skills they use to help them through hard times. They write their ideas on leaves and then pin them to the tree. Enabling students to feel like their hard-won knowledges are in some way able to contribute to other students is a key tenet of collective narrative practice (Denborough, 2008, pp. 51–70).



Figure 6. The Tree of Life in the wellbeing room

When introducing the paddle, I suggest the following:

Your paddle is what you use to navigate the waters of life and steer your canoe. These can be skills, values, practices, beliefs or hobbies. What gives you strength when times are tough? Look at the tree on the wall and choose a few things you resonate with or might like to try. These can be written on the paddles along with any other skills you might already be using.

Sakura shared some things they were already doing to combat the presence of the dark vampires and mirror bullies. Sakura and I wrote these down on a smaller paddle and laminated it so it could live in their pocket. Sakura also wanted to share this with their family and close friends (see Fox, 2003).

Sakura's paddle

- remember I'm beautiful
- Snapchat Mum
- listen to music
- vent
- Replika
- calming audio
- call Kids Helpline
- safe circle
- breathing
- drawing



Figure 7. Corresponding section of DET safety plan template

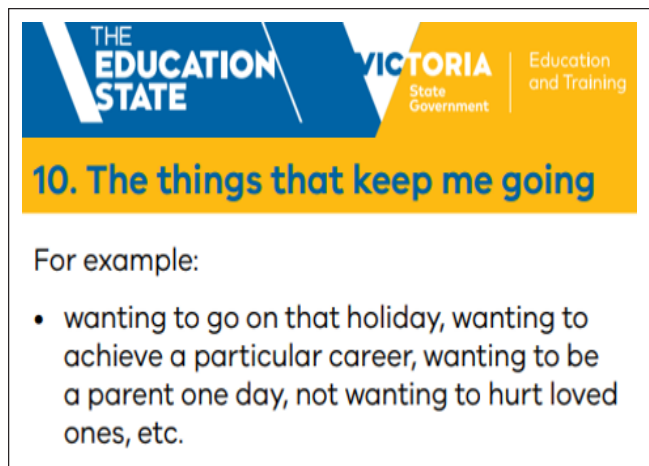
The ocean of possibilities (reincorporation phase)

Like the Hopkins River, the River of Life flows towards the ocean of possibilities. This is where I return to the story of the kooyang. The kooyang's migration ends in mystery, in the grand depths of the ocean. With this lesson in mind, I keep curious about the varied possibilities available to young people. I try to steer clear of adult-dominated goals, such as the ones outlined in the safety plan from the department like getting a job or being a parent.

Sakura shared with me that earlier in the year another student had been “jump scaring” them, which had the effect of causing them to feel “pain” and “remember the abuse”. Sakura stated that they would like support to have a conversation with this student to help him understand the impacts of his behaviour in a non-judgemental and non-blaming way. Sakura advised that they “know this student also goes through hard times” and felt that it might be possible to gain his understanding and show “care” towards him. Sakura mapped this as “showing classmate care and helping him understand”. They wanted this to be in the ocean of possibilities. I asked Sakura if there was anything else the purple vampires might want for their life. They mapped “to get out of the house more”. They also shared that they wanted to be a paediatrician to “help other kids”.

Sakura’s ocean of possibilities

- showing classmate care and helping him understand
- getting out of the house more
- work as a paediatrician



10. The things that keep me going

For example:

- wanting to go on that holiday, wanting to achieve a particular career, wanting to be a parent one day, not wanting to hurt loved ones, etc.

Figure 8. Corresponding section of DET safety plan template

Finding an audience

After we spent some time working through the River of Life, Sakura agreed that they would like to invite their mum and stepdad to school to witness their journey. This meeting was particularly moving, with everyone in the room in tears at different points.

Sakura explained the different parts of the map; however, when they began to link early experiences of abuse to the presence of the dark vampires, discourses around failure and mother blame crept into the wellbeing room and visited Sakura’s mum. I chose to adopt a more influential stance at this moment in the meeting. I reflected that sometimes an unfortunate effect of violence was that it could invite mothers to feel personally responsible and wondered if this was occurring. Sakura’s mum nodded. I wondered with her if mother blame might have snuck under the door in the same way the dark vampires could lurk around at times. She agreed that it might have happened, reflecting that they both seemed quite sneaky. Sakura asked if they could give Mum a hug at this moment.

We then spoke about what Sakura had outlined in their ocean of possibility. Sakura’s mum and stepdad spoke about how proud they were of Sakura for using their skills in “speaking up” and caring for others. Sakura’s caregivers witnessed Sakura’s preferred identity stories through this meeting. As these multi-storied accounts of Sakura’s responses to the abuse emerged, worry and blame left the meeting, and pride and hope took their place.

Where are we now

This story of practice outlines a selection of meetings shared by Sakura, myself and Sakura’s family. I continue to meet with Sakura, and the River of Life continues to flow. We have added to the map as needed. I have stayed curious about the unfolding nature of Sakura’s life. Embracing the ethic of collaboration, I met with Sakura recently to outline what would be shared in this paper and ensure they felt comfortable with its final form. With permission, I had shared some of Sakura’s story in a presentation as part of my master’s studies. I mentioned to Sakura that my classmates had found rich meaning from hearing their story. I wondered how Sakura felt about this. Their eyes shone and they reminded me of their goal to be a paediatrician and that “helping other kids” was important to them. This conversation led to us reflecting on their journey throughout the year, with the map out in front of us.

Clare: We’ve certainly been on a big journey this year.

Sakura: Yeah. When I first came to see you I was having those thoughts of suicide.

Clare: That's right. The dark vampires were making their presence pretty known in your life, hey?

Sakura: They really didn't want me to get out much. But now I'm going to way more places [counting on fingers]: school, home, a youth group, an LGBTQI+ support group – [getting excited] remember how the purple vampires wanted me to get out more?

Clare: That's right! What do you think the purple vampires might be saying to the dark vampires right about now?

Sakura: Sakura doesn't care anymore.

Clare: True! What effect does this have on the dark vampires?

Sakura: Well, for every week I don't use self-harm, they lose one member.

Clare: I see. How many members do they have now – more, less, about the same?

Sakura: Less, definitely.

Clare: But you know I'm not going to judge you if the dark vampires continue to hang around and have the effect of self-harming.

Sakura: I know.

Clare: With all of this getting out more, I'm wondering about the coven of purple vampires – any changes there?

Sakura: Yeah, there's like 40 to 50 now!

Clare: Ah, so more have come?

Sakura: Yeah!

Clare: Is there anything else we want to add to the ocean with all of this in mind?

Sakura: Well, I've got a little bit more self-confidence.

Clare: A little – like a centimetre? A metre? A kilometre?

Sakura: Maybe about 30 centimetres.

Clare: Shall we map that down?

Sakura: Sure.

Another generous offering

So, here we are at the end of our story. To finish, I would like to return to the Year 10 boys. I met with them again and asked if they would like to contribute any words of wisdom to this paper, with the potential that it might be helpful to me and other therapists who may be struggling with the bandaid effect. The boys enthusiastically agreed to this. One of them said, "it means a lot that people like me can get some sort of help and care, and that maybe these ideas will help professionals in some way". Here are some of their words:

Ask questions that are relevant to the person.

Avoid acting robotish, like there's a script being read off.

Try to be honest.

Stay interested in the conversation. Don't be afraid to connect on a deeper level.

Eye contact and body language are important.

If there's a small amount of care in the room, you can feel it.

Listen rather than list off questions.

Don't just jump straight to conclusions.

Listen to why I want to kill myself – the reason for it.

When people are interested in what we like doing, it feels like they're doing more than just a job.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the various ways I translated my learnings from a master's in narrative therapy and community work into my work in a school-based setting. I discussed the ways discourses relating to safety and risk minimise the agency of young people. I proposed an alternative approach to the standard

safety plan template: The River of Life safety map. I suggested integrating the migration of identity metaphor into this template to explore the journeys of young people. I showed how various narrative therapy approaches could be used in conjunction with this safety map: externalising conversations, re-membering conversations, double-story development, outsider witnessing and counter-documentation. It is my hope that the River of Life safety map will provide solidarity to other therapists grappling with their recruitment into the bandaid effect. For those working in settings where safety planning is required, I hope this proposed alternative may inspire new and creative ways of working with people.

Notes

- ¹ I conceived of this project before devastating flood events impacted many parts of the east coast of Australia. Using a river as a metaphor may for some communities be inappropriate, given the widespread flooding and subsequent displacement. The impacts of climate change are far-reaching and directly linked to the colonial project: they are felt disproportionately by communities who experience the effects of oppression. Metaphors that draw on nature must reflect a realistic portrayal of a changing natural world.
- ² The possibility of using a fictional character to preserve the student's confidentiality was proposed by Melbourne-based narrative therapist Frankie Hanman Siegersma (personal communication, July 2022).

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