Let's hear what the experts say:

Narrative co-research with young people resisting the gaze of success

by Angela On Kee Tsun

Angela On Kee Tsun is an honorary associate professor in the Department of Social Work and Social Administration at the University of Hong Kong.
aoktsun@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper documents a co-research journey with three young people who had been labelled as "socially isolated" and "underachievers". I introduce narrative ideas such as externalising the problem and its effects, exploring the absent but implicit, re-authoring and investigating the cultural context of how success is constructed in Chinese cultures. I describe the co-research methodology we used and the development of five themes; namely, the young people's views of the problem, their descriptions of the problem and its effects, the strategies they used against the problem and its effects, what they held to be important, and how the results of our co-research were extended to inform future plans and actions. After sharing the voices of the three young persons, I reflect on lessons from this co-research process.

Key words: co-research; absent but implicit; hopes and dreams; Hong Kong; school; exams; suicide; young people; youth; narrative practice

Tsun, A. O. K. (2025). Let's hear what the experts say: Narrative co-research with young people resisting the gaze of success. *International Journal of Narrative Therapy and Community Work*, (1), 64–75. https://doi.org/10.4320/DEPM3667

Author pronouns: she/her

I became a school social worker in Hong Kong in the early 1980s. At this time, students who were referred to work with me were often described as "underachievers" or as having "behavioural problems". Thirty-five years have passed, and many young people are still introduced to me because of "underachievement" and/or relational issues. Many of the problem descriptions they arrive with relate to academic achievement. Low motivation, internet addiction and school refusal are but a few of these.

In recent years, I have been alarmed by the tremendous increase in the number of children and young people in Hong Kong who end their own life. The suicide rate for those aged 15 to 24 almost doubled from 6.2 deaths per 100,000 people in 2014 to 12.2 in 2022, and there were 67 suspected suicides and 50 attempts involving people aged under 25 in Hong Kong in 2023 (South China Morning Post, 2024). Some of the reasons reported for youth suicidal ideation and suicide attempts include a belief that they have failed to live up to their parents' expectations, unsuccessful academic and school performance, high competition in the learning environment, anxiety about examinations, and bullying at school (Chen & Wong, 2024; Ho, 2024). Government departments, teachers, parents and the public all wish to find ways to prevent suicide, to support and encourage young people to seek help, and to reduce the study pressures that they may experience.

I have the privilege of hearing stories about young people's lives from their perspectives. These stories are often quite different from the dominant descriptions just mentioned. This has compelled me to seek out young people's voices and help them be heard. I am curious about what young people hold important in life. I also wonder how we can acknowledge and honour the strategies young people develop and use to survive hardship and move towards what they want in life. All these curiosities prompted me to start collaborating with young people in our conversations using what David Epston (1999) has described as a co-research process. I now invite you to walk this co-research journey with me and listen to what three young people want to tell us about their experiences.

Narrative ideas that informed the conversations

Narrative therapy, as co-founded by Michael White and David Epston (1990), respects people who come to therapy as experts on their own lives. I will outline the narrative therapy concepts that informed my conversations with the three young people whose stories are shared in this paper.

Construction of problem identities

"Persons live their lives by stories" (White, 1992, p. 123). When people come to tell stories about their lived experience, events with significance and workable meaning are selected and told. This may include information, feelings, expectations, wishes, images and impressions about their experiences. Other experiences may be left untold.

Bruner's (1986) dual landscapes help me understand story-making and story meaning. The landscape of action consists of life events (*fabula*) and story plots (*sjuzel*). The landscape of consciousness (or the landscape of identity as Michael White termed it) refers to how people make meaning from these events or plots. People's reflections on events express preferences, values, hopes and dreams.

The meaning we ascribe to an event is shaped by the "receiving context" for the event (White & Epston, 1990). The receiving context is the network of premises and presuppositions that constitute our maps of the world. Events that cannot be patterned are not selected for storying. According to Linde (1993, p. 3), "to exist in the social world with a comfortable sense of being a good, socially proper, and stable person, an individual needs to have a coherent, acceptable, and constantly revised life story". For this reason, stories that cohere with dominant cultural values (for example, taken-for-granted assumptions about what is "good" and "bad") often come to the fore. These may include accounts that situate experiences in relation to values such as self-cultivation and academic achievement – standards by which Chinese culture evaluates young people's performance.

Stories that link instances of failure to achieve dominant values can also be told and retold. People who do not "perform" according to dominant values are classified as "bad", "problematic" or as having "failed". Such labels recruit people into self-surveillance and self-judgement, monitoring themselves for deficits

and disorders (Foucault, 1980). As a result, people internalise the problem as part of who they are and reach a thin identity conclusion.

Externalising the problem

Some approaches position therapists as holding knowledge that enables them to make diagnoses and specific intervention plans, positioning the people who consult them as objects to be observed, assessed and treated in order that they be returned "back to normal". Narrative therapy holds a different view. Instead of situating problems within persons or communities, a narrative practitioner uses externalising language to separate the person from the problem. This creates space for the person to look into the problem and its effects on their life.

There are four categories of inquiry used to externalise a problem:

- eliciting a full description and naming of the problem
- mapping the effects of the problem
- evaluating the problem and its effects
- justifying the evaluation.

Please refer to Morgan (2000) and White (2005) for a detailed description of these categories and questions that can be used to explore them.

The absent but implicit and re-authoring

Life is multi-storied. Story plots different from the dominant problem-story plots are often forgotten or ignored because they are held to be less important. "The background experiences for problems often have to do with what people treasure or cherish" (Freedman, 2012, p. 2). An experience becomes problematic when it is different from or against the values that a person upholds.

A narrative practitioner uses "double listening" (White, 2003) to pay attention to both problem stories and experiences that might fall outside the problem stories. We listen for contrasts between two or more descriptions (the gaps) and attend to the knowledges and skills people engage in resisting the problem or maintaining or reclaiming hope. Questions may include:

- Despite the frustration, you persisted in finishing the work. How did you make it through?
- What might this tell us about what is important to you?
- What might this tell us about the values that you uphold?

As the absent but implicit (White, 2000) is explored, the person's values, hopes and dreams can be rendered visible for the person to richly describe or thicken. These alternative storylines reflect ideas, experiences and commitments that people give value to, long for or hold precious. People can rewrite or re-author their life stories, reposition themselves from being problematic to being valuable, and regain a sense of personal agency to determine directions for plans or actions.

In summary, narrative conversations are externalising conversations in which the practitioner collaborates with the person who comes to consult them. The practitioner holds a not-knowing but influential position by asking questions so that the person can identify and explore alternative stories that exist alongside problem stories. In these conversations, the problem and its effects are unpacked so that the person gains space to discover alternative stories that align with their values, hopes and dreams, and these can guide them to plans and actions.

Construction of success and failure in Chinese cultures

The cultural context of a problem is another key consideration. For the three young people whose stories are shared here, local constructions of success and failure were important to consider. Academic achievements and harmonious relationships have long been yardsticks to measure the success of children and young people in Chinese cultures. Under the gaze of "the eye of success", many young people who do not show "good academic performance" or "good relational skills" receive labels such as "incapable", "useless", "unsociable" and "abnormal". These labels not only affect their lives but also shape their identity as a "failure".

McDull, a pig, is a popular cartoon character created by Hong Kong cartoonists Alice Mak and Brian Tse. McDull has featured in comic strips, television programs and films, and he is seen as representing the lives of ordinary people in Hong Kong. He is not smart, but he has many dreams. He tries, fails and feels disappointed, but he persists, tries again and never gives up exploring his dreams. In one of the movies, *My Life as McDull* (Yuen, 2001) McDull's mother is

shown in the delivery room making wishes for the son about to be born. The list includes "smart, clever, studying hard". This list represents adults' expectations of children and young people in the local context. Academic achievement and harmonious interpersonal relationships are values that Chinese culture upholds and that we aspire to in our lives even in contemporary Chinese cultures.

The eye of success

Polanco (2010) used the term "eye of success" in relation to the experiences of North American university students dealing with ideas of "success" in Western educational traditions. This reminds me that as counsellors we may have internalised the norms of the "receiving context" (Bateson, 1979). According to Foucault:

> Each society has its regime of truth, its "general politics" of truth: that is, the types of discourse it harbours and causes to function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true from false statements, the way in which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures which are valorised for obtaining truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1976, p. 13)

Across societies, two of the institutions that convey "truth" and monitor people's behaviours are the education system and the family. These institutions implement the eye of success, and the self-surveillance it invites shapes people's lives and identities.

Success as a cultural and historical construction

In about the 7th century CE, imperial China put an end to hereditary nobility and hereditary tenure of office by introducing state examinations. People from the peasantry then had a chance to join the scholarly gentry and become state officials if they studied hard to master the Chinese scripts and had money to travel to the capital (Lang, 1946). Educational achievement became the only way for ordinary people to move up the class ladder, gaining wealth and prestige, and it was also a way to honour one's ancestors. Educational attainment has since been regarded as fundamental to child development and self-cultivation. The Chinese saying "Everything is inferior, only scholars are superior" still guides us to achieve academically.

Confucianists believe that the survival and continuation of civilisation is a communal attainment. This has laid the foundation for the significant role of harmony and social relationships in Chinese cultures. The virtues of humaneness, righteousness, willingness to sacrifice, loyalty and filiality regulate individual behaviour as well as interpersonal relationships (Chinese Culture Connection, 1987).

Under the normalising gaze that reflects the dominant values in Chinese cultures, students who cannot attain satisfactory or good academic achievement, or are not seen as being sociable, are viewed as problems to be fixed. The three young persons in this co-research were affected by this gaze.

Narrative co-research

David Epston, an anthropologist as well as a narrative therapist, developed co-research as a therapeutic practice through his collaboration with children, young people and their families suffering from issues like asthma, genetic disorders, anorexia or "dirty pants" (Epston, 1999, 2016).

Both David Epston and Michael White conceived of therapy as "a reciprocal exchange" and honoured the local knowledges of persons consulting practitioners (Epston, 2014, p. 106). Karl Tomm, a family therapist, commented to David Epston after watching his conversations with families from behind a screen: "David, you do research all the time" (Epston, 2014, p. 108). Epston came to understand his daily therapeutic practice as a form of research or co-research. Narrative practice itself can be seen as a form of co-research that is as much ethnographic as it is therapeutic.

People who come to consult a practitioner become the consultants, giving the practitioner the privilege of listening to their stories about the problem and its effects on their lives, as well as counter-stories of how they may have resisted hardship – stories against the problem. In the process, the values, hopes and dreams that support their resistance are rendered visible as the stories unfold. The practitioner is "an archivist, a co-creator and an anthologist of alternative knowledges" (Epston, 2001, p. 179).

In the co-research process, the person and the therapist co-produce an account of the person's insider knowledge about suffering. Each person consulting

the therapist is a co-researcher who is "an equal part in the process of exploration and it is their knowledge and skills about their own life and relationship that are the focus of their conversations" (Dulwich Centre Publications, 2004, p. 33). In co-research conversations, the practitioner "raises a number of questions to the person's conscious awareness" (Epston, 1999, p. 143). These questions guide the conversations while the practitioner simultaneously seeks to follow the person's lead.

My co-research journey with the three experts

Epston's ideas about co-research have encouraged me to embark on narrative journeys with people as co-research partners. I started to explore possibilities of consulting young people about their stories and how they make meaning of their life experiences. I am particularly drawn to how young people are affected by cultural discourses that shape failure identities. I am also curious about their resistance to being positioned as failures and their persistence in upholding their values.

As therapists positioning ourselves as co-researchers, we must neither characterise young people "as victims or dupes to structure" nor "erroneously celebrate them as completely free actors" for ideological purposes: "We must simply listen to what young people themselves have to say when making sense of their own lives" (Stephen & Squires, 2003, p. 161). As a practitioner and an archiver in the co-research journey, I took a not-knowing position and avoided prior assumptions about the problem and about possible solutions. I did not have any expectations about how the sessions would go or how they would end. Rather, the conversations were opportunities to explore the young people's experiences, their knowledges and skills in resisting the problem and its effects, and the values that the person holds on to (Epston, 1999, 2014).

To capture the experts' stories – particularly their meaning-making in relation to the problems, their resistance and strategies against the problem and its effects – and to render their values, hopes and dreams visible, I had in mind the narrative maps that guided all the conversations. On the other hand, decisions about which direction to go in and what information to pursue in greater detail were led by the young people.

With informed consent I was granted discretion to record our conversations for research, training and publication purposes. All the conversations were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by members of the Hong Kong Blind Union who were experienced transcribers.

Meeting the experts

Fung, Kit and Hong, aged between 17 and 19 years, were school repeaters who were seen as having low academic achievement. Fung and Kit were asked by their teachers to see the school social worker because of perceived underachievement and relational issues. Fung's teacher described him as a loner who "walked like a zombie", stumbling here and there during recess and lunch hours. Kit was described in similar terms. In addition to seeing Kit as a loner, Kit's teacher was concerned about the crying spells that Kit had: "she would cry during class for unknown reasons". Hong sought help from the school social worker as he was being attacked by depression and suicidal thoughts.

Soon, the school social worker felt that the conversations with these young people were going nowhere beyond the problem description. She suggested they try having one-to-one conversations with me. The young people were curious about this option and agreed to come to see me. Kit, Fung and Hong visited my office six, nine and 10 times respectively.

Below, each of these experts is introduced and I share some of our early conversations getting to know the problems they were experiencing. We began with externalising conversations. I collaborated with them to unpack the problems and their effects. As they gained some separation from the problems, space was made available to render visible their preferences, values, hopes and dreams. Knowing how my questions could influence or lead their responses, I always bore in mind to ask experience-near questions (questions that followed what they had just said).

To decentre myself and adopt a not-knowing position, I started the conversations by inviting the young person to take the lead: "What you would like to talk about?" Questions that I found helpful in offering a space for loitering and inviting a full description of the problem or issue consisted of "You mentioned …, could you tell me more?" and "Besides …, what else would you like to talk about?"

Kit's story

When I asked Kit what she'd like to talk about, she responded immediately: "relationships with others and study problems".

Kit shared how study pressure was affecting her relationships with her classmates: "I felt irritable and would throw my temper at them when they talked loudly while I was studying. I just could not concentrate. They said I was unfriendly behind my back and stopped talking to me." Kit wanted to focus on her studies and decided not to be bothered by human relationships, but she would cry when she felt she could not relate well.

To my enquiry about what these tears expressed, Kit said, "They [classmates] did not talk with me, and no one cared to understand me … They did not like me and often accused me of throwing tempers". She said she had no friends and that the temper affected her concentration and her relationships with others. At the end of our first conversation, Kit realised she would like a peaceful environment to prepare for the examination, but at the same time, she cared about relationships. She was "surprised to know that I expect myself to have good academic performance as well as good relationships with people". I was curious about whether or not this surprise was pleasing to her. Kit said she was happy with the realisation as it gave her directions: study hard and improve relationships with people.

To unveil the problems and their effects, I invited each of the young people to talk more about their concerns. In our second conversation, Kit brought a birthday card with greetings from her classmates. I was curious about why the classmates would give her a birthday card if she had no friends at school. To start the conversation, I asked Kit about which greeting struck her most. She chose "do play with us" and wondered if the classmate meant it.

Kit: They said they wanted to make friends with me, but we failed in the end. Was it because I am no good?

Angela: Do you mean you have had chances to play together?

Kit: Yes, in fact, they accepted me. It's because I am asocial. They said I am asocial.

Angela: Who said so?

Kit: The teachers and the classmates said so. I don't know why I am asocial.

Angela: How do you notice "asocial"?

Kit recalled an episode when asocial was present: When a class photo was being taken, she stood in the corner and would not do the same pose as others did. The asocial stopped her from building a relationship with the others. I asked her to tell me more about how the asocial might have been affecting her relationships.

Kit added more details. Sometimes she became irritated when she could not finish her work. At other times she knew her classmates were speaking against her. Just that morning, a girl had stood beside her table, and Kit became anxious that the girl might do something against her. As I asked more about this, Kit named this problem "suspicious and over-sensitive".

I began to explore the history of suspicious and over-sensitive. Kit narrated more events about backbiting that occurred when she repeated Secondary 5. A close friend with whom she shared secrets turned against her. She felt horrible. At this point, Kit also shared her experience of being bullied when she was in primary school. She felt hurt and cried.

Fung's story

Fung's response that "there is nothing we can do" seemed, on one hand, to be expressing a sense of helplessness. On the other hand, I wondered what might be absent but implicit in this statement. I kept this curiosity in mind and waited for a fuller description of the problem from his perspective.

I did not ask Fung an absent-but-implicit question about "nothing we can do" as it seemed too early to explore his preferences and values. Instead, I asked about what made him come to our meeting.

Fung: Ms Chan [the school social worker] asked me to come.

Angela: What made you visit Ms Chan?

Fung: My form master asked me to visit Ms Chan.

Angela: Was visiting us your preference?

Fung: It doesn't matter.

Angela: Why would the teacher recommend you visit Ms Chan?

Fung: He said I always appear to be unhappy.

Angela: How did he notice that?

Fung: I don't know.

Angela: Did he ever mention this to you?

Fung: He did, but I forgot what he said.

Angela: You just mentioned you visited Ms Chan at the teacher's request. You came all the way here because Ms Chan asked you to. Did visiting us mean anything to you?

Fung: Whatever.

My attempts to invite Fung to take the lead and to understand what he wanted from our conversation were going nowhere. I decided to ask an influential question.

Angela: Could you tell me, what did you and Ms Chan talk about?

Fung: We simply waffled. We also talked about pop songs and family matters.

Angela: What did you waffle about? [I could have asked about the pop songs and family matters]

Fung: Don't know what to say. Whatever.

Angela: I could be wrong, but it appears that you will do what others want you to do.

Fung: Whatever. This is just a nominal title.

Angela: Nominal title?

Fung: Whether or not I am an accommodating person depends on individuals' perspectives.

Angela: What do you mean? Whose perspectives are you referring to?

Fung: I don't know what to say. It's difficult to know about others' views.

Angela: Who are these "others"?

Fung: You can choose just any person from a random sampling and ask them about it. I don't know.

There were several "it doesn't matter", "whatever" and "I don't know" responses, which could have meant Fung was disinterested in our conversation, he didn't want to talk, or that he did not know what to say. However, I was encouraged that our conversation did not come to a dead end. We were engaged in a dialogue, and I was thankful that Fung was trying to help me understand his thoughts and expert knowledge.

After summarising or providing an "editorial" of what he had just told me, I asked again:

Angela What do you look for in our conversation?

Fung: [After a short silence] I don't know. I have not thought about it.

Angela: I could be wrong, but it appears that you are doing what other people want you to do.

Fung: I think that too.

Angela: I am not sure if coming here is what you want. Here, you can choose to say what you want to say and share what you want to do. We can do it together. Would you like to do that?

Fung: I want a better relationship with those who care about me.

Angela: Who are these people?

Fung then gave me a list of the people who cared about him. This might as well have been a list of people who he cared about.

From the second interview onward, Fung shared about his studies and adults' expectations of his academic performance. He said that family members had applied great pressure on him since he was in Secondary 4, particularly his paternal aunt who became his guardian after his mother died of cancer. The aunt would call him or meet with him several times a week and would say, "How is your study?", "Study hard", "Don't play too much; spend your time on study, and enter a university". Besides the schoolwork, projects, tests and examinations also created pressure on him. He suffered from insomnia.

Hong's story

When I asked Hong what he'd like to talk about, he showed me scenic photos he had taken in the countryside, and commented "the king of worst".

Hong believed he had "poor performance" compared with others and he named the problem as a "vicious cycle". He had been a victim of bullying ever since he entered secondary school. His classmates said he was autistic and would blame him for everything. This made him unhappy and emotional, and affected his sense of competence. He also lost his sense of control particularly when he was in a group. I was curious about what he described as being "fearful of the human being".

Angela: What is this fear like? How big is it? How tall is it? What is its colour?

Hong: It accelerates my heartbeat.

Angela: How else does this fear affect you?

Hong: It creates negative emotional responses, hard-to-concentrate, and somatic responses.

Angela: What kind of somatic responses?

Hong: Diarrhoea, dizziness. It affects my emotions and then my performance.

Angela: It affects your performance?

Hong: Academic performance, interests. Then it started affecting my self-esteem and self-confidence.

Angela: Any other effects?

Hong: Negative emotions, self-confidence, can't get charged up, relationships. The cycle keeps spinning on and on.

Angela: How would you name this?

Hong: Vicious cycle.

Hong shared more fully about the vicious cycle and its effects on his confidence, which in turn affected his social relationships. It kept him from approaching a group.

Resisting the eye of success

Each of the young people described problems related to the "eye of success". As each problem was externalised, I sought to provide a platform for the young people to examine the problem's history. The effects of the problems became increasingly visible. Throughout these conversations, I used double listening to hear the young people's alternative stories. As they described problems they were facing and their effects, I would ask myself: What else are they trying to tell me? What are their preferences? What could be absent but implicit in their description of the problem and its effects? Soon, their resistance to the normalising gaze became visible.

Kit's story

When Kit was invited to evaluate the problem, she said, "I thought if I did not relate to anybody, they would have nothing to gossip about me. But it was even worse when I isolated myself from them". Her intention to withdraw from her classmates became clear. I therefore asked a question about what was absent but implicit in this – "What was your choice then?" – to help make visible her intention. Kit stressed that she was trying to keep away from backbiting and gossiping. The "having no friends" was her agentic action against backbiting and gossiping which were not her preference in social relationships.

If backbiting and gossiping were not Kit's preference, what did she look for in social relationships? Without hesitation, she said, "I look for candidness, mutual help, care and acceptance in relationships. Acceptance is very important. We all have weaknesses. We shouldn't gossip about others but appreciate others' merits".

Kit realised that the "unsociability" was a choice rather than a problem. She was certain about what she valued in friendship: candidness, mutual help, care and acceptance.

As what Kit held important in social relationships was rendered visible, she was invited to richly describe her experiences with valued relationships. I had the privilege of hearing more about her time with several close friends.

These conversations provided a basis for looking to the future. With Kit's realisation about what she held important in friendship and her quest for friendship in school, I was curious about where this would lead. Kit decided to take the initiative to make friends. I asked who came to mind and how the initiative could take place.

Fung's story

I was curious about Fung's responses to the study pressure he was receiving from his uncle and aunt, his teachers and from broader social discourses. Fung said that he tried his best to study. As we talked more about

this, he gave me the privilege of hearing details of his study practices and his plans as well as some of the strategies he had been using to resist the pressure.

Fung: I would not let them know that I listen to pop songs while doing homework or revisions.

Angela: Why?

Fung: They would just witter. My uncle would ask me not to do other things while studying … My aunt said my academic results were no good. Though she did not say anything, I knew she wanted me to enter a university … Among the 10 children in the clan, I am the only one who can study high school and may get into a university.

Angela: How did you respond to the expectations?

Fung: I chose not to be bothered.

Drawing was another activity Fung would engage in when he was tired and felt "unmotivated to study". His strategies to "try my best" were becoming more visible. He knew clearly that he preferred science subjects and did not prefer memorising texts, as in subjects like history and literature. When the time came, he planned to turbocharge his efforts – to do more exercises besides homework and more revision: "I know what I am doing."

Fung also asserted that "it's beyond reproach that we should accommodate others, but we don't have to become a different person. Just be me". He would try his best. He might have a sense of failure, but he would not be anxious even if he could not gain entry to a university. An alternative pathway he had identified was to study electronic engineering at a vocational college. Fung was also good at sports such as long-distance running, swimming and sailing. He would consider further developing these hobbies into a career, such as becoming a fitness coach or lifeguard. Together with his friends, he planned to take first aid and lifesaving classes.

Fung used a metaphor to describe his relationship to his studies:

Fung: I will keep up the long-distance running. When you are exhausted, you can choose to stop or to continue. I choose to continue till the end of the race.

Angela: What made you decide to continue?

Fung: Once you have stopped, you need extra effort to re-start.

Angela: What keeps you going?

Fung: Hoping for a better future.

Angela: What do you mean?

Fung: The recent run was quite good and pretty encouraging [he was referring here to his examination results].

Angela: How was it?

Fung: There were improvements.

In our last conversation, Fung said he had already applied to the Fire Department. Perhaps he is now serving one of the fire stations.

Hong's story

Hong was invited to evaluate the problem: "Do you like the vicious cycle?"

He replied, "I tried to stop it but found no way". He also mentioned "the external environment".

Angela: What about the external environment?

Hong: Complete darkness.

Angela: Has there ever been a dim light?

Hong: Nope.

Angela: Nope?

Hong: I dared not go even if you pushed me to, nor would I want to say a word. They were all laughing and joking. This kind of environment made me even more unhappy.

Angela: What made you choose to go then?

Hong: I tried to go.

Angela: Why would you try?

Hong: Still I could not make it.

Angela: Could I say that you were trying to stop the vicious cycle?

Hong: I could not control it. It was not easy. I could not make it.

Angela: What were you trying to do?

Hong: Without self-confidence, there is no sense of accomplishment, and you are always a loser. I couldn't figure out what it was and what to do.

Apart from the full description of the problem story, I also intended to render visible Hong's values and beliefs, hopes and dreams by asking questions about what might be absent but implicit in his account, such as "Has there ever been a dim light?", "What made you choose to go?", "Why would you try?", and "What were you trying to do?"

Hong said, "I want to make changes … to excavate success". He began the excavation through drawing but was discouraged again by comparisons.

Hong was not happy with some teachers who he thought did not have enough knowledge or believed he was not interested in what was taught. I was curious about why he would insist on gaining a bachelor's degree or master's degree.

Hong: It's just a rough idea, probably for knowledge.

Angela: What kind of knowledge? Or why would you want to gain more knowledge?

Hong: I do not want to enter the work world, but I know people may expect some work experience before you pursue a master's degree.

Angela: Uh huh.

Hong: If I have higher qualifications, I can earn more. I am a philistine, right?

Angela: What would the money be for?

Hong: For a quality life.

Angela: Who would have a quality life?

Hong: Me.

Angela: You.

Hong: First and foremost, to reciprocate my father.

Angela: You would like to reciprocate your father.

Hong: If there are surpluses, I will help other people.

Though we did not go further into "reciprocate my father" and "help other people", Hong re-engaged with his preferred identity of being a filial and helpful person.

Hong was clear about what he wanted and believed that "the road will be easy for me" once he "started the engine" and began heading towards his goal. Nonetheless, he had "a vague sense of propulsion", and "the ship has a definite destination but has no gasoline". Taking up his metaphors, I asked how he might access some gasoline.

In my last three conversations with Hong, I invited some students from a narrative therapy introductory course to witness his stories. He narrated that he wanted to leave the comparisons behind and be himself. Hong ended up joining a photographic club that one of the outsider witnesses recommended to him. He did not come back to my office, and I was certain he already found his preferred life and identity.

Reflections: Lessons from the three experts

Success is a social, cultural and historical construction. In Chinese cultures, good academic performance and good social relationships continue to be a measure of success for young people, thereby shaping the three experts' failure identities as they tried hard to find ways to attain satisfactory academic performance to get into university.

They were also given labels such as "loner" and "asocial" because they were perceived to have few friends in school.

However, these descriptions were just one side of the story. With space and an invitation to tell their alternative stories, they did not surrender to the inspecting gaze and resisted the normalising gaze of the eye of success. Their major concerns were not about success *per se* or whether people would perceive them as failures.

As their stories unfolded, their preferences about relationships became visible. Kit and Hong decided not to pursue friendships with their classmates even though they longed for social relationships. Kit did not want to gossip about others or be gossiped about, and Hong did not want comparisons. Their choices reflected these values.

The three experts had a repertoire of strategies, knowledges and skills that they used to get through hardships. Drawing, listening to pop songs, taking photographs, physical exercise and learning music theory were hobbies that were often regarded as unhelpful to academic performance. However, these practices embodied insider knowledge about getting through hard times. When these strategies and skills were acknowledged, honoured and thickened, the values that supported each of the young people were rendered visible.

Adults often make remarks about young people:

> They are too young to know what to do.
>
> They do not have any plans for the future.
>
> We must start educating them for career planning early.

The experts in this co-research reassured me that they did have values that they held on to, and they had hopes, dreams and plans for the future, which they persisted in heading towards. These voices need to be heard.

Conclusion

This paper documents my co-research journey with three young people who had been labelled as underachieving and social isolated. In our narrative conversations, we explored their subjective experiences. As a counsellor, research partner and archiver with curiosities and a not-knowing position, I had the privilege of joining with these young people in examining the problem labels, and exploring their resistance to the problems and their effects. When the values they held dear and their hopes and dreams were elicited, directions, plans and agentic actions became available.

Very often, counsellors do not hear from the people we have met with nor have further contact with them after our conversations come to an end. Several years ago, I wanted to share Kit's story in a publication and I called Kit about it (though she consented before we ended our collaboration, I wanted to make sure about it again). I was struck by the cheerfulness of her voice over the phone. She told me she was a public relations officer. I had an image of her as a trustworthy, helpful, accepting and caring workmate and friend.

To draw this paper to a close, I would like to thank you all for witnessing my co-research journey with these young experts and the new stories that were realised through our collaborative journey. The collaboration contributed to my life as well as the young people, for the discoveries stayed in my consciousness and supported me to continue yet more journeys with people who granted me the privilege to listen to their previously untold stories and unheard voices.

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