



“Dear Violence”:

Using process drama, narrative therapy and collective letters to explore and acknowledge students’ experiences of domestic violence in PNG

by Dorothy Wanega and Jane Awi



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Abstract

This article presents preliminary findings of a locally developed research project that combined arts-based research tools and narrative therapy as a response to the effects of domestic violence on the academic performance of school students between the ages of 16 and 19. Students in selected schools from two regions of Papua New Guinea (PNG) participated in the study. These students experienced a set of creative exercises devised to enable them to speak about their experiences of domestic violence and to elicit and honour their stories, responses and suggestions about ways of addressing and preventing further violence in PNG. From the rich material offered by the students, three collective letters were written for use in advocacy and education. These letters and this paper provide a voice for PNG school students. This paper also presents a way of bringing together arts-based research and narrative practice, offers an example of the use of collective letters to represent qualitative research findings, and documents a form of research that encompasses social action on community problems.

Key words: arts-based research; qualitative research; domestic violence; family violence; process drama, externalising, collective letters; narrative therapy; narrative practice

Arts-based research has become increasingly popular in the last two decades as a method to explore and understand social problems. It is used within education, health care, social science, behavioural science and developmental studies. Arts-based research engages an array of art forms including dance, drama, music, visual arts and creative writing. These art forms have been used to gather data especially when researching sensitive and complex issues such as teenage pregnancies (Zimeray, 2022), cyber bullying (Gerega, 2018) and domestic violence (Ganaii et al., 2017). In the last 10 years, arts-based research tools have been developed to better communicate the impacts of HIV/AIDS (Awi, 2014).

We used the arts-based research tools previously developed at The University of Goroka and Queensland University of Technology (Awi, 2014), and combined these with narrative therapy approaches to support school students to share their thoughts, stories and experiences of the effects of domestic violence on their academic performance. We also hoped to provide some relief from the isolation and silence that often accompanies domestic violence.

Domestic violence is a very significant issue in PNG. It is exacerbated by cultural practices such as bride price (Richardson et al., 2021). Cultural knowledge is needed to address this complex issue. There is research in PNG about Indigenous ways of addressing sensitive issues such as HIV/AIDS through the use of symbols, metaphors and cultural performance (Awi, 2014; Awi et al., 2018; Haseman et al., 2014). As local researchers, we drew from our cultural knowledge to complement the arts-based research and narrative therapy approaches. This enabled stronger connection with participants through our shared cultural understanding and play-based activities. The approach was purposefully designed to support young people to share their thoughts, stories and experiences of the effects of domestic violence on their academic performance.

Our research is perhaps the first attempt to use the specific arts-based practice of process drama (Neelands & Goode, 2015) in combination with narrative therapy to investigate how domestic

violence is affecting young people's lives and academic performance. It is also the first attempt to elevate the stories, experiences, ideas and suggestions of young people through combining process drama and collective letter writing (more on this later).

Four secondary schools – Aiyura National High School, Kondiu Secondary School, Kerevat National High School and George Brown Secondary School – located in the Highlands and New Guinea Islands regions of Papua New Guinea (PNG) were selected for the first two phases of the study. Phase one involved schools in the Highlands region and phase two involved schools in the New Guinea Islands region. Participants were aged between 16 and 19 years.

We hoped that if process drama and narrative therapy explorations proved helpful to students, then this might contribute new options for PNG researchers to use in further projects in response to pressing social issues.

Domestic violence and school performance

Lester (2001) described domestic violence as violence between people living in a close relationship including spouses, conjugal couples, family members or even flatmates. Domestic violence can be physical, sexual or psychological. It is recognised that violence between two people impacts greatly on other members of the family, household or community – especially children.

Domestic violence is a global issue present across communities. According to UNICEF (Carmo, 2025), over 600 million children worldwide are exposed to violence at home. Studies have documented the prevalence of violence in PNG – within homes, in schools and in the wider community – and the lack of support services for survivors (Ganaii et al., 2017; Putt & Dinnen, 2020; Putt et al., 2021; Setepano, 2016). A recent study found an alarming 210 per cent increase in reports of gender-based-violence in PNG from 1986 to 2025 (Faa & Gunga, 2025).

Numerous studies from different parts of the world have established correlations between students' exposure to domestic violence at home and poor academic performance. Studies from the United States (McGaha-Garnett, 2013) to Kenya (Karanja, 2019; Phares, 2017) to Fiji (Vakeke et al., 2017) have described how the immediate effects of domestic violence in students' lives can manifest in truancy and violence. Students may engage in fights and disobey authorities. Some drop out of school, significantly influencing the trajectory of their lives (Karanja, 2019; McGaha-Garnett, 2013; Phares, 2017; Vakeke et al., 2017).

Michael McManus (2006) described in the words of students in Madang, PNG, some of their devastating experience of domestic violence and its prevalence – with 97% stating that the problem of domestic violence is severe in PNG. McManus (2006) also reported that students exposed to domestic violence in childhood responded in different ways. Their strategies included running away, hiding in nearby bushes and attempting to stop the fighting. Others turned to drugs and alcohol when they left home. One student recalled her mother losing consciousness and her father threatening to burn her alive. At that time, the student wished she was “a strong man and not a little girl then!” (McManus, 2006, p. 7). Another participant reported physical abuse from her uncle and consumed marijuana when she was in high school. These two examples illustrate students' varied responses to their exposure to domestic violence.

Influenced by narrative therapy responses to trauma (Denborough, 2008; White, 2004), we wished for our research to elicit and honour the diverse ways in which students and other family members seek to respond to the problem of domestic violence in accord with what they give value to.

Domestic violence services in PNG

Here in PNG, there are very limited professional responses to families experiencing domestic violence. There are few safe houses and case-management services. These services involve collecting information and referring victims to

hospitals for medical treatment and to the police if they are seeking legal redress. Femili PNG is one organisation involved in case management, outreach, training, support and advocacy (see <https://femilipng.org/>).

Ongoing counselling services are generally absent. Heather Barr (2015) noted a lack of psychosocial counselling and case management and emphasised a need for qualified counsellors to provide such assistance.

When it comes to school students, services in schools in PNG are limited to educational and vocational guidance and lack counselling for survivors of domestic violence or other issues. Kravia (2016, p. 193) observed that there is a lack of guidance officers and school counsellors trained in counselling students exposed to domestic violence.

Our use of arts-based research and narrative practice to assist students exposed to domestic violence

Arts-based research offers an array of methods that can be employed to generate, gather, represent and present data. This can include visual or performative methods such as painting, drawing, sculpture, film, media, poetry, music and theatre. These forms of practice create data that are emotionally and politically evocative, captivating, aesthetically powerful and moving. These arts-based research processes can help participants (and researchers) to make sense of the world we live in and to come to new understandings about problems and possible solutions.

We explored the use of process drama as a means of arts-based research to create a safe space for school students to share their experiences of domestic violence. Neelands and Goode (2015) explained that process drama engages the intellect, the emotions and the body. It enables negotiation of new images, ideas and meanings. Participants are enabled to change their perspectives on things. It was our hope that

through symbolic strategies such as storytelling, drama and rituals (Geldard et al., 2019), the young people would be able to contribute their experiences and ideas to the research and also experience some relief.

Process drama is a genre of applied theatre (Piazzoli, 2012) that is carried out in a non-conventional theatrical setting, especially in communities and public spaces. The participants and facilitator co-construct a dramatic world (Bowell & Heap, 2001). In this project, the co-construction of the dramatic world also involved the use of narrative therapy approaches, which privilege the sharing and documentation of lived experiences and insider knowledge. Co-research investigations (Epston, 1999) and externalising conversations (Sliep, 2005; Sliep & CARE Counsellors, 1998; White, 2007; Wingard, 1996a, 1996b, 2010) unpacked the experience of domestic violence in ways that acknowledged not only the effects of such violence but also young people's responses, ideas, knowledge and suggestions.

Sliep et al. (2004) undertook research on domestic violence in northern Uganda and concluded that collective responses generated through narrative therapy and forum theatre can provide possible solutions to addressing domestic violence. Their work, and that of countless others around the world, drew inspiration from the work of Augusto Boal (1978), the Brazilian dramatist known for his book *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Through theatre of the oppressed, government institutions can be challenged to improve their services, and grassroots solutions to problems can be elicited and supported.

In our study, we used Boal's "image theatre" because it "privileges physical expression over the spoken word. Through a series of workshop-based exercises, the human body is used as an expressive tool to represent, nonverbally, a wide repertoire of feelings, ideas, and attitudes" (Haig, 1996, p. 185). Image theatre was used to collect images of forms of domestic violence and narrative therapy approaches were used to give voice to the participants.

Narrative therapy has been used widely by counsellors, community workers and researchers in different parts of the world. Brown and Augusta-Scott (2007) explained that narrative therapy draws its theoretical framework from social constructionism, which emphasises the idea that we live by the stories that we tell of ourselves, and others tell of us. It is through stories we make meaning of our lives. Burr (2003) suggested that people's identities are shaped by the discourses of their social and cultural contexts.

A key element of narrative therapy is the use of externalising conversations, which position the problem as the problem rather than the person as the problem (White, 2007). Narrative practice sees people as experts on their own lives and assists them to find their own voice and their own solutions to their problems (Morgan, 2000). Narrative practitioners often use creative and playful approaches to respond to serious issues. For instance, Nyirinkwaya (2020) used playful approaches with children and young people who were experiencing hard times in Rwanda.

In this research, we devised a set of drama tools that used externalised language to unpack the effects of domestic violence on participants' academic performance; to elicit and honour students' responses to domestic violence; and to consult them in relation to their knowledge, suggestions and stories in the hope of reducing domestic violence in PNG.

The one-day process-drama workshop that we ran at each school followed five stages: pretext, narrative building, externalising, poetic action and reflection. This structure was adapted from Neelands and Goode's (2015) *Structuring Drama Work*.

Introducing the workshop

We began each workshop by setting ground rules, explaining that participation was voluntary and that students could step out at any time, and letting participants know that their class teachers would be with them for support. Importantly,

we also explained that Ms Dorothy is a trained guidance and counselling officer and that she was also available for support. After getting their consent, we introduced drama games to close the gap between the students and us as strangers to them. We played a series of fun games to bond with each other, and to ignite laughter and excitement with the participants. This helped students to focus and when the time was right, we moved into the first activity.

Stage 1: Pretext – “The story behind the tears”

We introduced the topic of domestic violence using what is called in process drama a “pretext”. A pretext is a word, text, picture or diagram that stimulates discussion. In this workshop, the pretext in relation to domestic violence involved a “role-on-the-wall” exercise to generate discussion about the experiences of a child as a survivor or witness of domestic violence. This role-on-the-wall exercise, which we called “the story behind the tears”, involved introducing a fictional character, whom we referred to as Teardrop (in some schools, the children re-named the character with a local name). This character was represented by a sketch of a person with tears dropping from their eyes.

We asked the students to come together and stand next to this drawing of Teardrop, which had been placed on the wall, and we then asked questions to prompt discussion. We asked

- What do you see in this character?
- What is the story behind the tears?
- What do you think Teardrop is feeling or thinking?
- What do you think is happening to Teardrop?
- What is the community’s reaction to Teardrop?

We gave each participant a sticky-note pad and asked them to write one or two words that would express what Teardrop was thinking or feeling. They then stuck these notes inside the outline of Teardrop’s body.

We stood together during this role-on-the-wall exercise, so the students were having a collective experience. We asked them to write their responses so they didn’t initially have to speak. We then gave the students a second sticky note on which to write what the community thinks about the character Teardrop. They wrote a lot of different things about that character, and we asked them to place these outside the outline of the body to represent the community’s thoughts (see Figure 1).

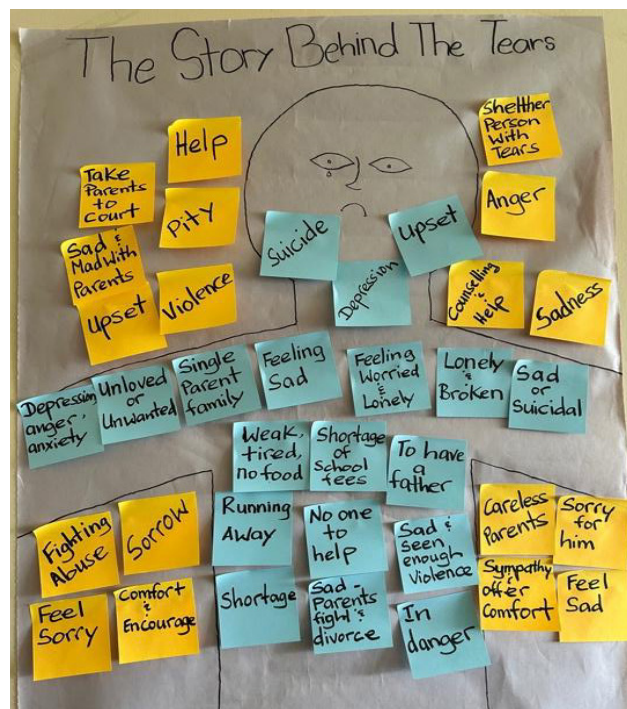


Figure 1. The Teardrop role-on-the-wall and the children’s notes inside and outside Teardrop’s outline

Randomly selected participants were then invited to explain to the group what they wrote on their sticky note. The children were encouraged to accept or decline this invitation as they wished. Common themes identified from their responses indicated the presence of domestic violence in family homes, and that this frustrates and hurts young people. The students regularly referred to violence as being the reason behind the fictional character shedding tears (approximately 70% of responses). The young people’s discussions revealed their deep thoughts about domestic violence as a problem and its effects on the fictional character Teardrop, which in turn reflected their own lived experiences. The

responses listed outside the body outline reflected diverse community views on domestic violence. The most common response listed (40%) was sadness.

Stage 2: Narrative building using image theatre

The second stage of the process drama introduced “image theatre” (Boal, 1978) to enable the students to share narratives of domestic violence. Image theatre involves participants working together to make their bodies into an image like a tableau to represent issues or tell stories about an issue.

Participants were encouraged to create an image of a situation of domestic violence. Different perspectives were encouraged. The predominant aggressive behaviours displayed in the images created by students involved one person punching, hitting or biting another person or pulling on their



Figure 2. Illustration of the image theatre process

shirt (most images were of men using violence against women). Some images included depictions of alcohol and the use of mobile phones. Almost 90% of images symbolised perpetrators punching the faces of survivors. Many images showed the survivors covering their faces to protect themselves. We asked the young participants to describe and explain the images they had created, if they wanted to. For ethical reasons, we are unable to share photographs of the students’ creating their images, but they represented different forms of violence as illustrated Figure 2.

Stage 3: Externalising conversations – teacher-in-role

In process drama, “teacher-in-role” usually involves a facilitator taking on the role of an expert to lead group discussion. In this study, however, the teacher-in-role involved a trained counsellor (Dorothy) playing the role of “Violence”, enabling the students to have a conversation with this character (see Kaseke, 2010; Sliep & CARE Counsellors, 1998; Wingard, 1996a, 1996b, 2010). This process of externalising violence in a theatrical form unpacked domestic violence as a social issue and demonstrated the narrative therapy philosophy that “the person is not the problem; the problem is the problem”.

Stage 4: Poetic action – three-picture story

The fourth stage involved what is referred to as “poetic action” (Neelands & Goode, 2015) and used “picture story” (Awi et al., 2018). Small groups of students were asked to create a three-picture story that captured three critical events in a perpetrator’s or survivor’s life. One picture was to represent the past, another was to represent the present, and the third image was to represent the future. Students were given flexibility to imagine any event relating to domestic violence.

Interestingly, almost all the picture stories depicted a peaceful, happy family in the past,

a family beset by problems in the present, and then a family of reformed character in the future. This reformation was depicted as being supported by pastors, counsellors, nongovernment organisations and community leaders.

Examples of past images included a happy family, a family having a meal together, children happily going to school, and scenes of fun and laughter in the home.

Present images represented by the participants included gambling, Teardrop crying with his younger sister, a father about to kill the mother, a father drunk and fighting with the mother, and Teardrop isolating himself from his friends.

Future images included families praying together, playing together and having meals together; children happily studying and reading; and Teardrop happily participating in class.

Through these collective representations, participants presented various forms of domestic violence as well as possible solutions and preferred futures. Additionally, gestures of forgiveness and harmony were displayed in the participants' images. Support, conversation and family reunion were also depicted.

Stage 5: Ritual and reflection – conscience alley

The final stage of the workshop involved a drama tool called “conscience alley” (Neelands & Goode, 2015), which was used to create a community of support. Participants stood in two rows forming a tunnel for Teardrop to walk through. As students playing the role of Teardrop (survivor/witness to violence) walked through the tunnel, the rest of the participants offered them comments, encouragement, advice and suggestions: “Be strong”, “You’re not alone”, “We are all in this together”, “Study hard”, “Your future is bright”. Sometimes advice was also given such as “Go to church”, “Pray”, “Drink water”, “Go for counselling”, “Work hard”.

We also gave students the opportunity to represent a perpetrator of violence walking through the tunnel. Again, other young people offered encouragement and ideas such as “Change your habit”, “Go to church”, “Stop drinking and bashing your wife”, and “Think about the future of your children”.

In this part of the workshop, we wanted to create a community of support. For young people who were currently experiencing violence in their home, and who may not have spoken directly about this, we wanted them to experience a ritual of support.

At the end of the workshop, we asked each student to write a letter to Dorothy Wanega, the counsellor. In these letters, students who hadn't spoken aloud shared their explanations and experiences of violence. We also asked them to respond to the question: What are the effects of domestic violence on your academic performance? In their letters, we wanted to hear the students' stories. Some students may not have wanted to speak personally about their experiences, but they had a chance to write their stories in their letter. The students sat quietly and wrote. By the end of the workshops across the four schools, we had around 120 carefully written letters generously shared by students.

Collective letters generated from research data

In his commentary and reflection on papers included in the Narrative Practice Research Network special issue of *The Qualitative Report* (Denborough et al., 2024), John McLeod (2024), described the ways in which narrative therapy qualitative researchers such as Marnie Sather (2024) have presented the findings of their research “not only as themes but also in the form of letters to different stakeholder communities, a technique for relational healing widely used within narrative practice” (McLeod, 2024, p. 234). In McLeod's view, this way of presenting research findings “represents a major contribution to qualitative research methodology” (p. 234).

Drawing on these recent developments and the long history within narrative practice of the use of letters and documents (White, 1995; White & Epston, 1990), and with the assistance of David Denborough, we have presented some of the findings of this research in three letters. All three letters are drawn from the words the school students included in the letters they wrote at the completion of the workshop. The first letter is addressed in the school students' collective voice to "Dear Violence". The second letter is addressed in the school students' collective voice to "Dear counsellors, community leaders and pastors" (the three groups for whom the students had suggestions and requests in relation to addressing and preventing violence). The third letter is written in the voice of the authors (Dorothy and Jane), quoting the students. It is addressed to "Dear younger generations".¹

We have included the first and third letters in this paper. The second letter can be provided on request.

Dear Violence

Within the workshop, we provided an opportunity for the students to speak directly to or to ask questions of an externalised character representing Violence. This built on the work of Yvonne Slied and the CARE Counsellors of Malawi (1998), Barbara Wingard (1996a, 1996b, 2010) and Sipelile Kaseke (2010). In the letters and surveys that school students completed at the end of the workshop, one young person had written: "I am writing to the violence against family." Inspired by this young person, we created a letter addressed to Violence that includes some of the key themes that the students shared in their letters and surveys.

Dear Violence,

Greetings to you in the name of the good Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We are school students from all provinces of Papua New Guinea. We think domestic violence is a horrible and most dangerous form of violence which is practiced and done all throughout the world. Too often you are visiting our homes.

Especially when there are financial problems and our fathers and uncles are drunk, they bring you into our homes.

Some of us think that nowadays you, Violence, are getting worse because of the influence of alcohol and gambling. And you also seem to come around with jealousy and gossip. False rumours seem to bring you into our homes, like when our fathers are provoked by peers – being told that your partner is cheating on you.

Violence, you have really bad effects on our schooling. You make us worry so much about our mothers and sisters and brothers. Some students are sleeping in class, daydreaming, not attending lessons, falling behind in class, missing days or playing up a lot to try to forget their problems. Don't you want us to get an education?

Some of us are at boarding school now and we are frightened to return home. The feeling of losing school and going back home is hammering my heart every day.

Violence, you make children feel bad. You make a child feel like they have no place in this world. Is that really what you want?

Even if you happened a long time ago, it's still like a nightmare, like it's happening all this time and everywhere I go. The memories affect me all the time whenever I am alone.

At times, I feel unwanted and am questioning myself about whether I am one of the causes of my father's violent behaviours. Especially when my father hurts my mother and I don't do anything to stop it.

As a child, it always traumatised me seeing that someone you love so much and married could do such things to you. Seeing that, I always think about what will happen to me when I get married. Will I go through the endless cycle of abuse or not? Sometimes when I see a couple arguing or fighting, my entire body just gives up on me and I'm just standing there paralysed to the core of my bones.

That's why we are writing to you. We all want our fathers to stop hurting our mothers. Stop hurting us.

Violence, the child is dropping tears because their parents are not happy together.

Please leave our homes, our village, our province, our country.

If love, peace and harmony prevail among families, then the community, province and the nation will also be in peace and harmony, and it will be easy for the government to run the country.

Thank you for listening to us.

Please leave our families alone.

Yours asking for assistance,
The school students of Papua New Guinea

This year, as the new university term and school term begins, we plan to share this letter through schools, churches and also with trainee teachers. We are looking forward to seeing how the words of the students, generated through this research, can be used to spark action to prevent and address domestic violence. We also hope to use radio and other media so that young people currently experiencing the effects of violence get to hear the words of others who share their experiences.

Our letter back to the students

Narrative therapy approaches to trauma emphasise the importance of recognising and elevating the ways in which people (including children) *respond* to traumatic experiences, and also the skills and values implicit in their responses (Denborough, 2008; White, 2004; Yuen, 2007). In a letter we wrote back to the students who participated in the research, and more broadly to younger generations, we sought to not only acknowledge the effects of domestic violence which the students had shared with us but also to highlight the ways in which many students honoured the actions of their mothers (and other family members) in trying to protect them, as well as their own diverse responses and their hopes and dreams for the future.

Dear younger generations,

Thank you for your honesty and courage to share with us your experiences about domestic violence. We are so sorry for what you have been through.

You shared with us so many important stories. You have taught us about the effects of the violence in your lives and on your schooling. One of you said:

Since I was affected by the violence, in school I am normally "giddy". For example, if someone drops a book or yells unexpectedly,

I freeze and then have a “flight” reaction. My friends, when they scare me, I always end up screaming and tearing up because of it. I have anxiety and panic attacks if I hear any fighting around my place. So yes, domestic violence has affected me negatively, has scarred me.

But despite all that you have been through, you are still in school and trying to create a good life.

When my dad’s younger brother used to belt up my mum, I used to see this and cry bitterly with sadness and anger, and even by seeing my siblings cry and feel uncomfortable ... When I think about it, I feel hopeless sometimes, but there is a voice inside of me telling me not to give up and face challenges in life to be a better person and live a happy life one day and to be the solution to domestic violence.

Some of you told us stories of how mothers try to protect their children:

- Some mothers hide their kids with their bodies receiving all the beating from their spouse.
- Other mothers hide their children. They tell the children to go into their room or to run away and stay with other family members. They bring their children to other family members so that only they suffer the beatings.
- Some survivors leave their violent spouse and take their children with them, never looking back. They may grow food for themselves or seek

help from elders, the police and the courts.

- Some take refuge with their close friends, relatives and children.

One of you told us about how your grandparents assisted you:

When I was a baby, my parents used to fight against each other, not caring about me. To escape that, my grandparents grabbed me and looked after me. And they continue to pay my school fees now.

But in other situations, you told us some children have no-one to protect them. Some escape their homes and end up involved in crime to survive. Others remain in their homes and try to find ways to endure the violence.

You told us of the ways that you or your friends or nieces and nephews respond when there is domestic violence in your homes. One of you told us about your niece:

My teenage niece goes out with her peer mates and back any time as she wants to just forget about her home. Or she brings her friends to the house so that the parents may not fight or argue. She goes for sleepovers (which I think is not safe). Or she goes to church every time to pray and sometimes she stays with our pastor’s family for a while.

We think that young people, like this niece, have developed many skills in enduring violence in their homes. Many of you told us you are searching for safety in different ways. You turn to elderly people, educated people and church pastors for advice. Some of you

turn to sports and to social activities and keep busy and your minds free.

Some of you told sad stories of when you were young children. When there was little you could do, some of you shared tears with your mothers: “When my mother cries I stand beside her and cry.”

Now that you are older, one of you spoke of studying harder and harder. And some of you spoke of your faith:

I pray harder and continuously to God to instruct my parents to take up their responsibilities and also to help my grandparents. I keep putting my FAITH in GOD, no matter what circumstances I’ve been through and I’m in it. He always listen to me and answer me in one way or the other. Therefore, I will not give up.

One of you told a story of fighting back and escaping:

Back when I was 12 years old, my mom remarried to a bula man, and this man is an alcoholic. Every time he gets drunk and comes to the house he always beats up my mom and even though his family were there, he never cared to stop hitting my mom. There was a time he came so late in the night, and he was so drunk that he got the knife and came in the room and wanted to stab my mom and I, but then we fought back until we took the chance and escaped until then we never saw him again.

And we heard a story of change in a different family:

As the elder of two siblings, I can’t stand seeing my violent dad beating my mother every now and then.

Seeing them getting cross and argue over little, little things make me sometimes thought of running away, or sometimes I usually thought that why was I born into such family? When I was around the age of 13, I still cry when my parents fought themselves. But now, when I have two lovely small brother and sister to look after, I started taking sides and involving myself in my parents’ problem. I stopped my father from beating my mom and take him away for a walk. As we the kids grew older and older, my parents change some of their attitude and now we at least live a life free from fear. So I would like to thank all our good friends who have changed my parents’ attitude.

We would like to thank all of you for the stories that you shared with us.

We also heard stories of your hopes for the future:

If we happen to find a family experiencing domestic violence, then we have to help that family in some ways so that the family can be resettled in a way.

I am planning to help run a program back in our community later to help our people from domestic violence.

One of you said:

As an upcoming generation, it’s our responsibilities to teach the community about domestic violence.

Your words and stories are teaching us a lot.

We are listening.

And now we hope to share your words to bring about change so that women and children do not live in fear.

With respect,
Ms Dorothy Wanega and Dr Jane Awi,
University of Goroka

We had hoped from the beginning of this research project that it would not only provide information to us as researchers, but that it might also provide some modest form of relief for young people who are enduring hardship. The way we wrote this letter was shaped by this hope and also by a commitment to honouring the actions of mothers/survivors.

Providing relief

In their individual letters to us, some of the students described the effects of the workshop. We will include some of their words here.

When you did not come yet, I normally feel hurt, lonely, embarrassed and so poor in my academic work, but since then, great improvement has happened. Thank you.

I have learnt much or I'll say, I learnt many new things from my friends during the workshop. One of the many things was to experience the thoughts and feelings of my friends and how they express it in their own ways. But still having them and me to express ourselves in the different and various activities we participated in. Much of the burdens and scar will still be within ourselves. But a big word of thanks to you guys for helping us to take the step and move forward.

I've learnt so many new things in this program which I will use everyday of my life.

Dear Counsellor,

Being young, I grew up in a community filled with violence. Not a day goes by that I have peace, just think of all these people involved made me feel sad. I never thought it would happen in my own home. It breaks my heart to see my parents fighting – actually, my dad beating my mum. Seeing all these while growing up made me feel lost and neglected. I also turned to violence myself. I get so angry all the time. I started beating and bullying others who annoy me. My life was turning upside down. I was always walking around with sadness, anger and depression in me.

I know that deep down my parents still love each other and I'm sure there are other reasons why they are fighting. I am really grateful and thankful for this wonderful program. It has helped a lot, for example, being with those other students who has been through this situation like me. It makes me feel comfortable because I'm not really open with my problems.

Once again, I appreciate everything and love every part of this program and it has really helped me.

This sort of feedback was heartening to us. It gives us confidence that arts-based research and narrative practice can elicit valuable research information and also provide some relief for participants in terms of all they are dealing with. This sort of feedback from students encourages us to continue to explore ways of using these practices to respond to community hardships and social issues.

The sharing of letters continues

The collective letter to "Dear Violence" was shared with narrative therapy students and practitioners from different parts of the world, some of whom wrote letters back to us about how the ideas and stories of PNG students, and the process of

this research, could assist them in responding to domestic violence in their own diverse contexts and countries.

In the coming months we will be sharing the collective letters from this research and the letters from different parts of the world² in forums here in PNG. This may include within schools, universities, churches, the media and with community and political leaders. If you are responding to domestic violence in your part of the world, and anything about this project could be of value to you, we would welcome hearing from you.

We hope this research, which elevates the voices and knowledge of high school students, can play a part in addressing the social problem of domestic violence – here and perhaps elsewhere.

We will include here two messages we have received from different parts of the world that we will soon be circulating in PNG.

From Joyz Tan who lives in Singapore

Dear young people from
Papua New Guinea,

The Lord be with you. I've heard your words to Violence, and you moved my heart so much.

I am from Singapore, a very small country located in Southeast Asia. Here too, many young or older people are also visited by violence.

Your words can support many of us here though. Will you let my people read your letters too? They will benefit from you, just like I did.

You have touched me with how you resist Violence.

You were visited by Violence, but you did not let yourself be poisoned by it. Your

heart remains so tender, so polite
and so wise.

You care about your schooling, and
mothers, and yourselves and others.

I think this is a strong care.

You said, at times, you feel unwanted.
I hope you know you are wanted.
And I hope you will want yourself.

I wish you well in your schooling and
that the hurt you experienced can
be comforted.

I hope the government and the church
can hear your stories and wisdom.

I wish you abundant love, peace
and harmony.

Affectionately in Christ,
Joyz

***From Tyson Carmody who lives on Arrernte
Country in Central Australia***

Hello young people of
Papua New Guinea,

My name is Tyson Carmody. I am an
Arrernte man from a small town called
Alice Springs in the Northern Territory of
Australia. Alice Springs is located in the
very centre of Australia.

In our culture, family and connection
to Country are so important for the
health and wellbeing of everybody – for
children, women and men. Unfortunately,
we too share an unwanted relationship
with Violence. This Violence causes

much trauma and pain for our families, particularly women and children, as it is our men who are most likely to use violence against them.

I was honoured to listen to your letter to Violence. Listening to your words took me to my own childhood witnessing Violence hurt our families, especially the women in our families. Your words also connected me back to a group of young people I worked with nearly 10 years ago in a local school. I took the young people camping out bush to talk about mental health and suicide, which are very serious concerns in our community. While on this camp, I conducted a role-playing activity with a psychologist and mental health worker from our local Aboriginal health organisation. The activity was called “an interview with Depression”. I played the role of Depression and the mental health worker interviewed me.

She asked me (Depression) the following questions:

- Who are your friends you like to hang out with the most?
- Why do you like hanging out with these friends?
- How do you feel when you hang out together, what are some of the things you like to do the most?
- How does hanging out with these friends of yours help you to stay close to young Aboriginal people?
- When do you feel strongest and when do you feel weak?

As I listened to your important words in the letter, I imagined you all interviewing Violence in a similar way and I heard

you already named some potential friends to Violence. Friends like Drunk, Alcohol, Jealousy, Rumours and Gossip and Money Problems. If you could ask Violence the questions above, what or who would Violence talk about? What might be some other important questions you'd like to ask Violence about?

When speaking with Depression, we learnt that it liked having control over our young people and that's what made it feel strong, but on the other side of this, Depression felt weakest when it couldn't control our young people. We began to see that Depression was just like all of us – we have friends who we like to hang around with and there are also people that we don't like or don't know as much. Depression named Culture and Country as two people it didn't like because they made it feel weak, as though it didn't have as much control over young people when they were close to Culture and Country.

The friends of Culture and Country were named as:

- Love
- Happiness
- Fun
- Hunting
- Learning
- Language
- Family
- Sport.

Ever since this moment, whenever I have been tasked to support young people or men around issues of violence or mental health, I always end up talking about Culture, Country and all their friends.

It allows everyone to find a way (their own way) through the problems with our skills and strengths.

At the end of your letter to Violence, you named Love, Peace and Harmony. I wonder who you might name as their friends and how this group of friends may help you bring this important conversation to the attention of your community and government leaders. How might Love, Peace, Harmony and their friends help young people to stay in school? Or to feel good, knowing your place in your families and community? Would you have questions of your own to ask Love, Peace, Harmony and their friends? If you wrote a letter to Love, Peace and Harmony, what would you say to them and how would you let them know what kind of impact they have on you and your community?

With respect,
Tyson Carmody
Kings Narrative
<https://www.kingsnarrative.com.au/>



To close this paper, we will include a letter we have written back to our colleagues as part of what is becoming an evolving international community project.

Dear friends in the counselling class,

Greetings to you all from Papua New Guinea. We want to say a big thank you for the reflections you shared after reading our young people's letter to Violence. Even though you are far away, your words reached us with so much care, respect and understanding. It truly meant something to us to know that our work spoke to you in your own places, cultures and stories.

We are grateful to David Denborough and Cheryl White for seeing value in what our students are doing and for connecting us with you. Through your letters, we felt like we were sitting together under the same shade tree, just talking and learning from each other.

Many of you shared powerful experiences of your own resilience. When we read about the ways you have stood up to violence, we knew these would encourage our young people here in PNG.

Some of the strengths you talked about really touched us, including:

- using cultural healing and identity to stay strong
- finding support in family, culture and connection to Country
- the "Interview with Depression" conversation
- fighting to continue your education when violence tried to block your path.

One of you asked who taught our young people to stand up to violence. For many of us who grew up in rural PNG, we witnessed tribal fights, ethnic clashes and community conflicts from a young age. Those experiences shaped us. They

taught us that when violence comes, we cannot just sit quietly; we must stand together, protect our families and speak against what harms our communities. So, when our students wrote their letters, they were drawing from that same spirit.

We were also moved by the image one of you shared about David standing up to Goliath. In PNG, that story speaks strongly to many people, because we also face “giants” in the form of domestic violence, sorcery-related killings, election-related violence and ongoing ethnic clashes. Your reflection reminded us that courage does not belong to one culture alone; it is something people everywhere carry in their hearts.

Some of you shared your own memories of being pushed around by violence when you were little. Others said our students’ letters reminded you of the care, comfort and strength that comes from standing together. These connections show us that even though our places are different, our experiences can speak to each other.

We enjoyed reading about how nature and culture play a role in your counselling work:

- The picture of the mob of kangaroos felt like a symbol of the community that stands ready to protect and restore peace and harmony. This is encouraging to know that we do have a community of support.
- Taking young people out to the bush to talk about mental health and suicide reminded us of how, in PNG, we often go to our gardens, rivers or mountains to think, talk and find peace.

- Your use of role-play connects with our own work in process drama.
- And your “Interview with Depression” really echoed our activity where one of us wore a mask to personify Domestic Violence and allow the young people to interview us.

Your stories helped us see that even though we come from different parts of the world, we have similar ways of healing through culture, through nature, through storytelling and through our community.

Thank you, friends, for walking with us in this learning journey. We hope this connection continues to grow, just like a yam vine finding another vine to climb with.

With warm PNG greetings,
Dorothy and Jane

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This research had clearance from The University of Goroka Ethics Committee. Permission was also granted by the National Department of Education to conduct research in schools. The researchers sought consent from teachers and participants in the participating schools. Images generated from the research were deliberately left out for ethical reasons. The data coding systems used letters and numbers to represent the participants to preserve confidentiality. The authors acknowledge The University of Goroka for funding the research.

Notes

- ¹ If you are interested in more information about how these letters were created and the thinking behind them, please write to the authors.
- ² For more about the process of exchanging messages across communities in collective narrative practice, see Denborough et al. (2006).

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