# Narrative therapy as a guide for responding to unacceptable actions

## *Abstract*

Young people's actions at school can be seen as an expression of the storied identities which shape both their sense of who they are, and guide how they feel they ought to act. In response to unacceptable actions, the practice of re-authoring young people's identity stories allows alternative life-stories and ethical hopes for life to be explored and taken up. In order to effectively respond to identity stories and the sometimes unacceptable actions which flow from them, it is necessary to include young people's significant peers, teachers, and family and community members in a process of re-authoring. This chapter outlines a theory and practice of re-authoring identity stories.

## *Chapter*

## *Key Points*

1. Unacceptable actions at school can be seen as a young person's attempts to achieve something, and/or a young person's understanding and expression of "how one ought to act round here"

2. These attempts and expressions flow from a young person's storied sense of self, their identity stories.

3. Developing alternative identity stories can significantly change the way a young person acts at school, including making restoration for harms done

4. Developing alternative identity stories is a social achievement requiring the support of key people in a young person's life across time

## *Introduction*

In her exploration of students' experience of being stood down from school, Towl (2014) writes of seven students for whom "their narratives revealed that the stand-down was a consequence of their unsuccessful strategies to resolve the isolation that put them at risk of being bullied" (p. 3). Towl goes on to note that "the students in the study were making rational, albeit unacceptable, decisions about keeping themselves safe and resolving isolation through managing friendships" (p. 4). In this chapter I develop this theme to propose that young people's actions – in school and in communities - can be usefully thought of as either an expression of a desire to improve their situation in some way (action as intent or desire to achieve something) or an expression of a young person's understanding of how their sort of person ought to act in these sorts of situations (action as an expression of identity stories). I propose that in exploring the hopes and intentions implicit in young people's actions (rather than focusing initially on their unsuccessful strategies for expressing such hopes and intentions) and in developing alternative identity stories in keeping with young people's hopes and intentions, schools and community workers can make a significant difference to young people's actions as young people are invited to develop and enact new and preferred identity stories.

I further propose that the identity stories which emerge from such inquiries must be enriched, confirmed, supported and maintained as much as possible by networks of relationships at school, home, and within the community. As such, it is important that appropriate teachers, peers, family and community members are invited to co-develop and support preferred identity accounts with young people over time.

At times when unacceptable actions at school or in the community lead to suspension or exclusion (or other punitive measures) being considered, I suggest workers ask a series of questions including: What might these unacceptable actions be in response to? What might the young person be hoping for or trying to achieve in these unacceptable actions? What do these hopes and intentions suggest about this young person's aims in life? What do they say about the sort of person this young person hopes to be? Does this young person have alternative reputations in other times and places – school, home, community – which fit with or complement their

hopes and intentions, implicit in their (unacceptable) actions at school or in community? Where appropriate, how might those alternative reputations be made more visible and available? How might support people recruit significant people (at school, at home, and in the community) to support a young person in developing, taking up and enacting different and preferred identity stories?

In this chapter I demonstrate one such inquiry (see also McMenamin, 2014), through a process of re-authoring identity stories with Peter, a young person at risk of suspension or exclusion from school for "continual disobedience". Peter is a 14 year old Pakeha boy from a 1200 pupil, multicultural, co-ed state secondary school in New Zealand. In response to his unacceptable actions at school, Peter had been spoken with, sent out of classes, removed from and had changed all his classes, been referred to deans and counsellor, had letters sent home, and had been stood down from school for several days a number of times. I describe here an exploration of alternative identity stories which made a difference to how Peter understood himself and to his subsequent actions at school.

## Peter's new stories

My aim with Peter was to develop alternative accounts of his identity through stories about what he cares for, and how he prefers to live his life. We would do this through exploring the effects of his current actions and reputations, and through exploring alternative reputations he might have both at school and in other settings. If together we could re-author Peter's sense of self, his subsequent actions might reflect those preferred stories rather than the stories of "troubled and troubling" which dominated at school at this time.

As we spoke over a period of weeks, accounts of Peter as being able to decide, as caring for children, and as being reliable and honest emerged in response to my questions and Peter's reflections. In the light of these identity stories, Peter saw himself as capable of, and desiring to act differently at school. Previous to these counselling conversations, these identity conclusions were available but had not been fore-grounded sufficiently to influence Peter's actions at school. The work I describe here foregrounds alternative ways Peter might be known, and Peter reflects

about whether those alternative ways of knowing him fitted with his hopes for himself and his future.

In offering these brief extracts from our counselling conversations — two concentrating on troubled stories and six concentrating on emerging preferred stories — my purpose is to show how practices of narrative therapy such as externalising the problem and storying alternative descriptions of Peter's hopes for himself and others (White, 2007) make available different ways for Peter to think and speak of himself. I demonstrate how, as alternative descriptions are invoked, new possibilities for Peter to know himself emerge, allowing for different ways of acting to become available.

### *First extract: Externalising troubling reputation.*

Before beginning to explore the various influences which may shape Peter's actions, and before looking more widely within his life experience for alternative ways of speaking about him, guided by narrative therapy's Statement of Position Map One (White, 2007) in this extract I propose to Peter that he has reputations in the school which affect the way his actions become interpreted by others. I then interview Peter in front of three peers chosen by him as supporters, exploring the role and effect of prevailing reputations in his life.

I invite the reader to notice how we speak of Peter's Reputation as a separate entity, whose effects can be seen and reviewed. This externalising of Reputation and its effects reflects a central narrative therapy understanding that the problem is the problem; the person is not the problem (White, 2007). Such a separation of the person and the problem positions Peter as an observer and critic of his reputation at school, and its effects in his life. This separation represents a first step towards Peter declaring he would prefer things to be different.

This first extract is part of a counselling conversation in which I asked Peter why he thought his school dean referred him to me, as a school guidance counsellor, for discussions about his behaviour at school:

*Peter:  Ah, some classes I don't like so I tend to play up.*

*Donald:  Oh yeah?*

*Peter:  Like I just can't help it, [lost words] pencils and I bang them around and stuff. And like, I don't know, I just want to get teachers angry sometimes.*

*Donald: Do you?*

*Peter:  Yeah I just want to push their limit. I don't know why, but...*

*Donald: Yeah? How do you push their limit?*

*Peter:  Yeah just like, I don't know, they just seem to like, you know how I told you about that reputation?*

*Donald: Yeah, tell me about that.*

*Peter:  Some people don't even give me a chance. They just, "He won't even be good. We will just kick him out of this class." Like drama. I didn't like drama, so I was playing up and stuff, and I wanted to go to another class. There was a teacher that I didn't even know; I hadn't seen her or whatever. It was sport science. I hadn't even met her, or spoke to her or anything, and she said, "No." Because she has heard about me: the reputation!*

*Donald: So one of the effects your reputation has in school is that teachers don't even want you in classes. Is that true?*

*Peter:  Yeah, they don't even give me a chance, because what if I want to be good in that class? Maybe it's because I don't like drama, but if I get put into something I do like I will be good. But they don't even give me a chance.*

*Donald:  Yeah. So when that reputation, that idea of reputation ... what sort of reputation do you have about the place?*

*Peter:  Like my reputation?*

*Donald: Yeah*

*Peter:  I think my reputation is quite bad because last year I was, like, pretty bad.*

In this extract I seek to separate Peter's identity from that of his reputation. I use the externalising language of narrative therapy to speak of Peter's reputation as separate to him. From this stance Peter can reflect on the effects of the reputation he has due to the actions he has taken. In this "observer and critic of reputation" conversation, Peter can speak of his knowledge of the effects of reputation as something apart

from himself. It is this separation of his identity from that of the reputation which begins a process of Peter reviewing that reputation and its effects.

***Second extract: Re-telling the troubled reputation to peers.***

In this extract from a later conversation, Peter's three friends join us in conversation as an audience to my interview with Peter about his experience of school reputation. Here I show how telling and re-telling his stories with peers as an audience develops Peter's school reputation as something external to him, and something having undesired effects. The importance of the peer audience lies in their joining with Peter in his desire to see himself differently. I invite the reader to notice Peter's developing awareness of the effects that his reputation is having in his school life, and as a result, his developing sense of self as an observer and critic of that reputation and its effects.

*Donald: Peter, what sort of reputation did you have when we first started working together?*

*Peter: Um, I had a bad reputation.*

*Donald: Yeah?*

*Peter: Yeah, like, naughty, from last year.*

*Donald: Did you? From last year. How come from last year?*

*Peter: Cause I got stood down seven times and that ...*

*Donald: Yeah, yeah, for what? I know this stuff, but I'm just doing it for these guys.*

*Peter: For like swearing at teachers, and like, trying to push teachers, and tagging, and that stuff.*

*Donald: Yeah, and all that stuff. And that reputation came through with you to this year?*

*Peter: Yep.*

*Donald: How did that reputation affect you this year?*

*Peter: Oh, I didn't have much privileges, teachers thought I was like, all naughty as and stuff, so they didn't let me have a real chance.*

*Donald: They didn't give you a real ..?*

*Peter:  They didn't give me a real chance to start over new...*

*Donald: And what other things did that reputation do for you around the classroom?*

*Peter:  Everybody wanted me to play up and make them laugh.*

*Donald: Oh, your mates wanted you to play up and make them laugh ... so that reputation had teachers not wanting to give you privileges, and people around you wanting to make you play up and stuff ..?*

*Peter:  Yeah.*

*Donald: Anything else that reputation was doing for your work at school?*

*Peter:  Ruining my concentration in class and stuff.*

*Donald: True? And what effect might that have had on the way you were learning in the classroom?*

*Peter:  Like, I would have got sent out a lot.*

*Donald: Yeah? Did you get sent out a lot?*

*Peter:  Yeah!*

*Donald: Yeah?*

*Peter:  Out of every class.*

*Donald: In fact you got sent out of all your classes eh?*

*Peter:  Mmm, I got sent out of all my classes.*

*Donald: Into a whole new set of classes.*

*Peter:  Mmm.*

Throughout this conversation I am speaking of Peter's reputation as external to him, as something we can name, explore the effects of, and take a stance for or against. My practice invites Peter into an understanding that the problem (named here as reputation) is the problem, he is not the problem. The more clearly the reputation is seen as having undesired effects, the more likely it is that Peter will look for alternative ways of being known and of acting — that is, the more likely it is that he will take up alternative stories about himself as they become available through our

explorations. My work here is shaped by the maps of narrative practice drawn from White (2007) and White and Epston (1990), among others, which offer guidelines for exposing the undesired reputation and its effects, as well as an exploration of any preferred reputations and their effects.

### Looking For Alternative Stories

Much of narrative therapy guides counsellors in looking for and expecting to find people "living out their lives according to intentions that they embrace, in pursuit of what they give value to in life" (White, 2007, p. 103). I enter these conversations with Peter (and his peers) assured that, within his actions, there will be evidence of what Peter cares about (his intentions). In the six brief extracts presented in this next section, Peter and I search for alternative reputations that have been either implicit in Peter's stories, or waiting to be explored in other areas of his life.

In these extracts I demonstrate how language practices of narrative therapy make alternative descriptions available for Peter; descriptions which are drawn from his real experience and might be preferred by him. Having taken a stance against the effects of his previous reputation, Peter reviews these alternative descriptions. It is within these re-descriptions, and in the peer endorsements that follow that preferred stories about who he is are developed for Peter to consider and take up.

In the first of these six extracts I begin to explore with Peter alternative reputations, starting with a summary of Peter's ability to decide, and his desire to learn. Next I explore with Peter alternative descriptions which arise from his community. In the third extract I invite Peter to evaluate these emerging reputations. In the fourth extract Peter takes a stand for these emerging reputations. In the next extract Peter outlines some of the effects of the new and preferred reputations. Finally I interview Peter's peers, with Peter as an audience, for their responses to Peter's tellings of his new and preferred reputations. I invite the reader to notice the way these tellings and re-tellings make Peter's hopes for himself more visible and available to be taken up by Peter.

### First extract: A summary of emerging school reputation.

In a previous conversation I had asked Peter, *"How did you make that change?"* He replied, *"I don't know. I just decided. I got sick of my old behaviour."* Later in that

conversation Peter commented, *"I think it is just because, you know how I said that I can decide? I think it is commitment, I need to be committed to something and then I can do it."*

Following a narrative therapy practice of naming emerging character traits in order to review them (Morgan, 2000), in this interview I asked Peter about the word "decide" as a possible name for an action he had taken to make a difference for himself. I wondered if we might begin to develop a story of Peter as someone who "can decide". I went on to explore Peter's desire to learn: Is this learning a character trait he would include in his preferred identity accounts? This is an example of Peter and me exploring alternative descriptions and character preferences implicit within Peter's actions.

The transcript continued:

*Donald: So in the middle of all this I'm hearing you say two things: one is you can, if people speak to you properly, you can decide to just do things differently...*

*Peter: Yeah, get respect back from the teacher.*

*Donald: So that is the first thing: you can just decide. That's the first thing right? And the second thing is, forgive me if I have got this wrong, it sounds like you are quite interested in learning stuff?*

*Peter: Yeah most of the time. But it depends like the teacher, because last year Miss W., like she is such a cool teacher and I love English, and this year I absolutely hate English. I look at my timetable and I would be like "Oh yeah, I got English first" and then like...*

*Donald: But apart from teachers and all that sort of stuff, are you quite interested in learning stuff?*

*Peter: Yeah.*

*Donald: Can you say something about why?*

*Peter: It's just good 'cause like you know something, right, and then next lesson you can just write it down, just be like, do the work. And sometimes I like producing like neat work and stuff.*

*Donald: Do you?*

*Peter: Yeah.*

In this extract, in response to an inquiry that focuses on potential alternative descriptions, Peter begins to make preferred identity claims — *I can decide, I like producing neat work.* These self-descriptions are spoken in Peter's own words, and reflect his hopes for himself. From here it begins to be possible to invite Peter to choose these emerging descriptions as potential guides for future actions at school. As I highlight below, such emerging identity claims require the involvement and support of significant community members.

In the next extract, guided by my interest in how people in his community might describe him, Peter describes further possible identity claims.

### *Second extract: Community based reputations.*

In this interview, Peter has been answering my questions about how his friend Tama's mother would describe him. He has also described how a local internet cafe owner hired him to deliver pamphlets for the business. I highlight here that implicit within an account of Peter being hired to deliver pamphlets is the possibility that others may see him as reliable, as honest, as a worker.

The transcript begins with me recalling what Tama's mother had previously said about Peter, and how a local internet cafe owner had employed Peter to deliver pamphlets:

*Donald: So can you see what we are doing here, like together we are working out a different kind of reputation for you! So far we have seen that Tama's mum speaks about you in ways that are cool as, like good you know, "I like this guy." And Nick* [the internet cafe owner] *has trusted you with this whole thing, and paid you for this whole job, even though, you know, some guys would just chuck it* [the pamphlets] *off a bridge; but he knows something about ... does he know that you are honest or reliable, or some sort of words like that? Or nah?*

*Peter: Oh yeah, he does. Because one time I was at the internet cafe, and he gave me more money than he should have given me, and I was like, "Oh bro. Look, you gave me about $2.50 extra." He was like, "Oh. Ok. I will just take that back."*

Here a tentatively offered description of Peter as "honest or reliable" is taken up by Peter, and further developed with an example of honesty in action, shaping an emerging description of Peter as an honest and reliable person. I emphasise here that this is not simply semantics — Peter's sense of identity is being re-shaped within these re-descriptions. I propose that the actions Peter takes in response to such emerging descriptions are likely to be very different to those actions shaped by his previous school-based reputations.

In the next extract I invite Peter to evaluate the emerging identity claims he has made thus far. Not surprisingly, Peter takes up these preferred descriptions with some enthusiasm.

### Third extract: Evaluating emerging reputations.

Within practices of narrative therapy it is important that the emerging stories told about Peter are ones that fit with his preferred sense of self. Just as Peter was active in evaluating and rejecting earlier reputations, here he is invited to evaluate emerging new descriptions. As an active observer and critic of these emerging accounts, Peter enthusiastically takes up the alternative versions. Here, rather than being described by others, Peter is positioned as author of his own identity claims.

*Donald: So how is it going for you, in the sense of this idea of we can tell a different story about you Peter? How is it fitting? What are you hearing about yourself? What have we been talking about so far?*

*Peter: Good things. I realised that I can be good if I were to be committed, and get a good reputation, and like eyeing up, decide what ... things now for my future ... all those reasons.*

*Donald: You are hearing all that stuff, eh? See all that stuff there?* [Showing notes collected earlier of various affirming things people have recently said about Peter] *What sort of a guy, what name would you give to a person who has all that stuff going on for them? How would you describe a person like that?*

*Peter: Happy ... on to it.*

*Donald: On to it! Happy ... on to it!*

*Peter: If I was all those things, all those things all the time. Oh, maybe not occasionally ... even if I be myself, I would be a good person I reckon.*

Here I ask Peter to evaluate the explorations of stories from different parts of his life. Peter is positioned as editor of the emerging accounts of his identity, and describes such a person as "*Happy ... on to it*" – "*I would be a good person I reckon.*"

**Fourth extract: Continuing to take a stand on new reputations.**

In the preceding extract, Peter expresses liking what is being said about him, and he begins to describe a future in living that way. In the next extract Peter expands on the effects of a new reputation, and together we reflect on how he has made such a shift in reputation. In response to my questions, Peter talks about how new reputations are making a difference for him, and that he prefers these reputations. My use of preferred descriptions makes them increasingly available for Peter to take up.

*Donald: When you think about that reputation, what do you think about it now? What, are you for it, or..?*

*Peter: It's changed a lot I reckon.*

*Donald: Yeah? How has it changed?*

*Peter: I've been getting A's, and House Cards and stuff.*

*Donald: OK.*

*Peter: And like, it's fun being good, cause you get privileges, and you can still play up a little bit.*

*Donald: You play up a little bit?*

*Peter: And still get A's!*

*Donald: And still get A's!*

*Peter: Mmm.*

*Donald: So you found the balance between good reputation and a bit of fun?*

*Peter: Yeah.*

*Donald: How did you make that change — from one to the other?*

*Peter: I don't know — I just decided — 'cause I was sick of my old behaviour.*

*Donald: How come did you decide?*

*Peter: Because I felt like it.*

*Donald: Yeah?*

*Peter: And I had consequences if I didn't.*

*Donald: Yeah — you saw those consequences. What consequences were they man?*

*Peter: Um, going to [another local school].*

Here Peter re-uses an earlier description of himself as "a person who can decide." That description, previously tentatively offered and taken up by Peter, appears here as an established part of his preferred self-description. Although I did not pick up on it in this interview, implicit in Peter's account is an ability to weigh up consequences and make decisions. In keeping with a re-authoring project, such a description of Peter as someone who can weigh up consequences and make decisions could be offered tentatively and, if taken up, explored for other times when it had been of use to Peter, and for what it might say about what Peter holds as important. Through the practices of telling and re-telling of these accounts, Peter is able to hear, evaluate and take a position on these new ways of describing him.

### Fifth extract: Reflecting on differences noticed.

In this extract, I discuss with Peter the effects of his new ways of being described, and add yet more vocabulary to the descriptions available. In this interview Peter reports that his new reputation has preferred effects in the present, and it appears it may have preferred effects in the future as well.

*Donald: So, have you noticed any difference since you have been bringing this new reputation to school?*

*Peter: Yep.*

*Donald: What difference have you noticed?*

*Peter: Like that I'm good and stuff, and that I get House Cards and get privileges.*

*Donald: And I know it's kind of an obvious question, but what difference do you think it might make to your exam results at the end of the year?*

*Peter: Quite good, 'cause I am learning more and I'm enjoying it. I'm learning more.*

In this extract Peter and I have grown his preferred account to include future possibilities, and Peter has again evaluated those possibilities as positive. Through these carefully layered inquiries, a vocabulary for a re-description of Peter has become available through which to make sense of himself. As we shall see in the extract to follow, significant others are invited to join Peter in these preferred vocabularies, and to add their own descriptions to a growing pool from which Peter's alternative identity stories can be written.

An originator of narrative therapy, Michael White (1995), writes that "if the stories we have about lives are negotiated and distributed within communities of persons, then it makes a great deal of sense to engage communities of persons in the negotiation of identity" (p. 26). Throughout this re-authoring project, the ongoing re-storying of Peter's identity is first negotiated with Peter, then with his peers, and subsequently with his teachers and family. In this way Peter is supported throughout this work by those who are an audience to his actions. In this way too, these people are recruited into the description-of-self language that Peter prefers, further supporting the presence of the preferred identities.

In this final extract I invite Peter's three peers to respond to what they have heard of Peter's account. When I invoke an audience of teachers through the written comments they had provided in response to my request, Peter responds with delight. My purpose in including this extract is to yet again demonstrate the emergence of preferred identity stories, this time through the eyes of his peers and teachers.

### Sixth extract: Peers' response.

After several weeks of meeting together, and exploring Peter's preferred accounts, I interviewed Peter again in front of his peers, and invited them to respond. In the following transcript Peter's peers, Andrew and Tama, make comments, while Jason has nothing to add at this point. I ask Peter to evaluate what he has heard, and he responds.

*Donald: You three — what did you just hear about Peter?*

*Andrew: He has a good reputation in class.*

*Tama: He's been concentrating a lot.*

14

*Donald: He has been concentrating a lot. [To Jason] Did you hear anything in there, man? What did you hear what I was reading out to Peter?*

*Jason: He was …*

*Donald: Oh, sorry man — I didn't mean to put you on the spot — you might see something as we go along … So this guy has improved over the last week. Is that true, or not true?*

*Peter [calls out] Yeah!*

*Tama [jokingly]: Mmm … not really sure about that … Mmm.*

*Donald: So how does it fit for you — being the guy who's improved in the last week?*

*Peter: Awesome!*

*Donald: Yeah?*

*Peter: It feels good.*

*Donald: [Showing Peter the paper with the teachers' names and comments recorded] See all these teachers? Every single one of them said some stuff about you that was sweet.*

*Peter: [singing] I feel good!!*

Peter is clearly delighted with the descriptions he is hearing. The rich language which has emerged over the weeks from Peter's own tellings, and those of his peers and teachers, has developed an account of Peter which he prefers.

In these extracts I have shown how language developed through explorations of Peter's intentions and alternative reputations can provide new descriptions. These new identities describe Peter as a reliable worker, a determined student, a valued cousin, and an interested learner. In the presence of these new possibilities, Peter hears and evaluates what is being said about him, takes up a preferred stance, and begins to act differently at school.

### Practices of Narrative Therapy

Within narrative therapy, the premise, "The problem is the problem; the person is not the problem" (White, 2007) is a central tenet. This stance emphasises problems as external to a person, leading to conversations about people's relationships with the

problems which beset them and their preferred directions in life. Conversations which seek to expose the effects of the problem, and the ways it works in a person's life, are central to this way of working (White & Epston, 1990, Morgan, 2000; White, 2007). Such externalising practices are seen throughout my conversations with Peter in phrases like: *"This idea of trouble; that reputation came through with you to this year? What other things did that reputation do for you around the classroom? Anything else that reputation was doing for your work at school?"*

In this context, the language separates Peter from the reputation he is known by, positioning him as an observer of his own actions and their effects. In this conversation, the effects of his school reputations no longer speak to Peter's character — Peter can decide to what extent he wants to align himself and the ways he is known with those reputations.

Also within narrative therapy is the idea that identities can be developed through exploring alternative stories. Here, stories of identity move from familiar accounts of life to the "not yet known, but possible to know" (White, 2007, p. 276) accounts of preferred identity. This idea shapes much of the conversations above, for example: *"So can you see what we are doing here, like together we are working out a different kind of reputation for you!" "Forgive me if I have got this wrong, it sounds like you are quite interested in learning stuff? How is it going for you in the sense of this idea of we can tell a different story about you, Peter?"*

On narrative therapy terms, Peter's sense of self is shaped by the ways he is described. Through my questions, which focus on alternative and preferred descriptions, Peter has access to more choice about how he wants to be described and act in the world. Through the externalising of his previous reputation and its effects, and an exploration of the many alternative descriptions implicit within his actions, and offered by significant others, Peter is able to review how he is described and re-author his preferred identity claims, and to evaluate these claims. As such, Peter exercises ethical agency, which is the hoped for outcome of these practices.

In response to these enquiries, Peter makes a number of identity claims: *"I was sick of my old behaviour; [I am] polite and stuff, funny, good to get along with; I'm good and stuff; I am learning more and I'm enjoying it; I feel good!!"* These identity claims have become available to Peter through explorations into his hopes and intentions,

and into other places and relationships where he may be known differently, and through the paying of attention to Peter's small claims thus adding to their credence. In light of these preferred identity claims, Peter is less likely to act in ways contrary to the school's hopes for him, and as a result suspension, exclusion or referral to an alternative education site becomes less likely.

## *Gathering the community*

Although not recorded in this chapter, during the weeks of our meeting together to explore alternative descriptions of Peter and his actions, Peter's peers, teachers and family had been reported to and invited to contribute to Peter's developing accounts through conversations, emails and through listening to Peter's stories. In consultation with Peter I invited his supporters – peers, teachers and family - to a gathering to further tell and re-tell his preferred identity stories which had emerged. In the final section of this chapter I include a letter I sent to the participants of that gathering. This letter served as a record of the event, as well as yet another telling of the shared identity project:

*Dear All,*

*Thank you again for the support you show for Peter in stepping into a new reputation at school. While for us all it is only ever an 'on the way' report, what we heard on Tuesday seemed to most of us to be a pretty good step in the right direction!*

*Coming out of a project looking at how schools can respond to young men in ways that avoid exclusion, we have all been working in our own ways to support Peter, and through his story, to support others in getting the most out of these years at school.*

*As we heard, Peter was heading for Alternative Education, or a course, or looking for another school. Now he's saying that he gets second chances, privileges, rewards, trust, good attention, food, house cards, and compliments.*

*To achieve this, Peter decided to get things better for himself at school. He did this by deliberately bringing his out-of-school reputation for reliability, kindness, good work etc into school.*

*But he could not do that on his own, because old reputations stick quite closely. To make the change he had some very real help:*

- *Mr. Mac helped clarify his preferred reputation;*

- *Tama, Andrew, and Jason supported Peter by being there with him, and adding ideas;*

- *Peter's teachers knew of his efforts, and supported them by noticing them, and by acknowledging them with attention and rewards;*

- *Peter's Dad has always and continues to lead Peter and support him with trust and encouragement;*

- *Huia and Brent from another school supported Peter with their keen interest in his story;*

- *I know too that D, the RTLB, has supported Peter and his teachers. And I know that Mr. B, Mr. S, and others have supported Peter with clear guidelines and consequences.*

*Here are some quotes from Tuesday's meeting:*

*Peter:*

*I don't have to be bad.*

*Instead of getting bad attention I can get good attention.*

*Ms. B said I am becoming one of her top students and I can get into good classes in the future.*

*The friends said:*

*It was a bit of a surprise because he had a bad reputation, but now he thinks about his consequences.*

*He used to get E's in class and now the blue book is filled with A's.* [Teachers record daily in the 'blue book' with grades for behaviour, attendance and so on.]

*He didn't used to be like that!*

*And the teachers said:*

*He's been paying more attention to what you say; he's listening, taking what you say and using it.*

*In PE, and from a dean's perspective, the switch has been a major one. His manners, his ability to be attentive, doing what is asked of him, offering to help; there's high energy and positive energy. I've seen a major shift. There is more of an ability to reason with Peter, he will listen and try and change things. It's a lot nicer because it's not negative, so much nicer.*

*Peter is more open to my ideas, he's listening a lot better. Success is coming from wanting to learn, I've noticed Peter doing better, and the work he is doing.*

*I've seen a big change after the first two days where he had to be removed, then, when he came back, he didn't do that stuff again. In the last 3 weeks I've noticed a real improvement, a huge difference. It makes me want to pay more attention to smaller things, because I know he is not playing with mates. He is higher in my attention for help when asked, this is really noticeable.*

*Peter's father said:*

*Getting notes about trouble in school is hard. Without those there is no drama happening. Now he brings his blue book home, and mostly it is all A's! Now there is no need for that terrible feeling of taking away from your child the very things you want to give him — he gets more trust, and I am not needing to restrict him. It's more peaceful!*

*And in the community?*

*In the other school which is following Peter's story, Huia said that Peter has given her so much hope! She said, "I see doors to futures of brilliant young men flying open all over the place!" Huia described the process as simple: "The most important is about doing the relationship differently, focusing on the small and positive. This has definitely made a difference. There is one boy in particular who is hearing about these things, and now I have more insight into possibilities for him and for others."*

*And these stories will be sent out to South Africa, and the people there will respond to what it's like for them to hear it — the echoes bouncing out all over the place!*

*So it's been great working together on this project. It's only a step along the way, but it's a good step.*

*A genuine thank you to you all.*

*Donald*

*I'll leave the last word to Peter:*

*What's it like to hear all this Peter?*

*"It puts a smile on my face! It's pretty cool! Thanks! And the teachers probably appreciate that I'm not bad in class!"*

## In conclusion

The process of re-authoring identity stories with young people described here winds through a range of individual and community conversations, all aimed at bringing to light preferred identity conclusions for young people, and enriching those preferred identity conclusions with the contributions and support of people who care for them. Although not linear, a process of re-authoring identity conclusions includes: naming problem reputations and their effects for the young person and others; offering restorative practices as appropriate; identifying preferred identity claims for those involved; searching for and developing alternative accounts in keeping with preferred identity claims together with key support people; and circulating preferred identity accounts among a community of support, including efforts to make a difference for others where appropriate.

In this chapter I have described young people's actions as an expression of the identity stories which shape their sense of who they are, and guide how they feel they ought to act. The practice of re-authoring young people's identity stories as described here allows for alternative life-stories to be explored and taken up in ways which change behaviour, and reduce the need for responses such as suspension and exclusion to be considered.

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