

CHAPTER FOUR

The Tree of Life: A collective narrative approach to working with vulnerable children

This chapter describes a collective narrative methodology which Ncazelo Ncube and I developed in response to the following challenges:

- *How can the lives of children who have experienced significant trauma and/or losses be responded to in ways that are not re-traumatising, that reduce the effects of trauma, and that bring to light children's own skills and knowledge?*
- *How can children be provided with experiences that increase connectedness with their families, values and cultural heritage?*

When children have experienced collective trauma and/or are experiencing a collective vulnerability due to broader social factors (such as poverty, HIV/AIDS, the consequences of war, natural disaster and so on), it can be challenging for workers and local communities to know how to respond. In these contexts, if an approach emphasises individual disclosure of hardship it runs the risk of individualising what are collective experiences and this can inadvertently contribute to an increased vulnerability for individual children. The approach described in this chapter emphasises ‘collective disclosure’. It provides ways in which children can share their skills, abilities, hopes, dreams, as well as the hazards they are facing, and the ways in which they are responding to these difficulties.

This methodology was originally developed for use with vulnerable children in Southern Africa who have experienced many losses due to HIV/AIDS and who are often living in situations of neglect, abuse and/or violence. More recently, it has also been taken up in Canada, Russia, Brazil, Nepal, the Palestinian Territories, and here in Australia. It has been used with children in many different contexts including: groups of refugee and immigrant children; children within Indigenous communities; students whose community has suffered from a natural disaster (floods); groups of young people who have been expelled from school; and individual children who have been subject to domestic violence, neglect, physical abuse and emotional abuse within their families.

Interestingly, practitioners have also found the Tree of Life very helpful in their work with adults, including: young mothers; parents whose children have a disability; adults who have had their children removed from their care and are trying to change their ways of living so that conditions are right for their children to return; elderly adults; and groups of men who have mental health diagnoses.

Using the metaphor of ‘The Tree of Life’ to enable people to speak about aspects of their lives is a common approach within popular education. The first published version of the Tree of Life that I have come across was by Sally Timmel and Anne Hope (Timmel & Hope, 1984), two educators who had been inspired by Paulo Freire. The version of the Tree of Life presented in this chapter, however, is quite different to those presented elsewhere.

In the following pages, I have chosen to include an extract¹ from a longer paper by Ncazelo Ncube (2006). This extract is shaded. At various points, I have included recent additions and variations to the Tree of Life process that have been developed in a variety of different contexts. These additions are unshaded. And at the end of the chapter, I discuss how the Tree of Life methodology can be used as a starting point for a range of broader community conversations.



Introduction

I (Ncazelo Ncube) have been working with orphans and vulnerable children for at least six years now. Anyone working in this field in Southern Africa will have many heart-breaking stories to tell about the hopelessness and desperate situations of illness, parental death and the subsequent suffering of millions of children who are faced with the reality of living their lives without their parents. HIV/AIDS has robbed numerous families of their joy and zeal to live fulfilled lives. I have worked as a child and community counsellor as well as a trainer for a number of organisations within Southern and East Africa whose purpose is to support the most vulnerable children, families and communities which are falling through the traditional safety nets. In this work, I have found myself not only having to grapple with helping vulnerable children and communities but also being overwhelmed by expressions of burn out, defeat, struggles, and feelings of incompetence often expressed by practitioners working in this field. This sense of incompetence has been further complicated by our struggles to identify suitable tools, means and methods that enable us to effectively counsel and provide support to children and their families in ways that are fulfilling to them and ourselves as the helpers. I have always been confronted with questions about how practitioners in the field should respond to the crying and wailing that they often experience when

having conversations with children and communities about their losses. I have found myself struggling to come up with satisfactory answers and ideas to such questions. My colleagues and I have often spoken about our experiences of defeat and incompetence particularly when faced with such challenges and dilemmas.

It is not easy to deal with a sense of failing individuals who you know have faced significant struggles in their lives and who have come to seek support from you. I have, however, come to realise that a lot of the struggles and limitations that we experience in our work are linked to structured approaches to counselling that often trap practitioners and people seeking counselling services into problem-saturated accounts of life. Such accounts often leave both the people seeking help and the counsellors feeling drained. Individuals seeking counselling support often find themselves trapped in the territories of life that led them to seek counselling in the first place.

Looking at the work that we have been doing with bereaved children and communities, I now realise that part of our problem was basing our practices on the western notions of catharsis. Some of our work has been informed by ideas that bereaved children and communities are not given platforms to 'express' their grief and therefore have feelings and emotions trapped 'deep inside them' which need to be 'vented out'. This kind of thinking has been very dominant in our work. We have for a long time seen ourselves as playing a role in providing the space for 'trapped feelings' and emotions to 'come to the surface'. The reality of such expressions, however, has been clearly overwhelming for both the individuals that seek our help and the counsellors providing support services.

More recently, I have become very interested in our role and responsibility as counsellors to ensure that our practices enable children who consult us to have a safe place to stand; a place that allows them to experience a preferred identity in order to change their relationship with the problems and challenges that they are facing in their lives. I have realised, more than before, how re-traumatising it can be for people to simply tell and re-tell a single-storied account of loss or trauma, as these single-storied accounts result in people dwelling only in the problem-saturated territories of their identity.

The 'Tree of Life' methodology ensures that children have a safe territory of identity in which to stand before speaking about difficulties in their lives. There are four parts to this process:

- Part one: Tree of life
- Part two: Forest of life
- Part three: When the storms come
- Part four: Certificates and song

The aim of the first two parts of this process ('Tree of life' and 'Forest of life') is to build and acknowledge 'a second story' about each child's life. This second story consists of the skills, abilities, hopes and dreams of each child, and the histories of these. The aim of part three ('When the storms come') is to enable children to speak about and identify difficulties or hardships they may be experiencing and also to identify ways in which they are responding to these. The aim of part four (Certificates and Song) is to ensure children leave with a rich acknowledgement of their skills, abilities and links to significant adults in their lives.

This process is ideally conducted with groups of children. Children are invited to draw their own 'Tree of life' with each part of the tree, symbolising particular aspects of their lives and community.

I will now discuss how we applied the 'Tree of Life' in Soweto-Jabavu, South Africa.

Part One: Tree of Life

I began the meeting with the children with a brief discussion about trees in general. The children energetically talked about the kinds of trees that they know and see in their communities. I then explained that we would spend the day together talking about our lives and experiences assisted by our knowledge of trees. At this point the children were quite excited. I then asked them to come up with a song to show me that, just as trees are alive and give life, so do they as children. The musicians in the group quickly came up with a song that we sung and danced to. After this hectic dancing and singing, it was time to start the exercise. I presented

the ‘Tree of Life’ metaphor to them and explained that they would each be drawing their own ‘Tree of Life’ which would consist of the following:

Roots of the Tree

The roots of the tree are a prompt for children to speak about: where they come from (i.e. village, town, country); their ‘family’ history (origins, family name, ancestry, extended family); those who have taught the child the most in life; their favourite place at home; and a song or dance from where they come.

Alternatives to roots

During a workshop in Rwanda in November 2007 with workers who are responding to children whose parents and families were killed during the genocide in that country, a number of participants mentioned that they work with children in orphanages who do not know their familial origins. They specifically asked us for alternative ways of approaching ‘the roots’. When working with children for whom historical origins are unclear, the roots of the tree of life can be used as a prompt for the children to talk about:

- those who have taught the child the most in life,
- those who have loved, contributed to and influenced the life of the child in a positive way,
- their favourite place(s),
- their favourite song or dance,
- what gives them strength? What keeps them steady (people, spirituality, food, music, etc.),
- what/who do they return to when they need strength?

In some situations, it may also be possible to ask relevant elders to come in and tell the children some of the dreams and wishes that they have for the young people’s lives. If this is appropriate, then these can be included in the children’s roots. In some Indigenous contexts it has been possible to include elders in discussions

about roots in order to convey certain cultural knowledge that otherwise may have been lost to the younger generation. In these instances, conversations about roots can also take on an educative dimension.

Alternatively, in contexts where children are less aware of their cultural and historical ‘roots’, facilitators have sometimes found that it works best for the children to start with the ‘ground’ (the children’s current lives and interests) and the ‘trunk’ (the children’s skills and abilities) and only after this to then work backwards to the ‘roots’. For instance, when the history of the children’s skills are traced, when influential people or places are named by the child as having contributed to their skills and abilities, then these people, places and histories can be recorded on the ‘roots’. There is no reason why it is necessary to start the process with children speaking about their ‘roots’.

The ground

The ground represents where the child lives at present; and some of the activities that the child is engaged in during their regular daily life.

Trunk of the tree

When the focus turns to the trunk of the tree this is an opportunity for children to speak about, and represent in drawing, some of their skills. These include: skills that may have become apparent when the child was talking about what they do in their daily life; or skills that the child has demonstrated in other aspects of their life.

In the days leading up to the ‘Tree of Life’ exercise, the counsellors working with the children take note of different skills that children display. These might include skills in physical acts, skills of caring, kindness, and so on. During the ‘Tree of Life’ exercise the counsellors can then draw attention to how the child has demonstrated these skills and can assist the child to include these on the trunk of their tree. During this process, counsellors can also ask questions about the histories of these skills, how long the child has had them, and did they learn these skills from anyone in particular. This enables stories to be told about these skills and the information from these stories can also be recorded on the tree.

While drawing the trunk, discussions also take place about special memories that the child can recall in his or her life. These are valued memories that the child holds precious.

Broadening the notion of skills and abilities

In some contexts, asking individuals about their own skills or abilities can lead to blank faces – it may be a cultural context in which skills and abilities are not generally conceived as individual ‘possessions’, or it may be that it is not appropriate to ‘talk oneself up’ in front of others, or it may be that any skills or abilities are not visible to the individuals concerned. In these circumstances there are a range of options for facilitators.

Firstly, it may be much easier for children to identify each other’s skills and abilities rather than their own. Children can be asked to give suggestions to each other and then each child can choose from these suggestions as to which ‘skills/abilities’ they claim as the ones they wish to list on the trunk of their tree. Secondly, it may be more appropriate for collective skills and abilities to be listed on the trunk ... these may be skills demonstrated by the child in conjunction with others, skills of teamwork, and so on. And thirdly, it is possible to not only ask the children to speak about skills and abilities but also the values that are important to them, or qualities which they seek to demonstrate in life. These values or qualities can then be recorded on the trunk of the tree. The history of their relationship with these values or qualities can also be traced and recorded on the trunk in some way.

Branches of the Tree

The branches of the tree represent the hopes, dreams and wishes that the child has for the direction of their life. While the child is drawing the branches, counsellors can ask questions to learn about the history of these hopes, dreams and wishes, and how these may be linked to significant people/adults back in the child’s home. When the counsellors get to hear

about how long these hopes and dreams have been alive in the child's life, they may also ask about how the child has managed to hold onto these dreams and what has sustained their hopes.

It is also possible to ask the children about hopes they may have for the lives of other children, young people and adults and also hopes they may have for their community.

Leaves of the Tree

The leaves of the tree represent people who are important to the child. The counsellor makes it clear that these can be people who may be alive or may have passed on. Just because people are no longer alive, it does not mean they are not still very important to us. Counsellors may ask the children questions about why these particular people are the most special to them. If, at any time during this process, children talk about some people who have died and they are upset about this, the counsellors can ask the following questions:

- Did you have lovely times with this person?
- What was special about this person to you?
- Would this person like it that you remember them in these ways?'

These questions invite the child to tell stories about what was significant about their relationship with the person who has died. This can contribute to an honouring of the relationship. It may also lead to stories about how the child continues to think about and remember those who have passed away.

It is also possible for children to include pets, imaginary friends and characters from stories as 'leaves' on their trees.

Fruits

The fruits of the tree represent gifts that the child has been given. These do not have to be material gifts but could be acts of kindness, or care, or love from others. At this time, the counsellors may ask:

- Why do you think the person gave you this?
- What did they appreciate about you that would have led them to do this?
- What do you think you might have contributed to their life?

If the child has difficulty in identifying any gifts, the counsellor can draw upon the conversations that have been shared with the child earlier in the 'Tree of Life' exercise.

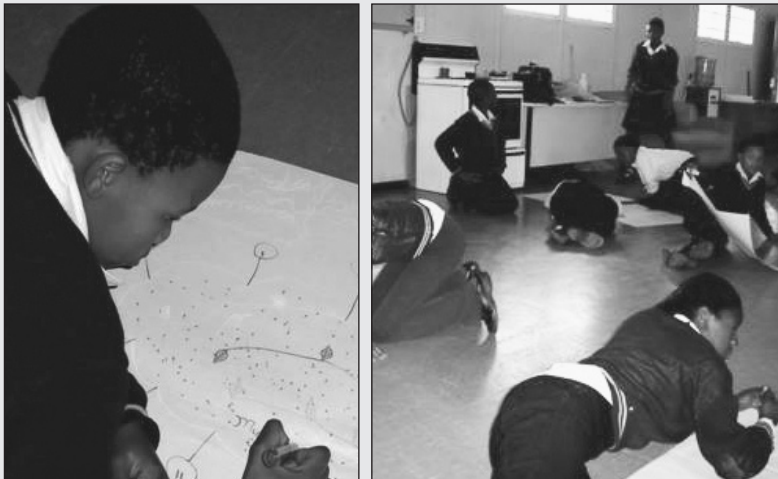
Acknowledging children's contributions to their community

When Anne Mead facilitates the Tree of Life in the Aboriginal Australian community in which she works, she invites the children to also consider the contributions that they are currently making to their community, as well as any future contributions they would like to make to assist the community to become a safer place for children younger than them. As she describes:

Aboriginal children often 'watch out' for children younger than them, and care for others, particularly elders. In order to acknowledge these contributions, I suggest the children add symbols to their tree, such as birds flying or nesting, sun clouds, flowers, and so on, in order to represent what they think they contribute, or could contribute, to the community and their families. We have ended up with images of planes, birds, butterflies, clouds, the sun, hills, and flowers, all depicting the many contributions that children are making in their communities to protect and care for younger ones.

The sorts of things that children have depicted include: 'taking care of little ones', 'looking after old people', 'finding others a feed', 'watching out for younger brothers and sisters', 'keeping them safe', as well as ways in which they take care of themselves: 'not drinking/ taking drugs' and 'not fighting'.

As the children drew their trees and developed their stories, it was quiet in the room but there was also a sense of energy and concentration.



Within the roots, ground, trunk, branches, leaves and fruits, the children found ways to write or draw representations of their own histories, activities, skills, dreams, significant people and gifts.

Part Two: The Forest of Life

When the children had finished drawing their trees, I invited them to stick them up on one of the walls. This created a forest of beautiful trees. We then called for a few volunteers to share the stories of their trees in front of the group. Several hands went up in response to this invitation. The enthusiasm that the children were demonstrating spoke volumes to me. Usually in group counselling processes it is a struggle to get children to speak out and share their experiences with one another. Understandably, sharing painful stories filled with guilt and shame is not as exciting as talking about things that give one a sense of pride. The willing volunteers that came up to the front to tell the stories of their trees were happy to share these. They were also happy to teach the group their favourite songs.



As each child spoke, we were educated about their hopes and dreams. Throughout their presentations I asked various questions about the history of the hopes and dreams that were expressed, how the children had managed to hold onto these hopes and dreams, and who else in their families and lives would know or would have known about these hopes and dreams. In response to these questions we listened to heart-warming replies. I have included an extract of one such conversation here.

An extract from a conversation with Mary (twelve years old) with regards to her hopes and dreams for her life.

Ncazelo: ... thank you Mary for sharing with us the hopes and dreams that you have for your life. I have learnt that you want to study hard and grow up so that you can start your own business. As the eldest in the family, you want to be able to take care of your young brothers and sisters so that they can also make it in life. You also hope to get married and have children. Mary, I find myself quite drawn to the hopes and dreams that you mention. Can you tell me how long you have had these hopes and dreams and what influenced or brought them on?

Mary (taking time to think): My mother always encouraged us to work hard at school so that we could have good lives. Before she died in December 2003, she told us to always take care of each other, that is why I want to take care of my brothers Anthony and Joshua ...

Ncazelo: So would you say your dreams and hopes for your life are linked to what your mother wanted for you?

Mary (taking time to think): I guess I have not thought about it like that before. Yes I want to make sure I do well in life. My mother was a Christian; she taught us a lot of good things.

Ncazelo: It sounds like you treasure the things that your mother taught and told you. Is that so?

Mary: Yes, very much.

Ncazelo: Do you mind to tell me Mary? How have you managed to hold onto these hopes and dreams? How do you manage to keep them alive?

Mary (taking time to think): My mother left us a special memory book where she wrote down a lot of her thoughts and wishes for our lives. I sometimes take the book and read it to my brothers and it reminds us of our mother and what we need to do to live a good life. Some people say I think a lot. I think that helps me not to forget important things.

Ncazelo: Is it okay that I am asking you all these questions Mary?

Mary: Yah, it is okay because it gets me thinking about important things that I have not thought about before.

Ncazelo: Such as? ...

Mary: Mmmm, my mother and the important things she taught us.

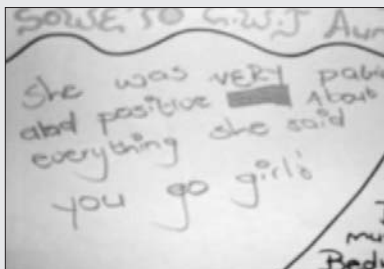
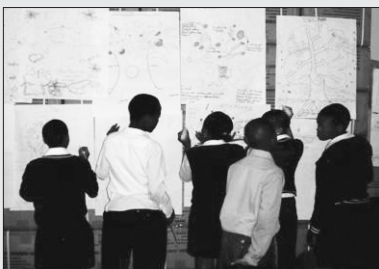
Ncazelo: Mary, who else in your family or in your life knows of these hopes and dreams that you have spoken of?

Mary: (Chuckling, she points at her friend sitting across the room) Mavis knows because we talk and share a lot together.

Ncazelo: What does it mean to you Mary to be talking about your hopes and dreams in these ways?

Mary: It makes me happy because I have had a chance to remember my mother, and whenever I talk about her I feel very happy. It also helps me to stick to what I want to achieve in my life. It is not easy to do that because sometimes you have bad friends who want to teach you wrong things, and life is sometimes hard, so it is quite good for me to remember.

There was a sense of quiet and fascination among the children during this brief conversation with Mary. You could almost feel and touch different thoughts floating around the room. After my conversation with Mary, I continued to invite other children to share their Trees of Life.



With the 'Trees of Life' stuck up next to each other, we took some time to reflect on this forest of beautiful trees of all shapes and sizes. We sat down together to appreciate our forest. At this point, I offered a re-telling to draw attention to the strong and firm roots that we all seemed to have. I also mentioned the dreams and hopes that we have for our lives. I spoke of the people to whom we are connected who have taught us a lot of things in our lives and continue to take care and support us in different ways. I gave examples of some of the people who had been mentioned by children including parents, friends, pastors from church, our community counsellors and social workers, teachers, grand parents, siblings and other relatives. During this re-telling I also acknowledged that some of these precious people have died but we still hold them in loving memory for the many wonderful things that they did for us. I spoke of how the relationships that we shared with them still support us in many ways as we continue to live our lives.

After my re-telling, we then spoke together about trees in a forest. We discussed what trees may have in common and also some of the differences that they have. This led to a conversation about some of the things the children in the group and the adults in the group have in common, and the ways in which we support each other as trees belonging in the same forest. At this point, the mood among the children was very light, warm and friendly. There was a lot of shared laughter. We then took a short tea break before we continued with the exercise.

Part Three: When the storms come

Having established a different place for the children to stand, we then wanted to create space for children to speak about some of the difficulties they may be experiencing in their lives, but in ways that would not be re-traumatising. We hoped to find ways that they could collectively speak about some of these experiences. We also hoped that we might be able to acknowledge the effects of abuse and harm on their lives. We planned to make it clear that children are never to blame for this abuse. And, importantly, we hoped that we might be able to unearth and acknowledge some of the skills and knowledges that children demonstrate in trying to respond to the hazards in their lives. Through this conversation, we hoped that individual children might feel more able to speak with us or each other about experiences in their lives, and also that their own skills and knowledge would be more visible to them.

We assembled together as a group to resume our conversation about trees and forests. In this part of the exercise I wanted to draw the children's attention to the hazards that trees and forests sometimes face as well as to talk about the effects of these hazards on the trees and forests. I started this part of the discussion by saying: 'We have lovely trees which have strong roots, beautiful leaves and fruits. As beautiful as our trees and forest are, can we say that they are free from danger?' The children quickly responded with a chorus of 'NO'. I then invited the group to mention some

of the potential dangers that beautiful trees experience. They mentioned the following potential hazards: burning of trees, cutting trees down, wee weeing on trees, kicking trees, too much rain, lightning, aging: trees can get old and die, and having no water.

This conversation on the hazards faced by trees allowed a safe entry point into a discussion about children and the dangers and problems that they face in life. ‘We have likened our lives to those beautiful trees in a forest. Would we be right to say that, like trees and forests, children also face dangers and troubles in their lives?’ Collectively the children responded with a loud ‘YES’. We then spent some time naming the problems and dangers that children experience. These included: rape, being abused, abandonment, swearing at children, neglect, denying food, chasing children away from home, kidnapping, killing children, children living on the streets, children smoking glue, children having to sell their bodies for sex, and children not listening to their parents and caregivers.

We then discussed at some length the effects of such hazards on children’s lives. The children spoke about sadness, physical hurt and harm. They spoke of fear and being ‘troubled in one’s heart’. These were some of the effects of the hazards that the children identified

Throughout this discussion, I was amazed by how the children were able to name all these problems and their effects with seemingly no shame or any sense of being defined by them. This was a collective conversation. The children were single-voiced. They stood in solidarity as they gave voice to the bad things that people do to innocent children. At no time were they invited to speak of their individual experiences. The energy and enthusiasm that they started the meeting with was surprisingly still very present even as we spoke about these hazards. This was despite the fact that it was very clear to us as facilitators that some of the children were speaking from direct experience of some of the mentioned hazards. An eleven-year-old boy heading a household and taking care of his seven year old brother particularly mentioned that children are sometimes chased out of their homes by relatives to live in the streets.

How children respond to the storms of life

Having come to a point where the storms of life had been named, and the effects of these had been thoroughly traced, we then asked the children whether it was the fault of the tree or the forest when the storms came. We asked whether trees or forests were in any way to blame for the hazards that they face: the burning of trees, cutting trees down, weeding on trees, and so on. Not surprisingly, the children were indignant on the trees' behalf. 'NO', they said. This is not the trees' fault! This provided the opportunity for us to ask whether or not it is the fault of children that they also face hazards and difficulties like trees. Again, there was solidarity in the children's response as they shouted out 'NO'.

I was interested to learn about what children do when these problems and storms come into their lives. Are there ways that they respond? Are there things that they can do?

In order to make it more possible for children's responses to the storms of life to be identified and spoken about, the facilitator may first initiate a discussion about how animals respond to storms when they are in a forest. A large list of ways in which animals respond to storms can be generated. This might include skills in hiding, protecting each other, flying away, running away, burrowing deep in the ground, building a nest, huddling together, and so on. Children are often very knowledgeable about these sorts of things, and the facilitators can also help in drawing out further ideas. By acknowledging and speaking about how animals are not simply passive when storms hit forests, this makes it possible for children to then consider the ways in which they are not simply passive in the face of difficulties in their lives. Sometimes children are also knowledgeable about how trees and forests protect themselves from natural hazards. Talking about this can also be helpful at this point. Once the facilitator has a sense that the children are ready, the group can then be asked, 'Okay, well these are some of the ways in which animals respond to storms, what about how children respond to storms that come into their lives? What do children do when these hazards and storms come into their lives? Are there ways that they respond? Are there things that they do? Do they try to protect themselves and others like the animals do?'

At this point, a whole lot of hands went up as the children were burning to share their knowledge about what children do to respond to the storms of life. As I listened to different children, the knowledges that they had around protecting themselves became clearer. They spoke of the ways that they share problems with caring adults and friends. They also spoke about a range of initiatives that children can take to protect themselves:

- Talk to someone that they trust.
- Talk to their neighbour.
- Run away to protect themselves.
- Talk to their teacher.
- Pray about the problems.
- Ask for help.
- Talk to a social worker.
- Make a report to the police.
- Talk to a friend.
- Talk to Aunt D (one of the counsellors present).
- Talk to friends about the problems.

As the children made these different suggestions, everyone was listening intently. It was as if special knowledge that might one day be very important was being exchanged. In future discussions, I will also be interested to ask how children hold onto their dreams and visions for their lives during storms. I suspect they would also have a lot to say about this.

In this instance, we then turned to focus on three questions:

Are storms always present in our lives?

Are our lives sometimes free of storms?

What do we do when the storms have passed?

I divided the children into groups of five so that they could spend time reflecting on these three questions. As I went round the groups, I heard the

children talk about the joyful times that they spend with their friends and at school. There was a general agreement within the larger group that storms come and go. I asked the children to include in their conversations stories about people who make them happy and offer them support. I also asked the children to talk about how they contribute to other people's happiness. Walking around the room I had the sense that the children were enjoying and valuing their conversations with each other.

Part Four: Certificates & Song

Whilst I had been talking with the children about 'When the Storms Come', the community counsellors had been busily preparing certificates for the children. They had taken notes about what the children had said during the 'Tree of Life' exercise: about their hopes, their dreams and their skills. And these had all been recorded on specially made individual certificates. These certificates also honoured the contributions of the special people in these children's lives.

In this final part of the day, we invited a range of workers from within Jabavu Clinic to witness the certificate giving ceremony. While the conversations during the day had been wonderful, the certificates can be said to have been the icing on the cake! The children were extremely excited and couldn't wait to show them off with pride to friends and family.





Tandiwe, one of the girls in the group, was covered in smiles as she said that she would hang her certificate on the walls of the family lounge. It would be a reminder to her that she has a lot to live for in life.

Writing a letter to caregivers

Prior to this day with the children, the counsellors and I had spent some time talking about the challenges that we experience with regards to involving parents and communities in our work with children. There is often a huge gap between what children experience during support groups and the context they return to in their homes and communities. It can be a great challenge to work out how to respond when children are returning to situations in which there is a high risk of abuse. It can also be a challenge to ensure that the work we do with children does not alienate them in any way from loving families and relatives.

We wish to find ways of including and involving caregivers in our work and where possible to extend our support to children's families. We spent some time thinking through how we could enable children to share their experience of the 'Tree of Life' exercise with their caregivers and families. We decided that giving children an opportunity at the end of the day to write a letter to their caregivers about their experience of the 'Tree

of Life' exercise might create an opportunity for the children to speak about what they value in their lives in the context of their families. We also thought it might be a way that the children could acknowledge and appreciate the support that they have received from their caregivers in a way that would be sustaining to these caregivers.

We asked children to identify who would be the person who demonstrates care to them that they would like to write to. We then encouraged the children to include in their letters descriptions of their values, skills, hopes and dreams that they'd spoken about during the day.

We also encouraged them to acknowledge the contribution of the caregiver to their life and to extend an invitation to the caregiver to visit the support group when they had time to do so. As many of these children's caregivers would not be able to read, we mentioned to the children that it would be respectful and helpful if they could read their letters aloud to their caregivers.

Kennedy gave me permission to share the letter he wrote to his grandmother.

Dear Gogo (Granny)

To day we did a very nice thing. It is called the tree of Life. In the tree, I said that I want to grow up to be mechanic. You know that I like fixing things, like that day on Monday I fix the Ty when it was not wiking. If I am a mechanic, I will be like my father because he used to fix lights. Gogo I want to grow up and be strong so that I can take care of you and sandie. Gogo thank you for the new uniform that you bot for me and the nice things you get for us always. You are good and special. I invite you to support group.

From

Kennedy

Other developments

As I (David), mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the Tree of Life methodology has been taken up in a wide range of different cultural contexts. Each time this occurs, modifications and additions are often made. I will include here some reflections from Palestinian and Russian colleagues.

A Tree of Life song from Palestinian children

Nihaya Abu-Rayyan

(a therapist who works in Hebron, Palestine)

In our national heritage we glorify trees, which represent the valuing of life. We especially love the olive tree leaves that remain green in all seasons. They remain steadfast and keep standing in the face of all the changes and difficulties, just like Palestinian people. We are firm and consistent in our land, rooted in the solid earth.

The *Tree of Life* approach accesses what I call ‘the storytelling language’ of children. By focusing on the positive aspects of life, we discover together that even in moments of pain there are skills, hopes and dreams. The children can also restore in a happy and positive way their relationships with dear persons who have passed away. And any painful memories are spoken about in safe conditions, contained in the refuge of the *Tree of Life*. When we talk together about what can be done ‘when a storm comes to the forest’, the children depict their skills and knowledges in dealing with the difficulties in their lives, such as beatings and abuse, checkpoints and poverty. Alternative storylines are developed through the *Tree of Life*, children are able to describe the mutual contributions that occur in their relationships with people around them, and they exchange experiences and reflections with other children in the group. Thus, in spite of all the painful events, there is hope and life. Children hear from each other about the ways they continue tenderly with life after loss. Children also become more knowledgeable about what they want from life and how to go on.

At the end of every session we sing a song, 'The beautiful tree', that the children made up. Of course, we sing this in Arabic, but here is an English translation of their words:

The beautiful tree

The beautiful tree has green fruit
It offers us this fruit to favour us

If a sparrow flies over, afraid from sun's heat
The tree hides her in its chest and she feels safe

If a tired man comes to it in the afternoon
It gives him its shadow and gives him its fruit

Its roots are strongly in the ground
Remaining standing all the time

It keeps standing waiting for the rain to fall
And keeps saying God's name and thanking God
Since God created it from seed to tree

Older Trees: Using the Tree of Life with older people

Daria Kutuzova, Moscow

While I (Daria) was teaching narrative practice in various regions of Russia last month, I included the 'Tree of Life' exercise and it was warmly welcomed. We thought about how this exercise might be used in work with elderly people for whom there might be less time for future hopes and dreams to be fulfilled. We thought that these older trees may bear:

- several flowers,
- winged seeds (you know, those that get carried by wind quite far away),
- and singing birds may visit.

The flowers and their aroma will represent cherished memories of beauty, love, connection, fulfilment.

The winged seeds will represent legacies. It can be discussed what these legacies are, and what care and support they need in order to ensure that these legacies are carried forth.

And the singing birds will represent gifts from other people.

Upon reflection, we thought this version of the Tree of Life might work particularly well if there were young people and elderly people together, all drawing their own trees, and all acting as witnesses for each other.

Using the Tree of Life as a starting point for wider conversations

Significantly, the Tree of Life methodology can also be used as a starting point for wider community conversations. I will briefly mention three possibilities here.

Intergenerational acknowledgement

Recently, a group of young girls in an Aboriginal Australian community created their own Trees of Life and then shared these in a ritual with a group of women elders from the same community. These elders were moved to see how the skills the young girls were demonstrating were linked to their collective history and their culture. In fact, so inspired were the elders, that they decided they would like to make their own trees and forest and then share these with the girls!

In this way, enabling groups of children to go through the Tree of Life methodology can be just the beginning. It then becomes possible to facilitate rituals that involve intergenerational honouring and acknowledgement. Along the way, a range of different relationships can become re-authored:

- First of all, relationships between young people and the significant adults in their lives become more richly described. As young people name and include significant figures on their tree, honour their contributions, and write letters to them, this richly acknowledges the significance of these relationships.

- Secondly, as young people have the opportunity to share in collective conversations about the ways in which they respond to the ‘storms of life’, this provides opportunities for the young people to know each other differently.
- And thirdly, relationships *between* generations can become more richly known. After young people have traced and honoured the history of their skills and knowledges, it becomes possible for the older generation to witness this and to take pride in their contributions. It also becomes possible for the older generation to acknowledge the ways in which young people are carrying on broader legacies in their own ways.

This re-authoring of relations across generations is not a romantic process. It does not diminish the extent of difficulties that any community may be facing. And it does not deny the conflict or harm that may have taken place between generations. In many communities that have experienced collective and long-term trauma, the relationships between generations may be extremely strained. The older generation may be despairing that the younger people have deserted the ‘old ways’, while the younger generation may be disenchanted with the ‘out-of-date’ solutions offered by the older generation. This context can lead to degrading interactions between the generations. Often, after experiences of collective trauma, there are few opportunities for meaningful two-way intergenerational acknowledgement. The Tree of Life methodology can provide one such opportunity.

Environmental education

One of the reasons that the Tree of Life methodology is proving to be so popular is because of the significance of the metaphor itself. The relationships that children (and adults) have with the natural world in general, and with trees in particular, provide rich material for psychosocial and collective practice to explore.

Here in Australia, trees have rich cultural meanings:

... many people [have] ... fond memories of a tree associated with a place, a person or a special time in their lives. In the same way a certain fragrance can transport you straight back to your grandmother’s house, or a favourite sweater you once owned, or your local bakery. Nostalgia about trees evokes a more visual kind of memory. (Beale, 2007, p.1)

Australia's story is written in trees ... they are literally at the root of our national identity ... Trees are embedded in the symbols of our national identity: our green and gold national sporting colours represent the leaves and cheerful pompom blossoms of the wattle tree, which also underpins our coat of arms ... We use trees to remember our history. Many a tree planted ceremonially by a visiting official commemorates an important date or event. Memorial avenues ... are a uniquely Australian expression of grief ... Other trees embody our extraordinary natural heritage. Many are living history books of a time before European settlement (Beale, 2007, pp.5–11)

In this day and age when environmental concerns are so critical, our work takes on a different responsibility. Can our ways of working in response to trauma also strengthen people's relationships to the natural world and contribute to environmental sustainability? The Tree of Life exercise seems to be one example in which this may be possible.

It becomes very easy to extend the Tree of Life exercise to include environmental education and action. For instance, in the initial discussion that introduces the metaphor of the 'tree of life' it is possible to:

- trace the history of people's relationship with the natural world,
- discuss what trees and the natural world have contributed to their life,
- discuss what trees and the natural world contribute to the planet.

When it comes to discussing the 'storms of life' and the hazards faced by trees and forests, it is easy to expand this to investigate together current local environmental hazards. And, when it comes to consider ways of responding to the 'storms of life', this can include ways in which the collective of young people and adults can contribute to assisting nearby trees/forests and their local natural environment.

Of course, an ideal accompaniment to the Tree of Life exercise is to then enable children and adults to join in planting trees and then continue to protect this newly created forest of life.

Considerations of child protection

The Tree of Life methodology can also be a starting point for community conversations and action in relation to what is commonly called 'child protection'.

In many contexts, children are engaged in educational sessions around ‘protective behaviours’ in which adults speak to them about the hazards of abuse and violence and in which children and young people are advised in relation to various ‘protective behaviours’ that can lessen the risk of harm. The Tree of Life process can offer an alternative starting point for these considerations, as it enables children themselves to name the hazards being faced within their local context and also the ways in which children and young people are responding to these. These collective conversations can provide vital information to workers, not only about the risks facing young people, but significantly about some of the ‘protective behaviours’ that children and young people are already engaging in. With this knowledge, workers (and/or significant adults in the community) can take steps to support the efforts and actions that young people are already making.

What’s more, the words and stories of the collective of young people can also then be presented in community forums to raise awareness of the issues that children are facing and to create momentum for broader change. For instance, in one Aboriginal Australian community in the process of creating their ‘Trees of Life’, a group of young people vividly described ‘the things we do and can do to make our community safer for ourselves’ and ‘the things that older people in the community do and can do to make our community a safer place for us’. This insider knowledge of the young was then read to older women in the community, who in turn read out the children’s words to a wider audience at a public march against violence and abuse.

In these sorts of ways, the Tree of Life methodology can contribute to the strengthening of vulnerable children and also lead to local social action based on children’s knowledges. This combination of responding to the personal and collective experience of children, and then finding ways for children’s knowledges to ripple out into the wider community to spark local social action around child protection concerns, is something we are looking forward to exploring much more in the future.

Summary

This chapter has described how the ‘Tree of Life’ approach can be used to respond to the experience of vulnerable children. It is based upon many of the narrative principles that were explored in previous chapters and makes use of a visual arts medium as a method for rich description. This collective narrative

methodology was initially developed at Masiye Camp in Zimbabwe.² We would like to acknowledge the children and counsellors at this camp. It was their enthusiasm, dedication and openness to trying new things that made the development of this approach possible.

Notes

1. This extract has been slightly edited since its original publication. A DVD presented by Ncazelo Ncube about the Tree of Life is also available (Ncube, 2007), as is a handbook produced by REPSSI (2007). Ncazelo Ncube can be contacted c/o 197 Derby Road, 19 Ville Amanzi, Northriding, Johannesburg, South Africa 2169, telephone: +(27-11) 4620096.
2. In November 2005, a team from Dulwich Centre travelled to Masiye Camp in Zimbabwe at the invitation of REPSSI (see: www.repssi.org). Michael White and Shona Russell offered training to a group of counsellors and psychosocial workers, while David Denborough and Cheryl White worked with Ncazelo Ncube to redevelop the Tree of Life approach.