

Chapter 2

The Suitcase Project: Working with Unaccompanied Child Refugees in New Ways

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Jean was born into a farming family in Rwanda. His father was a central figure in his life, teaching him important life skills and how to raise animals on their successful farm.

My first house was in Rwanda. I remember my first house. I am not sure if it is there still. Maybe they broke it down. My father was in that house in Rwanda. He was teaching me to look after the animals. I had six chickens, four pigeons, five goats, five ducks. I have those ducks in my mind. My Dad used to buy ducks for me. He would say, 'Jean, this is for you, keep it, it is just yours'. He was trying to teach me how when he is not in front of me or beside me how I can run my own life with success.

I always wanted a rabbit and I was always asking my father, 'Can I have a rabbit? Can I keep rabbit?' My father he said he was going to get me a rabbit next time he goes to town. But he never went. We had to run away. Now I cannot find him. I cannot get hold of him. I do not know where he is ... (Jean, 16).

Jean's life was changed by the Rwandan genocide. When Jean was 10 years old, neighbours came into the house and took his father away. His mother fled, taking Jean and his young brother into the forests. After some days his mother was killed as the two small boys watched. The two boys joined the streams of people walking across the border into Congo where they were taken in by an orphan project. His brother was placed in an orphanage in Kenya because he was very young but Jean remained in Congo. After many months a young uncle was traced, and Jean and he journeyed to Bujumbura in Burundi where they caught a bus to Johannesburg. The uncle wanted to start a new life in South Africa and Jean came too.

When Jean arrived in Johannesburg in 1999, he could speak no English and was now 14 and had missed 4 years of school. He and the uncle were given a room in an apartment in Hillbrow and supported for 6 months with rent and basic food by a

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local service organisation. Jean made friends with the other families in the apartment who had also escaped war, and he and Paul, a Burundian boy, developed a close friendship. Paul brought him along to the Suitcase Project. This is the story of how Jean (and Paul and other children and young people) worked together to find ways to cope with what had happened to them.

The Children

Like Jean, the children who participated in the Suitcase Project were all survivors of war. They came from Burundi, Rwanda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Angola and Eritrea. The initial group of children was aged 9–17, but we also had the small baby of one of the girls, and he soon grew up to participate too. The children had all been through traumatic experiences in their countries of origin and then made (often dangerous) journeys down Africa to Johannesburg. They had all left familiar places and loved people at home. Most of them were unaccompanied, their parents having died in the war or on the journey.

Most of them were living in rooms in apartments in Hillbrow, Johannesburg; many were supported for some time by a local church organisation. The unaccompanied children had been informally placed by the church organisation in the care of adults like Paul's mother, who cared for four other children as well as her own. Some of the adults did informal trading (Paul's mother sold clothing on the street), but otherwise the informal families survived on the very minimal food supplied by the church organisation. There was no money for extras like clothes. South Africa allows refugees to live where they choose, but they are required to register and apply for an asylum seeker document. The asylum process takes so long and is so inefficient that many refugees live with this temporary document for over 10 years. Like Jean, many of the children who joined the Suitcase Project, which is explained later and is the main focus of this chapter, did not have any documents.

Most of the children had originated in rural areas, and almost all of them did not speak English so the world they found themselves in, in South Africa, was unfamiliar and even frightening. Hillbrow is a high-density inner-city area filled with tall, often decaying, apartment blocks very different from the mango trees, village paths and market towns they were used to.

Levels of xenophobia were high when Jean arrived in 1999 and remain high. Ordinary South Africans, as well as officials, do not want "foreigners" in the country (Misago, Landau and Monson, 2009). Local police target migrants, asking for documents and, when they are not there, taking bribes (Misago et al., 2009). The older boys in the Suitcase Project lived in fear of being stopped in the street by police, who often arrested men and older boys and took them to the local police cells where relatives had to pay a bribe to get them out. Hillbrow was known for its high levels of violent crime and the children lived with the fear of criminals on the streets and in their apartments. It was very difficult to access

schooling in local schools when Jean arrived so he and many of the other children did not attend school.

So, like many other unaccompanied refugee children elsewhere (e.g. Kohli and Mather, 2003), the children faced some of the following:

- Past experiences of violence in their home country or during the process of migration, most of the group had seen family members killed
- Grief for lost places and people, many left behind loved grandparents and extended family and small cohesive village environments
- The shock of a new unfamiliar and decaying physical environment
- Alienation or little sense of belonging because of strange (and multiple) new languages and myriad cultures all adapting to a hostile urban environment with a concomitant harshness
- Educational difficulties and under-education due to the migration experience (many had missed out of 2 or 3 years of school) specifically a struggle to get into school

Alongside this they faced specific challenges of being a refugee in Africa (Mann and Tolfree 2003), including:

- Extreme poverty because of the almost complete absence of a social security safety net that helps many refugee children in Europe where Kohli and Mather's research was undertaken and all of the uncertainties (no rent, no food) caused by this poverty.

They also faced xenophobic discrimination which translated into social exclusion, almost constant verbal violence on the streets and even at times physical violence and coercion.

This chapter describes how a group of children used the opportunity of an art project to respond to some of these challenges. The learning from the project points us towards some new understanding of how we can help children like Jean and others to cope with the myriad challenges of their new lives.

The Suitcase Project

The Suitcase Project was started in 2001 with 20 (mostly unaccompanied) refugee children all generally struggling with the issues outlined above. I had met the children while working as a researcher for a media organisation who wanted to write a television series on refugee children. I had run a series of research workshops with the group after making contact with them through a church organisation. When the workshops were over, I carried on meeting with them in an informal way, taking them to the park and playing games with them. Over about a year the informal meetings slowly became more formal. The main catalyst for the formalising of the group was their wish to counter the everyday xenophobia they experienced by telling their stories "so people can see we didn't choose to come here". One of the young women

asked if we could make a book together, and the group all agreed that this was what they wanted to do. To facilitate this process I made contact with a local art teacher, Diane Welvering, as I thought that artwork could help the children to tell their stories for their book. In this context, the term artwork was used to describe using different art materials to represent aspects of their lives. We did not see it as art therapy. The art teacher and I thought that doing artwork with suitcases would resonate with the children and, though the artwork activity changed over time, the core activity was work on a collection of old suitcases bought from second-hand shops around Johannesburg. The children began calling it the Suitcase Project in 2002.

This very informal beginning grew into an ongoing art group that met every Saturday for 5 years with the same core group of 20 children and numerous others who joined in during the 5 years. The process continued to focus on doing artwork that tells stories. The project is in its tenth year of operation, working with a new group of children each year. It is now part of a bigger institutionalised service, that is, the Sophiatown Community Counselling Service Families on the Move Project. The process however has stayed much the same. Each year a new group of children (over a hundred children in all since 2001) makes a set of suitcases to tell other people about their lives.

The Approach

The central focus of the process that Diane Welvering and I developed with the children was the art room at a school close to where the children lived in Hillbrow. Art materials of many kinds were set up in the large open space, and the children came and went as they chose every Saturday morning. Most often the children worked uninterrupted for 2 or 3 h with support from the art teacher and an assistant.

The artwork began with pictures that showed “windows into my life now” (an idea adapted from narrative therapist, Jonathan Morgan’s Memory Box Project) pasting the images on to their suitcases and then decorating the cases. The art teacher encouraged them to treat the outside of the suitcases in a very tactile way, using a wide variety of found materials—they reinvented the suitcases with their stories. They were encouraged to undertake this reinvention in their own way, reinforcing the idea that they were in charge. At no stage was anyone told what to do. The art teacher merely encouraged and led the children to a variety of art media.

Once the children felt the outside of their suitcases were finished, they began working on the insides. The insides of the suitcases were about memories of their pasts. This section of the work was introduced in a similar way to the work on the outsides of the suitcases in that children were encouraged to think of windows into their pasts. They then represented these windows using various media and pasted the pictures inside their suitcases. Again, the multidimensional layering of their stories was encouraged.

After finishing the suitcases (and this took most of them a few months) they began work on a set of small journals that would go into the suitcases. They were encouraged to work on these journals in a tactile way with many different media. To keep up interest, personalised, constructed objects were also made from found fragments, clay, papier-mâché and wire. The choices of modes of representation and materials to be used were always the children's own.

Alongside the art-making process, the suitcases were used as a focus for informal storytelling that could be used to eventually create a book. The way the term storytelling—not to be confused with other uses of the term (see Kelly, 2005)—is used here refers to the children telling what was “inside their drawing”, telling “what this window shows about my life”. Sometimes alone, but most often in small groups, children would bring a piece of artwork and tell the story behind it. They were always given a choice whether to do this. They were never asked to tell more than the story they had volunteered, details were not probed, and if a child chose to stop the story, this was accepted. After the artwork and discussion, the group ate a simple meal together, sharing with each other and the facilitators what had happened during the week.

Over the 5 years in which we worked together, I transcribed the story fragments and began editing them into a book. The edited transcripts were given back to each child. We chose artwork together and talked about the design of the book, and slowly the book began to emerge. In 2006 *The Suitcase Stories* (Clacherty, Welvering, & The Suitcase Storytellers, 2006) was published. The children were involved in the launch and marketing of the book. At about the same time, the children and I discussed the need to move on and undertake other activities on a Saturday morning. Though I have contact with most of them, they have all moved on with their, now, adult lives.

The response to the published book helped me to realise that perhaps together the art teacher, the children and I had created a process that could benefit other children. I approached a local service organisation, and the process we developed is now used in a formal therapeutic programme.

Learning from the Suitcase Project

Though the project was not set up as a healing project, Jean's story does illustrate that an impact was made on his life:

When Jean joined the Suitcase Group, he was not able to articulate even his country of origin and got up to walk away if he thought he may have to reveal anything about his past. For the first few months, he did not do any artwork at all but simply wandered around the art room chatting to the other children. We respected this and put no pressure on him to produce anything at all. One morning he sat down and painted with a quiet intensity layering paint on to a small piece of paper with a thick brush.

He asked to talk about the painting. The story he told was the story of what he had seen as a 10-year-old boy when he survived the genocide. With a huge sigh as he finished telling the story in his painting, he said:

I haven't told anyone this story. People don't know this. It was difficult with the (artwork for the) suitcase. I wanted to keep my story separate from me. But I painted it here (Jean, 16).

Soon after Jean told the story of what had happened to him, we went away on a camp together. On the Friday evening we did a simple remembering ritual where we lit candles, to remember people we love and have lost. Jean lit a candle for his mother and father, brothers and sisters. And then, just as we were about to end, he stepped forward and lit another candle.

This candle is for the boy who was me, the ten-year-old boy. The boy who survived, who walked and walked and survived, even though he was ten years old and did not know what was happening around him. This candle is for the ten-year-old me (Jean, 17).

Some months later we were working on large journey maps. The children were using magazine images on a collage to represent their journey to South Africa. Jean had been cutting out small pictures of shoes from a magazine all morning. They were arranged in pairs on the map he had made, almost 30 pairs of shoes. I asked him, "Jean, why all the shoes?" He said:

They remind me that I walked. I walked and walked and walked. I was a small boy but I walked. They remind me that I was a survivor, that things were very bad and I was only ten years old, but I walked and walked. And I survived. The shoes remind me of surviving (Jean, 17).

Within a few months Jean was discussing ways to get back into school and joined a local church and was attending the youth group every Friday night. He and Paul became leaders for the church children's holiday programme. In the art group Jean began to make huge, colourful pieces that reminded him of home. He talked a lot about his future:

I need to do something with my life because I've been saved a lot. So I also have to do something. I will be a politician. A lot of people in my country say you know what, when we are grown up, we're going to be soldiers and go and revenge and take guns and kill people. I promised myself I would never do such. I don't want to be a soldier. The kid who killed my mom. Let him go. I knew him. I can never take a weapon and try to revenge. That will never change anything. But I am going to go back and change things (Jean, 17).

Reflecting on Jean's story and on those of many of the other children who have participated in the project over the years, it seemed that there were aspects of the project that were central to its impact and that could be replicated. It gave him a place to mourn, a place to take control; it allowed him to see himself as a survivor and not only a victim, a place to look for a new identity that included being a person who could make a difference in the future, and it allowed him to become part of a community. Of course, as I point out at the end of the chapter, it did not leave Jean (or in fact any of the other children) healed. Nothing could take the impact of the fearful trauma of violence and forced migration away completely, what we seek,

though is for approaches that will allow young people some measure of control over their inner and outer lives. The rest of the chapter describes some of the aspects of the “Suitcase approach” that emerged as significant in the hope that they could inform work that will empower vulnerable children in other contexts.

A Place to Take Control

It is important to acknowledge that children suffer during periods of political violence. But as Burman (1994) points out, the dominant discourse of vulnerability, crisis and loss imposes a victim identity on children that has the potential for seriously undermining their well-being. Boyden (2003) takes this one step further by describing how this stereotype works against healing.

It ... ignores the possibility that children may have insights and opinions about solutions to their problems that could be highly appropriate and valid ... If children are to be helped to overcome highly stressful experiences, their views and perspectives need to be treated as a source of learning and strength, not weakness (p. 21).

This acknowledgement that children can be agents in their own healing goes against the discourse and practice of most therapeutic programmes developed for children who have experienced the trauma of war (Tolfree, 1996; Keyes, 2000). Most projects that give psychosocial support for children are still rooted in a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) paradigm (APA, 2000), in spite of the widespread criticism of this model (Bracken, Giller, and Summerfield 1994; Englund, 1998; Young, 1995; Summerfield, 2000; Zarowsky and Pedersen 2000). Tolfree (1996) in his outline of the criticisms of the PTSD approach describes it as individualistic, not taking into account people’s present belief systems and cultures, and looking at traumatic events in isolation of the broader context. It also tends to see the person suffering from PTSD as a victim rather than as a person with resources who, with support, can solve their own problems.

Similarly, the narrative therapist Michael White (Carr, 1998) criticises the application of psychiatric diagnoses to clients and of seeing them only in terms of these diagnostic labels. White says that this process regulates or rules the body and soul and as such becomes what Foucault (1988) would call a totalising (or controlling) technique. White calls for therapeutic interventions that allow the client power and ultimately control over their own lives.

The Suitcase Project is a practical example of how therapeutic programmes can focus on children’s strengths and allow them some measure of control over their healing.

Englund (1998) highlights the need to move towards nondiscursive methods of managing traumatic experiences; Tolfree (1996) explores how nondiscursive tools such as music, drama and the visual arts make very effective “tools” for encouraging migrant children to build on their own and other people’s resources towards healing. It was insights like these that encouraged a creative approach, but it was primarily the children themselves who gave the impetus for using nondiscursive artwork as a tool for healing in the Suitcase Project.

Most of the children in the original group had a deep suspicion (borne of experience) of the traditional counselling approach. They described their encounters with psychologists as follows:

When we told them (the counsellors) something, they forced their way to ask about things we didn't want to say (Jack, 15).

This one time I felt sad, and this woman was pressurising me to talk, talk, talk, and I felt pressurised (Paul, 14).

She [the psychologist] just wanted me to cry about it. I got bored so I did, and then she [the psychologist] felt better (Jenny, 16).

In response to this suspicion making art gave the children a nonthreatening, nondiscursive tool for exploring their past experiences. Diane Welvering, the art teacher, describes the thinking behind the Suitcase Project.

I wanted to create an environment in which the child participants could determine their own creative outcome, using their own initiative to the maximum. I wanted to provide a kind of creative free space, to encourage a spontaneous, extremely individual response from each child. I decided to offer the children such a wide range of art-making options that they could "lose themselves" in the process. At an important point—where I felt creativity worked at its optimum—the children would no longer feel self-conscious, and would dialogue in close relation to the materials at hand, absorbed in the free-flowing dynamic of their own ideas (Clacherty et al., 2006, p. 155).

A Place to Mourn

Jean's story illustrates "a depression/melancholy, marked by the slowing down of verbalization and the inability to sustain signifying sequences, pointing to the failure to take on the loss of the essential object ... what Julia Kristeva calls 'incomplete mourning'" (Beardsworth, 2004, p. 105). This was the case with many of the young people in the group. Jean's story suggests that the Suitcase Project gave him a space to mourn for what he had lost. Another boy of 16 described how the artwork allowed him to reflect on the feelings of fear and grief and express them.

For me it is interesting doing all these things. Memories of life, the workshop is about life stories. It is sometimes hard, our expressing when we draw. When we draw, we don't just draw, we draw how we felt at the time. We express our feelings in the pictures (Richard, 16).

Mottram's (2007) discussion of Evan's Group Painting approach gives us some understanding of what may have been happening for the children in the artwork process. Mottram describes painting as valuable because of "the physical, sensual and ideological risks involved in the process of searching for newness and discovery through painting" (Mottram, 2007, p. 55). She quotes Evans:

... I see painting as a kind of passage of feeling into meaning, involving a kind of encounter with the physical reality of paint, space, time and the achievement of form, a kind of experiment, construction hypothesis that attempts to contain, define and distance the rush of sensations and emotions that are our experience it ... works at purposefully not knowing in order to know (p. 2).

In Mottram's application of Evan's approach, the painting process allowed adults in an inner-city psychotherapy group to "know" their loss. It became apparent that this was how the art worked for the children in the Suitcase Project. The quotes below illustrate how, through the artwork, the children began to "know" the loss and were able to express it as they described what they had drawn.

I remember I had a special book. I have drawn this book here. When I was little, my mom used to read for me that book. It looked lovely. The name of the book was the Princess Diana Book. I am Diana. She read it because it's my name. I lived with my aunty but every time when I was going to my mom, she read for me the Princess Diana book. My Mom died in the village. I was in the city. I was there for school. I went with my aunt to the village and the house was not there. Nothing was there. Not even the bones. All burned ... And when my mom is died, I didn't want anybody to read for me a book ever again (Jenny, 16).

I have made a stone here from the clay. In my house I remember there was a stone for grinding Tef flour. A long time ago when they wanted to make Njira bread and there were no machines they ground the flour. We had one in our house. It is still there maybe ... I do not know. They have all gone from my house. Maybe no one is in my house and the stone for flour is still there. I do not know ... No one will throw it away I do not think because it has memories of long ago (Zenash, 14).

I have two pictures here which I have made—the first is from the village when I went to visit my grandfather. It was different in the villages—grasses, trees, a lot of cows. It was different. In town you don't find hens, cows, goats. This other picture here is a boy just looking at the big city he has come to. It is Johannesburg. He is sitting on the edge of the city just looking because he is afraid. There is nowhere to sleep here. Not like in the village where his grandfather is (Emile, 13).

Michael White (2005) talks about how important it is "not [to] be timid in opening space for people to speak of what they have not had the opportunity to speak of, to put words to what has been unmentionable" (p. 20). He also emphasises how important it is to do this in a way that enables people to "wrest their lives from the prospective, longer-term consequences of this trauma" (White, 2005, p. 20). It seems from Jean's and other's stories that this was what the artwork partly allowed the children to do. They could explore what they chose to of the "unmentionable" without being asked to talk about it unless they wanted to.

Thickening the Story

It is clear that the artwork process in the Suitcase Project did more than merely help the children to "know" the loss and to acknowledge the traumatic landscape they inhabited. It also allowed them to "search for newness and discovery" (Mottram, 2007, p. 67). As one of the young people in the group said, the artwork also allowed them to "... think back to the good things" (Richard, 16). Michael White calls this process of acknowledging the good amongst the bad "thickening the story".

White's (2005) understanding of this process, adapted from a handout at a training workshop given by Michael White (11 August 2003) South Africa, is summarised below:

- People have thin stories and negative conclusions about their identities. (In this context "I am a refugee or victim".)
- Stories tend to be problem saturated with a negative view of the future. Stories tend to be lacklustre with a prevailing sense of being trapped and paralysed.
- Life is multi-storied, not single-storied. Also multi-knowledged and multi-skilled. Knowledges and skills are present only in very thin traces in our lives.
- As therapists our task is to make these traces more fully known. Help people become familiar with knowledges through alternative life stories.
- Our task is to help people become primary authors of their lives.
- We need to establish appropriate contexts for people to develop thick stories.

The artwork in the Suitcase Project allowed the young people to feel safe enough to open up their feelings because these feelings were contained in the safety of the painting process (see Evan's quote above).

But the artwork played another role. Because the open-ended artwork approach allowed for the exploring of multiple points of view and many paths, the children were also able to access what White (2005) calls subordinate stories. For White accessing subordinate storylines helps children move from what he calls the "half memories" (or "thin stories") that hold only the negative consequences of trauma to the "full memories" (or "thick stories") that include the knowledges and skills they used to cope with the traumatic event/s.

White describes how the cathartic approach that emphasises the need to talk about the traumatic event/s alone and to let out one's feelings about it (what he calls a steam-engine model of therapeutic intervention) can be harmful as it re-traumatises people in the telling. But, White posits, if the process of intervention allows people to talk not only about the trauma but also about what they hold precious and what they want for their future by exploring subordinate stories, then the child or adult is speaking from a "territory of identity that is not circumscribed by the trauma". It creates "opportunities for people to experience being positioned simultaneously in more than one field of existence, in more than one territory of identity" (p. 11), for example, survivor as well as victim. This allows for the development of a sense of agency and power over the world. White (2005) describes how often these subordinate stories (that provide broader identities) are linked to significant others in a child's history:

As the contribution of these figures becomes more visible, new opportunities are presented for these children to connect/reconnect with their relational/social/community networks (p. 13).

In the Suitcase Project it was the artwork that allowed for the exploration of subordinate stories peopled with grandparents, friends singing French songs and kind pastors, all figures that allowed children to reconnect with their relational, social and community networks. Here the children and young people describe

various drawings, paintings and sculptural pieces they have made that recall significant others.

When I was little, my mom used to read for me that book (Jenny, 16).

I remember my grandfather used to plant in the garden. I called him Baba. He was my mother's father. He was a bit cheeky, he always told us what to do. But he used to like us a lot (Emile, 13).

I would sit there with my sister. It was close to our house and when it was hot we would sit there nearly the whole night and talk under that tree. That tree is a blessing on me (Pascal, 12).

I love my name so much. I am happy to have this name. Both my grandmothers gave me this name (Zenash, 14).

I do remember the priest who named me ... (Abel, 14).

My grandmother is beautiful ... (Bethie, 10).

This is a jacket I remember. I had it when I was very small. He bought it for me, the pastor at the church. That is why I like it (Pascal, 12).

What is interesting about the suitcase art process is that it allowed the children to tell their subordinate stories and to "thicken" their stories in a concrete and literal way. They painted and stuck and repainted and pulled off drawings, prints and magazine pictures—"thickening" their stories in a literal and figurative way. Some even placed pieces of their story in envelopes and pockets in their suitcases.

Thinking About the Future

It soon became clear that not only were the children able to access what they called "the good stories" but as they added more and more subordinate stories, the process of thickening them gave them the foundation for action to proceed with their lives. They began to see that they had agency and power.

The restoration and/or development of this sense of personal agency provides an antidote to the sort of highly disabling conclusions about one's identity that feature perceptions that one is a passive recipient of life's forces. Such perceptions are highly influential in the development of conclusions that one is 'damaged' and 'messed up' on account of what one has been through, and to the development of the pervasive and profoundly immobilising phenomena of 'vulnerability' and 'fragility' (White, 2005, p. 14).

The sense of agency and the idea that they had control over their lives became increasingly obvious as the project progressed. The next phase of the project involved the group in working on body drawings. They drew around their bodies, including their suitcases as part of the drawing. On the body drawings they drew and painted and printed images that answered the question "Where are you taking your suitcase?"

Jean's comment that he had tried "to keep my story separate from me" resonates with what Varvin and Stiles (1999) describe in their work with refugees who have experienced trauma. Aspects or parts of the experience may remain split off and inaccessible to normal thinking but may surface during stress. What began as coping during trauma may continue afterwards as rigid defences and result in maladaptive

life strategies (p. 381). They maintain that what is important is “assimilation or integration of those experiences ... so that split off *aspects of the traumatic experiences may become visible and be worked with*” (p. 382).

Through the artwork they made of the traumatic events they had experienced, Jean and the other children were able to “make visible” what had happened to them in the way that Varvin and Stiles (1999) say is important. But, the metaphor of the suitcase gave them a powerful trope for understanding how to assimilate or integrate it into their present and future lives. To this end, the project workers talked about how the traumatic experiences and memories would always be with them (in the suitcase they carried), but they could “close the suitcase on it” (i.e. not have to think about it all the time).

This could have been why the suitcase process allowed some of the children to think practically about the future. Soon after the body-drawing activity that encouraged them to think about “where are you taking your suitcase”, some of the older members of the group began to come up with concrete plans for their immediate future. For example, two of the boys, who were over 18 and in Grade 9 and Grade 10, respectively, at a local high school, were concerned about their age and the quality of education they were receiving.

I know I am not going to achieve my dreams if I stay in that school. Even the principal said to me I should find somewhere else (Richard, 16).

They had collected information about a local technical college, where they could do their school-leaving exams and gain eventual entrance to a university. Another young woman began to make plans for a small business.

Finding Another Identity

As the discussion above shows, the Suitcase Project process was informed by the idea of internal re-authoring: “... narratives are not representations of reflections of identities, lives, and problems. Rather narratives constitute identities, lives, and problems” (Bruner, 1986, 1987, 1991). According to this position, the process of therapeutic re-authoring of personal narratives changes lives, problems, and identities because personal narratives are constitutive of identity (Carr, 1998, p. 486).

But it also acknowledged the need to help the young people reflect on their context because as McAdams (cited in Bradbury and Miller, 2010) says, identity is not only an internal process; it is “reflective of hegemony, economic, political and cultural contexts wherein human lives are situated” (p. 689).

The ideas of Bradbury and Miller in their (2010) paper on how to help young South Africans rewrite their identity in the context of a post-apartheid South Africa are useful here. Their work can help to explain how the storytelling and art making helped the young people in the Suitcase Project question how much their context had created their identities. How this may have happened is explained below.

Bradbury and Miller (2010) describe a project that helped young people to “articulate new versions of [them]selves ... through multiple modes of the arts as a vehicle for exploring identities” (p. 689). They describe how the use of narrative literary texts and films and drama created the space for young people to explore their identity. Applying the Vygotskian idea of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in the context of learning, Bradbury and Miller (2010) posit that a zone for the development of identity is possible. They argue that this can be done through the use of mediated stories and texts:

... that offer the mediated subject the capacity to “escape”, or at least make the discursive constraints of the internalized other elastic or permeable. Language (or discourse) simultaneously regulates us and creates the possibility for novelty, resistance, and interpretation (p. 692).

Bradbury and Miller (2010) posit that it is the distance between the writer and the reader that creates the zone of proximal development that allows for new thinking about traditionally held ideas that shape identity. They talk about the “sense of losing ourselves in a book, a film, a piece of music” (p. 694). They also endorse Ricoeur idea that “we can treat our lives, ourselves, the human-life world of action as a kind of text: read them, interpret them, appropriate their meanings across a distance ...” (p. 694).

I think that the artwork and storytelling played a similar role for the children in the project. The context in which the Suitcase Children had to find a sense of positive identity was an international aid context that defined them as refugees and therefore eligible for support, a cultural context that denied the agency of children, a political context that labelled them “illegal aliens” and made them queue every three months for papers that called them asylum seekers and a social context of extreme xenophobia that labelled them *makwerekwere* (a foreigner who speaks a strange language).

These contextual pressures on their identity were obvious in the concerns the children expressed. It was clear that many of them had taken on the role of “refugee” as defined by international aid agencies. It seemed that much of this identity had been shaped in the refugee camps where many of them had lived before coming to South Africa, by their association with NGOs that provided social assistance to refugees and asylum seekers in South Africa and by the asylum process that they had to go through regularly which necessitated their telling stories of war and persecution as reasons for being granted asylum. Even the younger children had a firm grasp of this institutional and political reality. For example, much of the discussion in the informal conversation when the project first began was about the children’s wish for resettlement in Canada or Sweden, something they knew certain refugees could access. They spent time describing how they fitted the requirements for resettlement because they were “refugees” from war. They also spent time talking about how local service NGOs differentiated between migrants and how important it was to establish a refugee identity if one was to access practical support such as rent and food. The xenophobic verbal abuse they experienced at school and on the street also confirmed their outsider status. So, in spite of their young age, most of them had appropriated the identity of “refugee” fairly solidly by the time they joined the project.

The artwork on, and in, the suitcases created the distance that allowed them to reflect on their own lives and begin to think about it in new ways as they told their stories to each other and over time to find an identity beyond *makwerekwere*, beyond “refugee”. They began to see themselves as Congolese, as South African, as teenagers, as youth leaders and as artists—much more complex identities as most young people their age would articulate.

Creating a Community

One of the important characteristics of the storytelling in the project is that it was a communal activity.

Plummer (1995) talks about how “stories gather people around them” (p. 174). Storytelling is a relational activity that allows people to listen and empathise. The storytelling that took place in the Suitcase Project usually took place in groups and was usually dialogical in nature. For Bakhtin (1981, 1984) it is through dialogue with others that we create new identities and make meaning of ourselves within our context:

The idea lives not in one person’s isolated individual consciousness—if it remains there only, it degenerates and dies. The idea begins to live, that is, to take shape, to develop, to find and renew its verbal expression, to give birth to new ideas, only when it enters into genuine dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of others (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 87–88).

The discussion below illustrates this dialogical process.

Etienne: This person I drew he is holding people in his arms—he is holding us together. He symbolises my grandpa, my mother’s father. He worked hard to become the person he is now. He worked in this place for long and he built a big house, he had twelve children and many grandchildren. He built this big house and during the holidays we all went there. We used to be there together, kids, grown up people, we used to talk and sleep around twelve—just keep playing around, it was light outside. That was a real good life when I think about it. All the family got separated because there was a war and they chased my grandfather away. If I have people who are around me who love me and that I love then I am happy.

Jean: Can I ask a question? Like if you are not sure what to do and we have no home or people to ask. How can you find people to believe in, that you can ask?

TJ: I think you can ask peer counsellors at school.

Jean: But what if you don’t want people to know about your question. You need someone to trust.

Etienne: I think friends. Like all of you.

Jean: But you sometimes need older people. Who can you ask if you have no family?

Silence.

TJ: You need to look for older people to trust—like the pastor or an older friend.

Etienne: My guardian (Etienne, 14, Jean, 15 and TJ, 15).

The boys were exploring family in the emotional zone of proximal development (see Bradbury and Miller, 2010) that Etienne, through his discussion of his artwork, had opened up for them. The dialogue helped them to explore and even to come to

terms with the identity they now had as young people who had no extended family. The dialogue allowed them to explore alternative families, such as the support they could give each other. Tolfree (1996) talks about special interactions being important in the process of healing for migrant children:

The whole approach is based on the belief that all refugees are deeply affected by their experiences, but by avoiding labelling people as “traumatised” or as “having problems”, the [project] is able to work in a way that builds on people’s strengths rather than weakness. No attempt is made to “solve” problems or to suggest action which they can take. Rather the aim is to provide a special form of interaction and the “tools” with which people themselves can discover and build on their own and each other’s personal resources (p. 113).

The most important “special form of interaction” in the Suitcase Project was between the children themselves. Each week we discussed who was missing and why this may be so. The group was encouraged to make contact with the person during the week and let them know that we missed them. The children identified this as one of the strengths of the group.

The art classes are not just for coming here and doing art. We are also coming here and getting to know each other. I never used to know TJ so much, but now I know him and he is like a brother to me and I see him on the street and I feel good. We were next door neighbours once but we didn’t know each other because the way Hillbrow is everyone minds their own business. Now we are like brothers (Richard, 16).

The first group of Suitcase children has continued to support each other, and many of them now share accommodation with each other and support each other with money for food and rent, as well as giving emotional support.

So the dialogical nature of the storytelling built community within the group, but it also allowed for the development of a sense of agency in the children.

We become full human agents, capable of understanding ourselves, and hence defining our identity . . . always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things that our significant others want to see in us (Taylor, 1995, cited in Graham and Fitzgerald, 2010, p. 230).

Graham and Fitzgerald (2010) emphasise how important it is to do more than listen to children’s voices if we are to bring about “change” in the way they see themselves and their role in the world:

We have suggested that a participatory approach that seeks to facilitate the recognition of children entails much more than ‘listening to their voices’, but, instead, points to the potential of a dialogic approach. Such an approach to participation is based in relationships, that is, oriented towards children’s self-understanding and individual agency, as well as to the self-understanding of the adults involved. We have posited that it is only in engaging in such an approach that ‘change’ grounded in respect is possible (p. 349).

Present Everyday Challenges

Jean dropped out of school in Grade 10 because he was struggling to learn. He was helped to get a job as a trainee waiter, but he struggled to get there on time and to communicate with the trainer and other trainees. He lacked the life skills that other

young people learn from being part of a family and a supportive community. He then took a job as a caretaker at a local church. He struggled with this work too, mainly because it was unskilled and below his expectations for himself and also because of the way he was treated by his employers:

It was not good work, I had to carry chairs and sweep the floor. My father was a business man, my uncle is an engineer. It is not a good job. And the people were rude, they shouted at me. I could not stand and be shouted at (Jean, 20).

He spent some time without a job and began to realise that he should have worked towards another job while staying at the church. He is now working at a clothing store and has managed to earn enough to pay rent for a room with a friend. He does not always have enough money for food and rent. He continues to struggle to learn new skills and information. With some of his hard-earned money, he registered with a private school to try and get his school-leaving certificate but he dropped out after a few months.

I can get a better job with Matric. But it is like my head is still full of the bad things. There is no room for the new things I have to learn. I cannot study (Jean, 20).

He will not consider counselling or trying to trace any of his family like his brother that was taken to Kenya and a sister that he knows is still in Rwanda. Perhaps finding them will confirm how many other members of his family he has lost.

The Suitcase Project helped Jean to deal with some of what he had experienced, but his commitment to seeking support, to facing the trauma, is still limited. His ongoing problems exist hand in hand with the successes he has achieved.

It was clear that Jean and the others did find some healing from the Suitcase Project; it allowed them to reflect on their grief and mourn, and many of them have built a greater sense of personal power. But this has made little difference to the everyday practical challenges they faced. Structural problems persist.

... daily stressors contribute to continuously high levels of stress, and it seems reasonable to infer that coping with continuous stressors—poverty, family violence, unsafe housing, social isolation—is likely to place considerable demands on people's coping resources. To the extent that interventions are able to reduce the occurrence and/or intensity of such stressors, coping resources will be less taxed and thus be more available for healing from any persistent effects of war-related violence and loss (Miller and Rasmussen, 2010, p. 14).

Daily stressors are an ever-present reality of all of the young people's present lives. Though most of the boys received a school-leaving certificate, only those who found a kind sponsor have been able to pursue further education. They live from day-to-day with informal and intermittent part-time work. Three of the young women left school early because they had babies. Others are in difficult and even abusive relationships often in pursuit of a relationship that would provide economic security. Many of the group still struggle with documentation and live a life on the margins because of this. Would the art teacher and I have made a better contribution to the young people's future by focusing on helping them access documents and work opportunities? Perhaps the challenge is to integrate a project such as the Suitcase Project with a practical support process that focuses on legal and practical support?

Conclusion

What the Suitcase Project does show us though is that it is possible to facilitate a process where children find help and support to cope with the past and the present. Even within extreme poverty young people can gain some sense of control over their precarious lives. Their stories show that alongside the grief and past fear, there is also space to dream and hope. It is not complete, but as discussed in Walker and Clacherty (2014) in the chapter looking at women in shelters, perhaps it is “good enough” (Hamber, 2009, p. 81).

The project allowed the children to acknowledge through the artwork what they had lost but also what they had found. Through the storytelling they moved through a process of finding an identity that encompassed the traumatic past and the “good memories”. They began to find an identity that encompassed the difficult present and the strengths they had to make something of that present.

What the Suitcase Project teaches us is that this kind of “good enough” healing took place largely because the space was created (through artwork in this case but it could be any other reflective tool) for them to identify the power they did have, to see themselves as agents, as actors in their own lives. And most importantly they found this healing and identity themselves.

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