

Graduate Certificate in Narrative Therapy
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Final Written Assignment by

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“Living in adolescence”

A Collective Narrative Practice in a High School in Central Greece

1. The scene and the protagonists

I work in a Greek public high - school in Volos, a city in central Greece. It is the first time psychologists enter Greek public schools as part of the system and not as external experts. What I mean is that I am two days every week in the school following its daily program. The responsibilities according to my job description is to offer personal counseling services to parents – students – professors but mainly design and implement preventive programs. These programs could be addressed to classes of students, to groups of parents or / and to groups of educators. In order to implement such programs I should be in a close contact with the whole school community, hearing the ‘stories’ that all parties (students – parents – educators) want to share with me. And in order for them to ‘want to share with me’ I need a different role than this of the expert who can give solutions usually theoretical and alienated from their everyday experience. Part of my role also, is to recognize my position inside this social context and the power I have, I suppose different for educators, parents and students.

All these protagonists in school's stage, share problems and difficult themes, but usually their communication is very difficult. I suppose that this difficulty comes from 'what a high-school should be, what should offer to its students, who is responsible for the children's education, who is responsible for their behavior'. It's very usual to hear the two groups of adults (educators – parents) to talk about each other in hostile ways, 'throwing' each other the responsibility for the 'bad behavior' of the adolescent students. Also, both parties feel helpless as the others 'can't change and nothing can be done'. Sometimes I feel I am listening to a couple, who have come to talk to me separately about their child and their different perspective of how he/she should be raised. My question is 'where is the child's story about his/her life? , Is he/she able to speak or nobody asks (and not only hear) him/her? '.

It is easily understood that the school context gives me many opportunities to apply narrative practices, both in individualistic and collective ways. At first, I felt more at ease to use the narrative practices I was reading about and reflecting upon during individual counseling. Usually the problems brought to the counseling room from the students had to do with: stress – bullying - relationships with friends – relationships with the other sex.

Reading more about narrative practices and their application to different contexts, I started to realize that narrative approach could characterize my whole professional practice and not some parts of it. It is more of a way of thinking and seeing social phenomena and individuals into them and not only a practical guide on how to work with individuals or groups of people. So, I started to think that it would be very interesting to try and use collective narrative practices in my work with students. This idea came to me while reading D. Denborough's "Collective documents as a response to collective trauma". The wide range of situations for which narrative therapists have used collective narrative documents struck my attention. I thought that it would be a very useful practice in my work with students, who somehow seem to be left aside from all the discussion that it's been made 'for their sake'.

The narrative notion that *'therapists are not originators of the storyline that is developed but instead they privilege the voices of the people consulting them in the attribution of meaning to selected events of their lives, in the interpretation of the*

links between these events and the valued themes of their lives, in the deduction about what this reflects in terms of what is important to them' (White, 2007, p. 82) was leading my new position in the school system, a de-centered position.

2. The project: Giving voice to adolescents

2a. Adolescence is...

Adolescence is a word synonymous to 'difficulties in communication, anger, rebellious behaviors, changes that cannot be easily confronted by adults'. Many books have been written by experts about this 'ambiguous' period of our life, giving advices to parents about their proper behavior towards an adolescent. The way we speak about this phase of our life it reminds me of a 'mysterious decease' that parents and teachers must endure! Also, many of us use adolescence in order to explain all the mysterious reactions and behaviors seen for the first time while communicating with our child. Referring to adolescence we are somehow reassured that this phase will end at some point and we will see again the child we once knew. Giving all this power to 'adolescence' we forget that we have to do with growing human beings, who have different dreams, hopes, expectations, thoughts or/and feelings than those that we suppose they have. The characterization 'adolescent' usually hides the real person behind it.

I have heard parents, who came to see me, to talk about a 'complete change', a change that is making their children unrecognizable. I also hear adolescent students in the high school, who describe so naturally their 'way to adulthood'. I tend to think that adolescence is difficult for everyone else than the adolescents themselves. The lack of control over our children's life I think is the 'biggest problem' during that period of life. All this conversation about the dangers of adolescence brings fear and more difficulties in the communication between parents and adolescents: parents want to continue to protect with the ways they did until now and adolescents want to live and try things by themselves. I think that parents have greater difficulties in adjusting in

this new, but natural passage. And this difficulty blocks the communication with their children, who start to demand new things beyond the known boundaries.

This journey to adulthood reminded me of the 'rite of passage' as referred to by Van Genep (1960, in D. Epston & M. White. 1990). The three stages of separation, liminality and reincorporation describe the identity transitions made during adolescence. This detachment from known roles and statuses affects their close relationships. I suppose that to be a parent of an adolescent is another 'rite of passage' towards maturity, which reallocates parent's identity and through which they are supposed to recognize their lack of control over their child's life.

School is THE social place where teenagers can test the building of their new identity and THE place from where they are mostly influenced. They spend most of their time in this place, with many other adolescents with whom they negotiate their desired identities. David Denborough's reference on the 'multiple masculinities' (1995) that you can find in every school is very characteristic of the identity negotiation that is taken place in every school society. Professors are like parents: 'they do not understand them...they live in a different world...they do not respect their opinions... they treat them as children although they are teenagers'.

2b. Leaving aside the representations of adolescence

My position in the school system is somewhere in the middle of this battle entitled 'see me as I am'. I am an adult who at the same time tries to give them voice and respect their life stories. But only the students who had come to see me individually are aware of this different position of mine. For the majority of the adolescents I am an adult who 'helps those that need help, because they have psychological problems'. I am there 'for some of them', a notion that puts me in the borders of this community, a place that I do not like. I have tried hard to come closer to them, sometimes feeling angry because they could not recognize my efforts. Probably this is an 'adultish' notion of power: *'when you are a child you should cherish what others give you without complaints'*.

I had implemented many projects in different classes before this one. My main problem – and disagreement with the guidelines I had from my employer (University)

– was that I entered the classes without the students’ consensus. This practice made me seem like ‘another adult who enters the class having already in her mind what she wanted to talk about and how we (the students) should be’. I was starting with a ‘contract’ signed by me and each student who agreed to participate in our meetings, in which we introduced and agreed about the rules, which should be followed by all of us during our meetings. You could say that this contract is a form of consensus. The fact is that my projects are implemented during their everyday program, so it is better to do this project with me than biology or maths! The themes of our meetings are usually chosen by me (according to the class’s needs and phenomena that I had taken notice of or the other adults or students had informed me about). I think that this practice was not far away from the traditional professor who enters the class with a specific module to teach, because some people have decided that this module will be very useful for their adult lives.

This whole situation, together with my ‘professor-like-entrance’ in the class, was leaving me skeptical and usually without personal joy and satisfaction concerning these projects. I wanted a different position in the whole scene, a position closer to adolescents and their experience. I wouldn’t be able to ‘hear their stories’ having this ‘adultish’ position. For that reason I decided to give their story voice by living aside my ‘adult, expert knowledge’ about them. The theme I had in my mind was ‘feelings – recognize and deal with them’. This theme has many dimensions in school life (stress management – anger management – fear management etc) and undoubtedly emotions are a basic part in human life in all stages. I chose this theme in the first place because of the information I had for some students of these two classes, who seemed to face difficulties in managing stress and anger. But this time I chose not to start my work with these two groups of students with my idea of what their concerns would be. I preferred to give them the chance to speak of the things they think are important, to talk about adolescence and what this ‘life passage’ means for a young boy and a young girl.

2c. ‘An emotional guide for future adolescents’ – The five meetings

I chose IT lesson, when the class was divided in two groups. So, at first I had five meetings with half the group of students and after that I met the other half group. In each group there were 11 students. Here I would present mostly the work I have done

with the 1st group and some differentiations of the procedure during my meetings with the 2nd group.

I chose not to be the only adult in this procedure. I had invited two female teachers with me as part of the group in a completely new role for them and also for the students. It was a surprise for me that the students didn't know their teachers' first names. They were the IT teachers, who gave me their teaching hours in order for the project to be implemented.

The first meeting

The first group consisted of 11 students, 8 girls and 3 boys, who were 14 years old. We all sat in a circle, so that we could see equally each other. I started speaking about the purpose of my presence in their class and our desire to hear their opinion about the things that are important for them. I spoke about how we – adults, usually think that we know everything about them and we don't give them space to talk about how they see things. I recognized my ignorance concerning their age and declared my interest to learn what it means to be adolescent today. I proposed that these five meetings could be focused in their own knowledge of adolescence and its characteristics and that it could be an opportunity for us (the adults present) to learn from them. Finally, I asked them if they would like to document some parts of their experience and leave it as a living heritage in next generations of adolescents – students of our school, in order to make their life easier giving them useful tips. The students found this idea very interesting and “different” and showed their surprise about this new way of communicating inside the classroom.

We started by presenting ourselves, telling a little story about our name or surname (where it comes from, what does it mean, has it been helpful to us or has it caused troubles, what others usually say about it, does it says something about us...). The teachers also presented themselves in this way, giving a new dimension to their communication with the students. At the end of this meeting we decided the title of the project: ‘an emotional guide for future adolescents’. We also decided that this guide - with positions and reflections made for different “great” adolescent themes as chosen by them - will have an electronic form, as electronic communication is very characteristic of this generation.

The second meeting

In our next meeting we discussed of the major topics this guide would focus on: they decided that stress, sadness, love, fear and jealousy in school, family, peer and social context are the feelings that affect them the most. They also mentioned friendship, as a major adolescent theme.

Stress seems to come in their lives when they write tests in school or when their parents come to school to be informed about their grades each semester. Their evaluation and the fear that they will fall short of their parents' expectations, seem to be the main reasons for the stress's appearance. Some of them referred to family arguments or deprivation of privileges they had because of 'bad evaluation. We talked about 'how stress affects their lives', 'if they think that they want stress in their lives or not' and 'if they have tried some things to lessen its effects in their lives'.

Love and romance is the other major issue that seems to take a lot of their time. They referred to the new feelings they have for the first time, the anxiety, the happiness, the distraction, the fear - feelings that can be unbearable especially if the other one rejects you. This feeling affects their appearance, their school evaluation, their friendships. Fear and jealousy also have a place in their lives. They fear rejection, not only from the other sex but also from their friends and the other adolescents. We talked about the phenomenon of bullying and the rejection some students feel for being somewhat different. They expressed their concern about the different and marginalized students, the sense of not being equally treated, but at the same time expressed their fear to connect with them because of the 'stigma' they seem to have inside the school community. Talking about jealousy they described it as contrasting myself with others of the same age about appearance or school grades.

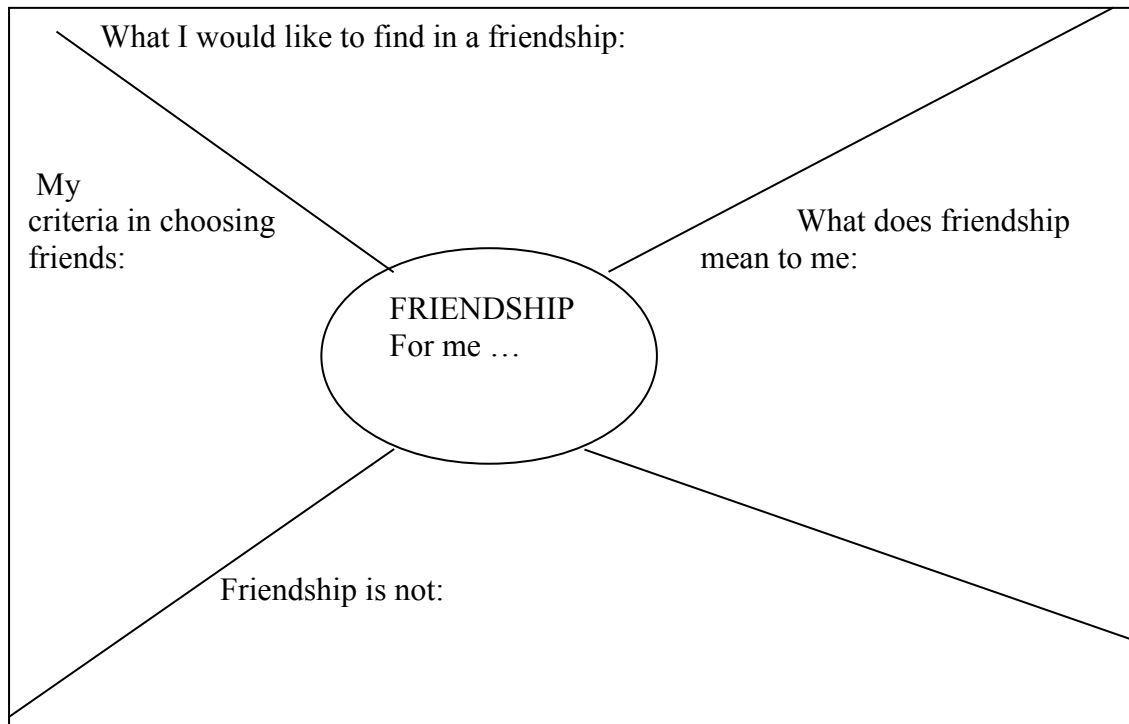
It was an opportunity for them to share their experience and for us (adult participants) to remember our adolescence and contribute with our own experience. It was like changing the relationship status: now we were the ones asking, listening and learning about their own life experience, acknowledging their position in the social system, acknowledging their privilege to be different. It seems difficult for them to trust this new way of communication inside the school. Although they had the opportunity to speak about themselves, they were not so talkative at first. The teachers' participation,

talking about their own experiences as adolescents using personal language and not the common normative comments, was very helpful in this new situation for all of us.

The third and the fourth meeting

Our next two meetings were devoted to the generation of collective narrative documents: they were divided in 3 teams and each member wrote down his/her ideas about 2 great adolescent themes: stress and friendship. Each team had a big paper divided in 4 inquiry sections. Each student wrote his/her ideas in this big paper, answering in a way the four questions. Finally, 3 big ‘position maps’ were constructed with student’s opinions – ideas – hopes etc.

The collective narrative document for friendship had the following form:



The four inquiry sections for STRESS were:

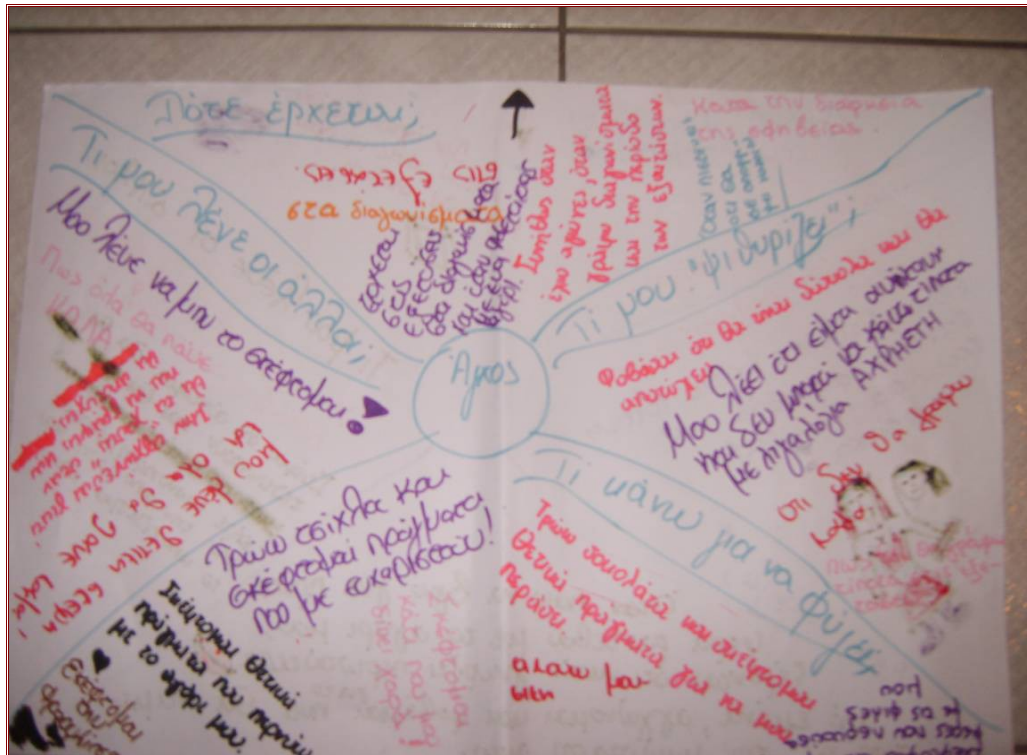
- It comes and meets me when:
- It whispers to me:
- Others tell me about it:
- In order to make it go away I.:

Students worked in groups and provided us with valuable knowledge for these two major themes in their lives. The students decided to form different groups in these two meetings. In this way they had the chance to get more in touch with classmates they did not know so well. They were free to put drawings or songs to their papers, if they thought that these could describe best their experiences or feelings.

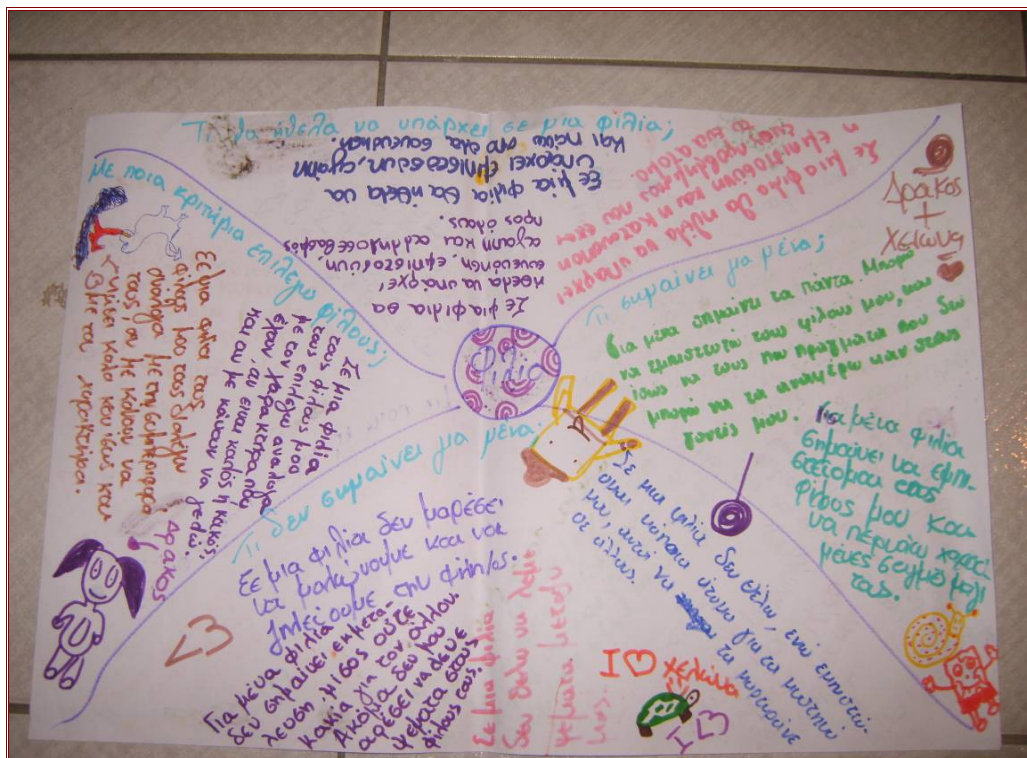
The last meeting

During the last meeting we had the chance to talk about being different in adolescence and what that means for them. They spoke of their need to be part of their age group and not very different from the other adolescents, because many times this is the cause that someone becomes the unwanted member of the school, nobody wants to be friend with him/her and he/she is all alone without friends to stand by her/his side. This need for conformity comes together with their need for difference, which was made very clear in our previous meetings.

Finally, I asked them about the experience we had together: if there was something they would like to keep and remember and if we talked about things they wanted to talk about. They replied that it was something different and they liked the procedure and the discussion very much. Most students said that will choose to remember what we said about stress and being different. I also reflected on my own thoughts and feelings which were evoked by this experience and I thanked them for the journey back to my adolescence that it was brought about by their words.



Picture 1: Stress



Picture 2: Friendship

The 2nd group - Differentiations

My meetings with the second group of students began after I finished with the first one. I followed the same way of communicating with the students and this time one

IT teacher was with me. This group also consisted of 11 students, 3 boys and 8 girls. Our first meeting was exactly the same. During our second meeting we talked about the great adolescent emotions. They chose to speak about stress and anger. Stress is related to school and mainly to parents' reactions to 'bad' performance. I asked them 'if they remember when stress came to them for the first time' and they all replied that high school is their meeting point, when examinations start. I asked each of them to describe me in colors or shapes or images how their stress is look like: 'red square - white and grey - black circle - yellow fish that has thorns around it' were some of their answers. I asked them how stress affects their lives: 'I get angry with the others around me and they do not understand why - I am shaking – It makes me have allergies in my body – I am sweating all the time – It makes me feel afraid that I will not succeed'. Also, we had an interesting discussion about genders and the different expectations parents have from boys and girls concerning school and their academic course. Girls believe that their parents will be much more proud if they are excellent students and go to college than their son's success to these fields.

Anger was the theme of our third meeting and the students worked in groups constructing 3 position maps. Fourth and fifth meetings were about the school's rules. Inspired by an adult project in the school (the head master together with the other professors are planning to enrich the rules and refer directly to the consequences the students will have if they will not comply with them) I decided to ask their opinion about the existing rules and if they wanted to propose some rules they think are crucial for the school's operation and their well-being inside it. We had a very interesting discussion about the existing rules, their necessity and the reason they were chosen by the adults. It seems that the students understand very well why the rules exist and why they are important for school's operation. At the same time, they think that they are very strict sometimes and that's why they decide not to follow them. Also, they see that all students are not treated equally and not all the professors are equally applying these rules. This whole situation makes them ignore the rules, although they know they are important. At home it seems more difficult to disobey the rules, as they are going to have consequences usually concerning the deprivation of 'loved' activities (internet – pc time – going out with friends etc).

Finally, they did not propose any new rules as they think that the existing ones are fine for the school's operation. Our discussion ended talking about the 'common phrases' that they hear all the time by their parents, which are usually controversial: at one hand they compare them with other children of their age – usually about better school grades or performance – and on the other hand when they claim for privileges that other peers already have, they advise them to look only at their self and not what others are doing! Surprisingly this constant 'tape playback' was the same for all of us, regardless of our age or gender.

2d. Transferring the experience to other adolescents

My participation to this project ended with the completion of the five meetings. But the project continued by the IT teacher with whom we had the idea of doing something that would come from the students and will be addressed to other students, respecting and acknowledging their own experience, their language and in general their adolescent culture. I had already worked with other classes in this emotional guide and I had collected plenty of data for a number of interesting emotions (including stress and anger). I categorized their answers by emotion or significant adolescent ideas (friendship - bullying) and I gave them to the teacher. She gave this material to many classes in the school and she asked from the students of each class to work in pairs so as to prepare an electronic presentation for the selected emotion / idea. These presentations will be uploaded to the school's web site, together with the written experience of one of the IT teachers who was participating throughout the project and continued it.

The majority of students found this project very interesting and put a lot of energy and creativity for its completion. The result left us wondering about their active participation in the school and how it could be strengthened. It seems that they could express themselves in different ways than the dominant story of the counteraction to adult rules, which brings forth only the differences between the two social groups and not their similarities.

3. The reflection

School system in Greece usually unifies students in a de-personifying way and focuses in what they should learn and how they must behave and not in their beliefs, ideas, positions, hopes etc. The recognition of a different position that students can have inside the school system regarding the traditional power relationships, I suppose that can be a basis for a second story development regarding their identity. This approach I think that acknowledges students as “personas” at the same time that recognizes and accepts their different collective experience. It resembles with the definitional ceremonies as described by Myerhoff (1986 in M. White, 2007, p. 181): *they deal with the problems of invisibility and marginality; they are strategies that provide opportunities for being seen and in one’s own terms, garnering witnesses to one’s worth, vitality and being.*

Through this project adolescents had the opportunity to talk and express their ideas, thoughts and beliefs in front of their peers. Also, they talked about emotions that seem to cause trouble in their lives, like stress and anger, and they all thought of ways to reduce their bad consequences and keep their positive functions. As they told me, usually they do not talk about such things when they are altogether. This new experience of ‘the already known person, my classmate’, helped those who were not so close to see each other in a different way. This project proved to have a mediating role and facilitated new friendships between them. Also, it is a rare occasion for students in high school to work in groups. The preparation of the collective narrative documents gave them the opportunity to exchange their thoughts and ideas about these common themes without adult interference.

The collective narrative documents were functioning also as an externalizing practice. They assisted students to give an external form to their knowledge of the emotions that seem to be making their life difficult and ideas (like friendship or bullying) that produce multiple emotions, affecting their everyday life and their identity. They were also statements about what they want to do with them, what they want to keep or leave behind. The discussion that followed their writing was making clearer students’ position concerning each theme and contributed in the development of a subordinate story, in which they were able to express their personal values and beliefs in front of an audience of peers and adults, without the normalizing gaze that put them in the category ‘adolescents’.

This project diversified the existing relationships that students had with these 3 teachers. It was the first time teachers were listening to them without censoring their ideas or behavior. In fact there were times they functioned much like outsider – witnesses in this procedure. They were listening carefully and when something was striking their attention, they were reflecting on how the students’ stories remind them of their own adolescence story. Without any act of positive or negative judgment, they were there to listen with personal interest and share their memories about their adolescence. I think for the adults participating in the group (including me), remembering has been taking place throughout the project. As teachers informed me after its completion, their communication with the students was better. This sharing of personal experience, which focused on the similarities and not on differences, was an act of mutual trust between the two age subgroups.

The involvement of educators in this project and its continuation by them, in a way brought these conversations and the experience of a new way of communicating with adults outside the ‘therapy room’ or outside the narrow boundaries of a group of people in specific spatiotemporal conditions under the guidance of an ‘expert’. It was an act of recognizing their active involvement and an act of acceptance of their knowledge and their personal and collective experience. Even more, it was a transfer of their knowledge to their peers and a living legacy to future students of this school. It was an acknowledgment of their position inside the school system, a position that is not characterized as counteraction to the system but as active involvement in the co-creation of it.

Regarding my involvement and position throughout the project I can say that I am satisfied because I managed to leave the narrow boundaries of a socially prescribed role, this of the expert who helps people with problems. I see myself more as a facilitator of human identities and human relations and I think the implementation of this project helped me state my position and to decide which things I want to keep for me and which things to leave behind. It was very relieving not to have to be always prepared and in control of everything in order to solve the problems that we (adults) thought that some classes or students were facing. I felt more open to ask and learn than impose ideas about how things should work inside a group of people.

I think that adolescence, like childhood, is very tricky for us, the ‘expert adults’ as we think that we have the power to understand without asking and learning from them. I used to mistrust their social and personal knowledge, dispossessing their personal agency, when at the same time I was asking them to take the responsibility of their actions. It’s like the inconsistent ‘tape playbacks’ that students referred to during the project! How can we form a ‘*social collaboration that assists people to traverse the space between what is known and familiar to them and what might be possible for them to know about their lives and identities*’ (White, 2007, p. 269), is the major question not only for therapists but for educational systems as well. Adolescence seems to be a phase where personal agency and the capacity for responsible action can be founded under the condition that is cherished and acknowledged.

I will conclude quoting once again Michael White’s words, which helped me develop a preferred story for myself as psychologist and therapist inside the school community:

*‘The experience of despair in this
work can be taken as a signal for therapists to review these conceptions, to take
steps to renew their engagement in these practices, and to enter into
explorations that question the known limits of these practices
in a quest to exceed the boundaries of them’
(M. White)*

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