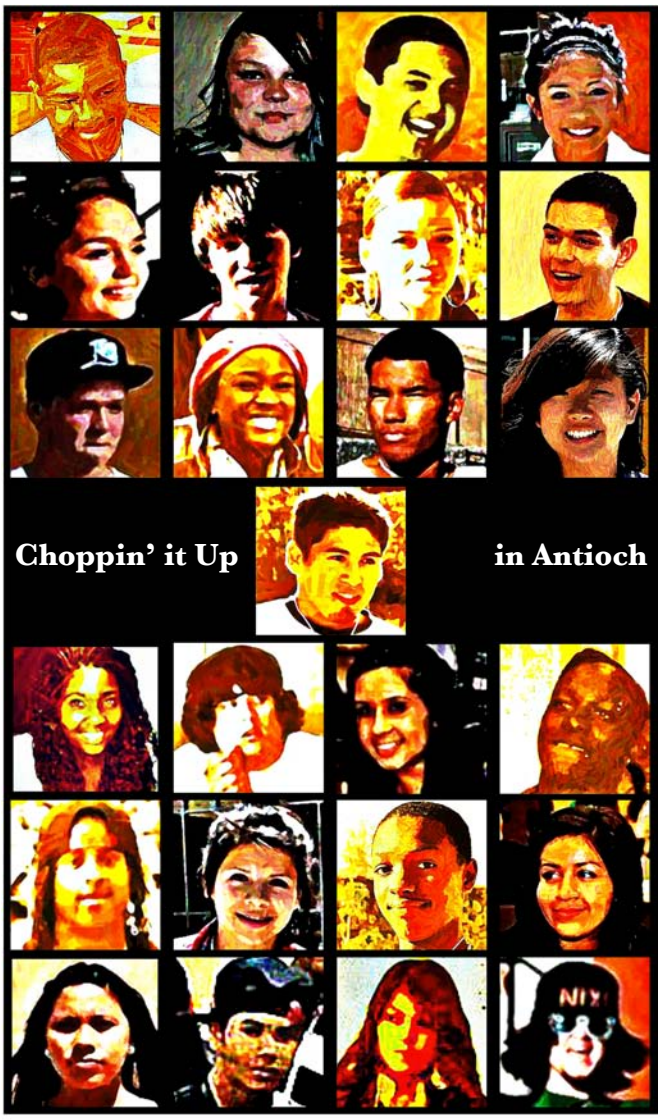
Choppin' it Up

Youth-Led Dialogues for Positive Change



Kristin Bodiford

Families Thrive of Contra Costa County

Choppin' it Up in Antioch
Youth-Led Dialogues for Positive Change

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Dedication

This is a story of transformation.
Transforming our lives, our relationships, and our communities.

No love, no friendship can cross

the path of our destiny

without leaving some mark on it forever.

~ Francois Muriac

With love, Kristin ♥

CHOPPIN' IT UP YOUTH

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ABSTRACT

In communities struggling with youth violence, gangs, and poor academic performance, adults and community members often view youth and delinquent youth behaviors as "the problem". In doing so, adults may neglect to view young people in the context of their lived experiences and unique paths to creating powerful identities, meaning, and well-being and may lose the opportunity to engage youth as powerful social change agents within their communities. This dissertation engaged youth in a collaborative inquiry about their lives and experiences, the impact of abuse in relationships, and ways they survive and thrive in the face of adversity.

Beginning in May 2011, Families Thrive, the Antioch Unified School District, and the Youth Intervention Network, collaborated to invite a group of twenty high school youth in Antioch, CA to participate in a powerful approach called Choppin' it Up. This approach to working with youth extends beyond solving problems and instead focuses on weaving new narratives and co-constructing alternatives by increasing our understanding of each other, generating new ways of being in relationship, and imaging positive possibilities together.

In the first part of our work together, youth explored and developed their skills for holding dialogues with each other. These dialogues examined the impact of abuse in relationships, explored what a healthy relationship looks like to them, and identified ways teens survive and thrive in the face of adversity.

From these dialogues between and with youth, we also began to see how youth can be powerful social change agents in their communities. The young people also realized that dominant narratives about youth often influence the beliefs people hold about them, the stories that are told about them, and how often the stories are told. Youth looked at how these stories impact the way adults are in relationships with youth and the possibilities and alternatives that are constructed. By subscribing to and participating in problematic dominant narratives, adults often miss seeing and hearing the multitude of strengths, dreams, and hopes youth have through which together we can imagine positive possibilities and build better worlds together. We may forget that despite the many challenges that children and youth may face in their lives, many not only survive but also thrive and flourish.

Youth were clear that they needed the support of adults to create the positive change they wanted to see in their communities. They also recognized that they may need to change perceptions adults might have of them in order to create the kinds of partnerships they envisioned. And they did it. Through their commitment and leadership, these youth demonstrated the power of youth as social change agents in their communities, envisioning and building communities that are good for all people, of all ages.

This story of transformation is centered on how adults and society view youth who are labeled at-risk or troubled, how youth view themselves, and in altering the relation, including the language we use and stories we tell, between youth and adults in order to create positive change in our communities.

The following video provides a summary of our work at Choppin' it Up.

To view this video please go to www.vimeo.com/familiesthrive/aivideo

DISSERTATION GUIDE

I have designed this dissertation to hopefully be reflective and interactive. You will find several resources included to support these goals.

Exercises - You will find exercises throughout the dissertation for reflection. In these spaces, feel free to write your reflections or pose questions back to the discussion areas online at http://choppinitup.org/discussions/. I have included questions that have been useful to me. I would also like to learn what questions you find useful. Feel free to email me at bodiford@communitystrengths.org.

Voices of Youth - You will find the voices of youth from the project throughout the dissertation in several ways. First, you will find quotes that appear indented in italic to reinforce or provide a narrative storyline for a concept I am speaking about. Second, two youth shared their personal stories to provide context for Chapter Three as we examine the possible limitations of current discourses that impact youth's lives. Lastly, you will also find the digital story videos the youth created embedded or linked in the digital versions of this document and as URL's for the printed versions of this document.

Please note: the quotations from youth in the dissertation were collected throughout the research project - in the dialogues we held, in group discussions, and in collaborative writing. Parent and youth permissions were secured to participate in the project and share data. As you will read in Chapter Six, the youth developed an agreement in which the information and stories they shared with each other were to stay in the room, unless it would be helpful for others, and then names and details were to remain confidential. They however, gave me permission to include in this dissertation the things that they shared. In honoring our agreement, I only indicate names next to the digital stories. The youth made a group decision that they wanted to share their digital stories and what they were doing to create change in their community widely.

My Voice - Throughout the dissertation, I provide my reflections on current research and the research project. I generally tend to write and speak using more collective language, however, I have attempted in this dissertation to speak at times in first person to give readers an opportunity to hear my voice in the writing and my role in the process. You will thus hear a weaving of first and third person in my writing. At times I will share journal entries indicated by *this font* that give you a more informal view into my thinking.

Reflections to Youth - If you would like to provide a reflection to any of the youth digital stories, you can go to http://choppinitup.org/videos/ where you will find the videos with a space to provide comments and reflections to the youth. You are invited to participate in the ongoing story development, affirming and acknowledging these young people's lives and their paths as powerful social change agents in their communities.

Conversations with Each Other - You will find discussion topics linked throughout the document to an online resource for us to have conversation with each other. You can also go directly to http://choppinitup.org/discussions/ to find the online discussion topics.

You are also invited to join our Facebook Page at www.facebook.com/choppinitup.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

In this glossary you will find some ways of talking about different concepts included in this dissertation that might make the reading more meaningful. I will continue to build on this glossary of terms in the digital version of the dissertation as I receive feedback from readers on what terms or other possible meanings might be useful to include. Please email me at bodiford@communitystrengths.org with further suggestions.

Choppin it Up - Slang term meaning "talking it out".

Dialogue - A conversation between two or more persons. Transformative dialogue may be viewed as any form of interchange that succeeds in transforming a relationship between those committed to otherwise separate and antagonistic realities (and their related practices) to one in which common and solidifying realities are under construction (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001, p. 2). Dialogue suspends our impulse to seek agreement when difference of opinion or worldview emerges. In dialogue, we attempt to understand our selves and others in new ways. This focus on understanding (as opposed to agreement) opens space for different forms of mutual exploration. (McNamee & Gergen, 2012).

Dialogue refers to a form of conversation: talking or conversing with one's self or another toward a search for meaning and understanding. In and through this dialogic search, meanings and understandings are continually interpreted, reinterpreted, clarified, and revised. Newness in meaning and understanding emerges, and thus, possibilities are generated for thought, feeling, emotion, action, and so forth. In other words, transformation is inherent in dialogue. True dialogue cannot be other than generative (Anderson, 2003).

Social Construction - Put simply, the underlying principle of social construction is that we construct our worlds together. What we take to be the world importantly depends on how we approach it, and how we approach to it depends on the social relationships of which we are a part (Gergen, 2009, p. 2). Constructionist theory and practice locates the source of meaning, value and action in the relational connection among people. It is through relational processes that we create the world in which we most want to live and work. Social constructionist dialogue is of cutting edge significance within the social sciences and humanities and concerns the processes by which humans generate meaning together. Our focus is on how social groups and the relational practices within those groups create and sustain beliefs in the real, the rational, and the good. We recognize that as people create meaning together, so do they sow the seeds of action. Meaning and action are entwined. As we generate meaning together we create the future ("Theoretical background and mission. The Taos Institute," n.d.).

Postmodernism - Postmodern scholarship poses significant challenges to pivotal assumptions of individual knowledge, objectivity, and truth. In their place we find an emphasis on the communal construction of knowledge, objectivity as a relational achievement, and language as a pragmatic medium through which local truths are constituted (Gergen, 2001, p.1). Postmodern thinking invites an ongoing skeptical attitude and critical reflection of foundational

knowledge and privileging discourses, including their certainty and power and it alternatively suggests a move to local knowledge and a multiplicity of truths (Anderson, n.d.).

Generative - Capable of producing or creating. In *Toward Generative Theory,* Gergen (1978) states, the most important thing social science can do is give us new ways to think about social structures and institutions that lead to new options for action (Bushe, 2007. p. 1).

Transformation - Transformation refers to new knowledge, expertise, identities, and futures and therefore, is inherent in the inventive and creative aspects of language (Anderson, 2001). Transformation can be thought of as transporting, the life shaping effects through which people become other than who they were at the outset (White & Denborough, 2011, p. 6).

Narrative Practices - Narrative therapy and practices are based in the notion that we make meaning of our lives through the stories we live. These stories are constructed within the larger stories that make up our social, political, and interpersonal contexts (Freedman & Combs, n.d.).

Reauthor; Restory - Reauthoring conversations are about drawing out the alternative stories of people's lives and providing an opportunity for people to participate in the rich description of some of the skills of living and knowledge of life that are associated with the alternative stories of their lives and identities. (Adapted from White & Denborough, 2011, p. 9).

Subordinate Stories - Subordinate storyline development offers a view of life as multi-storied, and all of the alternative stories of life to be cultural, relational and historical in origin. These stories are all possible constructions of the events and experiences of life. As these subordinate storylines become more richly known and experienced, it becomes more possible for people to take initiatives that are in harmony with what they give value to, with what they intend for their lives, and that are shaped by the knowledges and skills that are of their own histories. It also becomes more possible for them to further develop their connections with those who are significant to them, and with valued aspects of culture and history (White, 2005, p. 13)

Discourse - Discourse is "a group of statements which provide a language for talking about ...a particular topic at a particular historical moment." Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about (Hall, 1997, p. 44). A discourse is a system of words, actions, rules, and beliefs that share common values. Particular discourses sustain particular world views. We might even think of a discourse as a worldview in action. The dominant discourses in our society powerfully influence what gets "storied" and how it gets storied (Freedman & Combs, n.d.).

Norms; Social Norms - Norms form as standards that influence and provide a model for behavior. They are regularities to which people generally conform and are the specific way the environment translates and affects behavior through cues (Fujie Parks, Cohen, & Kravitz-Wirtz, 2007, p. 4).

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS

Chapter One: Introduction to Social Construction

"We the people, we the united, we of all humanity"

This dissertation is grounded in the orientation of social construction in order to provide both theoretical and practical information with the hopes of creating new, more generative possibilities. This chapter provides an introduction to social construction. We will take a journey from a view of self as separate to a relational orientation and examine the implications of these approaches. Social construction views meaning as an emergent byproduct of relations. From this relational orientation we look at how change is always present and possible. We discuss ways to build new, more generative realities when we are open to questioning taken-for-granted truths and examining alternatives together. This chapter suggests that our conversations and the stories that we tell lie at the heart of new possibilities. Later chapters will examine the implications and practical applications of operating within this orientation and explore how social construction provides a useful alternative in our work with and for youth.

Chapter Two: Impact of exposure to violence

"Let's talk about statistics"

In this project, we explored real life issues and challenges that youth face in their lives. In this chapter, I will focus on the growing body of research helping us better understand the potential impact of adversity and trauma, including childhood exposure to relationship violence and abuse. This research also depicts how exposure to relationship violence and abuse interrelates with other factors in a person's life and the many issues faced in communities.

In presenting these research findings, I do not intend to make a causal argument. While research indicates a high degree of correlation between exposure to interpersonal violence and many presenting social issues, it should be noted that a large percentage of studies are asking questions that emanate from the assumption that violence in the home may be a causal factor. From the point of view of this project, however, it is important to understand that other assumptions can raise different questions about the relationship between exposure to interpersonal violence and presenting social issues. This chapter introduces us to the interrelationships of issues. The present work attempts to explore the assumptions we make without dismissing prior research. An important question to consider is "what other options are there for understanding the relationship between exposure to relationship violence and other social issues faced by communities?"

Much of the traditional research presents certain limitations in developing a comprehensive understanding of a child's or youth's experience within their families, homes, communities, and in relationships with each other. This project and type of qualitative research helps us create a thicker, more detailed and contextual description of people's experiences. It can help address cultural and researcher bias and interpretation, and explore people's lived experience from a

viewpoint of what is most important and salient to them (Ungar, 2005). The term context (or contextual) refers to the impact and ongoing influence of the lived experience of people from their earliest relationships to their mature lives as expressed through their culture, gender, and socioeconomic positioning (Waldegrave, 2009, p. 85).

Chapter Three: Current discourses

"Thugs, drug addicts, drop outs"

In this chapter, we will explore ways of being in relationship with youth that may limit the potential for youth and the communities they live in to flourish. We will see how researchers and community responses deal with issues surrounding youth. First, I will consider assumptions that often frame research about youth and examine how certain questions lead us to or predetermine what we "discover" in the process. Often what we discover through this process leads to a dominant deficit discourse that misses seeing the context of youth's lives and thus leads to certain relational responses that may be problematic. Then, I will present how responses and approaches to youth may be "taken for granted" and examine the potential limitations. Lastly, I will suggest ways that we can begin to reorient ourselves in our relationships with youth in order to create more useful and generative possibilities.

Chapter Four: Resilience and thriving

"I kind of know I'm supposed to be a hero for something"

In this chapter, I will introduce a strengths-based view that helps shift from defining children, youth, families, and communities as a problem to focusing on how a system can better support the creative strengths, resources, and relationships that already exist to help address problems. Within this shift to a strengths-based view, I propose that an individual's strengths, relationships, and resources are critical assets for addressing the challenges that people and communities face.

A positive view of the strengths of "at-risk" individuals, families, and communities does not ignore their problems or difficulties or the critical need to ameliorate or prevent the harm caused by these difficulties. The key assumptions of this strengths-based approach are that individuals, families, and communities are defined not by their difficulty, but rather by their multiple strengths, and that the amelioration of current difficulties or the prevention of future difficulties begins with the identification and marshaling of these strengths (Maton, 2004, p. 7).

At Families Thrive, we found the concept of resilience provided a useful framework to help us shift from a deficit view to a strengths-based view of children, youth, families, and communities impacted by domestic violence (and other trauma). We wanted to keep the lived experiences and voices of children and youth at the center of a systems approach to addressing the impact of childhood exposure to domestic violence. This chapter will provide an overview of what we are learning as we attempt to construct environments that first create safety and then support people as they make their way to health through marshaling strengths, relationships, and resources. To do this, I will tell the story that led the Families Thrive project team to engage youth in order to learn more about relationships and resilience from their perspective. Our goal was to strengthen,

build upon, and increase access to important protective factors that promote resilience. What youth are teaching us is that resilience is more complicated than a simple model. They have also extended our thinking beyond resilience by sharing with us stories of thriving. Indeed, they are asking us to consider the potential of youth as powerful social change agents in their communities and what they need from adults in their lives to support them in this important role.

Chapter Five: Situating the research

"I never knew that just one story could change a person's life"

With a roadmap in hand, the youth and I created a path as we engaged in our collaborative inquiry called Choppin' it Up. The contours of the path and the directions we took were in response to what we continued to learn and what emerged from our journey. This chapter will provide an overview to the roadmap and the methods, tools, and resources that helped us to navigate. It will situate the research within an emergent process that calls us to be attentive and responsive to the research/inquiry, the participants of the research, and what we are creating together. This type of participatory action research invites us to create a fluid, interactional, and conversational space where emergence is supported and nurtured. Saliha Bava calls this the "performance of research". In this chapter, we will present how we performed and are performing the co-construction of emergent research. I will review several areas that we found important to attend to: 1) how we frame the research/inquiry, 2) relational reflexivity, 3) positioning and roles of researcher(s), participants and other actors, and a 4) focus on what we are creating together.

Chapter Six: Choppin' it Up

"On that day, we became family"

I have organized this chapter to explain what we did in this process of working together. The training we developed, while we held it emergently with youth, was intended for us to experience different ways of being in relationships with each other. It was not necessarily as linear a process as this chapter may imply or one that we had carefully designed. It was a process that also emerged throughout our work together; with what I brought as a researcher, what other adult allies brought with their expertise, and what the youth brought in with their life experiences and wisdom. What emerged at the center for me was the importance of addressing our beliefs and how we think about youth, the language we use in how we talk about youth, and the stories we tell and are told that impact how we go on together in our relationships with youth.

This chapter presents what the youth, myself, and the other adult allies explored in our first month together. It covers the training on dialogue methods, holding dialogues, training on relationship abuse and media literacy, and the development of digital stories and performance. The chapter is organized as a timeline that begins with day one on May 9, 2011 and ends with the community event on May 31, 2011. However, the story doesn't end there. Later chapters will include what we learned from this process and what the youth have continued to do as a result of their engagement in this project.

Chapter Seven: Youth voices and stories

"Marking a new path"

This chapter provides an introduction to the youth who participated in Choppin' it Up, the context of their lives, and the stories they created through this project. You will hear their wisdom in their voices and their stories. The narratives that the youth created highlight their lived experiences, their strengths, their hopes, and their dreams. Be prepared: These are stories of transformation–in ourselves, our relationships, and our communities.

Chapter Eight: Relational orientation

"Relationships shape us"

This concluding section reflects on what I learned from Choppin' it Up and shifts our orientation to the relational space-in-between. Here I will focus on the possibilities for how we can work to (re)author positive identities and move into generative social action. In this chapter, I will talk about the relational space-in-between that represents what we create together through our thoughts, what we say, and what we do. It is the place where relational interactions reside, are shaped, and developed.

This chapter reviews concepts of relational reflexivity and the processes of interaction that emerged from our work in Choppin' it Up that the youth and I found important to enrich our relationships. Through these processes, we transformed the relational space-in-between, creating striking moments where we saw things anew and were made different.

This chapter is an attentive decision to focus on practices and interactions in the relational space. With attentiveness, we can move beyond an argument of individual versus relationship to open possibilities in our conversations. We can transform conversations to shift from talking in non-relational terms to relational terms, from an either/or discussion, to a discussion about what is useful. In this movement to emphasizing relational process, we can change how we talk about relationships.

Chapter Nine: Identity

"I found myself that day"

With the Choppin' it Up youth voices as our guide, I will present the concept of identity in the context of constructing positive possibilities in our selves, in our relationships with each other, and in creating better worlds. When we look at our work with youth, there are implications for how we view identity that situates our beingness, who we are and who we are capable of being and becoming, within our selves or within our interactions and relationships with each other. Within this view, we are continually forming and performing "I" (Anderson, H., & Gehart, D. R., 2007, p. 17). We might consider not whether one way of thinking about identity is right or wrong, but rather what is useful to incorporate in our work.

This chapter reviews how Choppin' it Up provided a dialogic and relational space for youth to explore and develop narratives of their lived experiences, who they are, and how they respond to challenges in their lives. In this process, they teach us to examine our beliefs and assumptions about them and to listen for existing but sometimes unheard or ignored narratives that highlight their strengths, hopes, and dreams. This chapter concludes with a promise that new ways of thinking about and being in relationship with youth leads to new options for action.

Chapter Ten: Agency

"I am here to restore the community"

In this chapter, I will present a sense of agency–or the ability to take action or have choices – that the youth developed when we moved into action in a way that built collaboration and coordination to create positive social change. I will present what we learned about agency and generative action as a process in which we can claim agentive resources in and through relationships that may lead to new options for action. I will offer a question inspired by McNamee and Gergen's centering of a relational orientation and responsibility as we head into this chapter - "What happens to our lives when we embrace a view of agency and self within relationship, with relationship at the center?" (McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Gergen, 2011, p. 82). In this chapter, we shape our description of agency within a relational context as we look at how accounts of agency are constructed relationally and move us into action. We will also look at how we recognize, give accounts for, and determine value of our actions within a relational and cultural context (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 79).

The Choppin' it Up youth and I often talk about being and becoming social change agents. Becoming social change agents has been a process in our making–a way of being in relationships we have developed over time and in context to the change we want to see in the world. This chapter describes how we engaged together around common purpose, reflecting on the choices that we got to make in every moment about how we are seen by others, and how we interact with situations and opportunities in our lives in ways that lead to becoming social change agents together. If we think about agency from this perspective–as a choice we get to make in each moment–then we bring this concept into an interactional space, the space that lies in our internal conversations and conversations with each other that lead to certain actions. In listening to the voices of these teens, we hear stories of youth as powerful social change agents in our communities. We are also hearing what they need from the adults in their lives to support them in this role.

Epilogue: Continuing our Journey

"It is time for us to move into action"

In this chapter, I share my reflections on 1) what is important to support and extend work like Choppin' it Up, 2) what further research might be useful, and 3) what I would do differently next time.

PROLOGUE

It is a great privilege to share this story on behalf of a group of courageous and amazing youth in Antioch, California who were invited to participate in Choppin' it Up. We, the Choppin' it Up youth and I, invite all storytellers, social change agents, co-constructors and dreamers into our story as active participants. We hope that you will read our story on these pages, and that you will be moved to participate in discussion with us and each other by going to www.choppinitup.org. We invite you to share your own experiences, questions, and ways of being in relationships that may lead to positive possibilities.

As I write the story of my experience with the youth of Choppin it Up, I feel a sense of urgency to share what the youth and I learned and created together. I believe the important principles from which we co-constructed our experience can significantly contribute to developing ways of being in relationship with youth in our schools, organizations and communities. These alternatives show great promise for supporting positive change through relationships of courage, collaboration, respect, caring, and love.

> Let me begin with a passage from one my favorite philosophers:
>
> "What's this you're writing?" asked Pooh, climbing onto the writing table.
> "The Tao of Pooh," I replied.
> "The how of Pooh?" asked Pooh, smudging one of the words I had just written.
> "The Tao of Pooh," I replied, poking his paw away with my pencil.
> "It seems more like the ow! of Pooh," said Pooh, rubbing his paw.
> "Well, it's not," I replied huffily.
> "What's it about?" asked Pooh, leaning forward and smearing another word.
> "It's about how to stay happy and calm under all circumstances!" I YELLED.
> "Have you read it?" asked Pooh (Hoff, 1983, p. x).

Just as Pooh asks Christopher Robin - "have you read it", our story acknowledges the challenges of being in relationships of courage and caring in our families, schools, and communities. My own favorite moments of learning about relationships have occurred when I have been acting like Christopher Robin, going on about ways of being in relationships, and my children or others close to me ask, "have you read it?" and remind me of the challenges. These moments move me to be aware of the complexity of human relationships and to remember that my transformation is a central ingredient to my relationships.

The words you will read here are less prescriptive and more descriptive of our experience. In writing down this account, I may have missed some of the complexity and messiness, making it appear that the project followed a linear process of understanding and achievement. Recording our experiences in Choppin' it Up is like telling the story of a favorite family trip, where photos help describe our travels, but miss the full experience–yummy food in our bellies, jokes and stories

shared, depth of color, cool breezes, warm sun, and the scent in the air. These favorite photos may also miss documenting the flat tires and wrong turns. I have attempted to include the learning moments from our project as well, since they are also a critical part of our story and learning.

My experiences have taught me that attentive co-construction can be messy, emergent and organic when we come from a place of not-knowing and without an attachment to a particular outcome. It is moments like this where the magic happens. It is within this orientation that I present what the youth and I have learned from our experience. It is a paradox to be presenting these findings within the context of doctoral research. I will attempt to share our discoveries in a way that doesn't represent them as *truth* but as possible ways forward for us to consider and then hold in a new place of unknowing. My greatest hope, as we enter into this conversation, is to do so as a learning community, in a dialogue that explores possible ways or alternatives of being in relationships that may transform our understandings of each other and lead to positive possibilities.

The place of awe that spurs me forward in this work is one of entering into new creative movements and conversations about how we all might live better lives and develop relationships in our communities that allow us to live together with compassion, caring, creativity and maybe even great joy.

> **The creative act is not hanging on, but yielding to a new creative movement. Awe is what moves us forward (Campbell & Osbon, 1995, p. 20).**

I hope that this dissertation will capture what I am learning about human processes of collective and collaborative human action in community that help to improve lives often impacted by injustices in our societies. It is my hope that this work will help us to build better worlds together.

Please enter into this account of the youth's and my experience with the caveat that all accounts and experiences are loaded with their own complexity and circuitous paths. I hope that what we have to offer will be helpful and spur a discussion that might advance our understanding and practice of how to be in relationships in ways that support resilience and thriving in our communities.

INVITATION TO A CONVERSATION

This dissertation is grounded in the orientation of social construction with an intent to provide both theoretical and practical information with the hopes of creating new, more generative possibilities together. I also provide practical information and resources for work with youth, families, and communities and hope this material will be useful in supporting positive community change, particularly around the issue of violence in our relationships, homes and communities, and its impact on children and youth. My intent is to provide a theoretical backdrop with language and resources to help translate research into practice. Many times when I read research, I wonder how one might practically implement the principles in practice. I will attempt to provide practical tools and information along the way. You can also find tools, such as facilitator and dialogue guides, online at www.choppinitup.org/tools.

Part of what will make this translation meaningful and continue its co-construction is the ongoing expansion of voices involved in the conversation. You are invited to enter into a conversation about relationships and the use of language to construct better worlds together. I have attempted to structure the dissertation to provide an opportunity to enter into a similar process that shaped the collaborative inquiry with youth, thus continuing the ongoing construction of shared meaning and relational realities.

To frame our conversation, I want to share several decisions I have made about the way I write about the research project as a collaborative inquiry. One of the principles of a social constructionist orientation in research is a shift from the traditional research orientation of subject/object (e.g., me as researcher reporting objectively the experience and findings of my research) to a collaborative inquiry with participants (and others) (Gerhart, Tarragona, and Bava 2007, p. 373). I am intentionally reflecting an ongoing conversation in how I talk about this research as a collaborative inquiry. Within this collaborative approach, I am completely engaged as researcher and co-participant. As part of this engagement, is the research that the youth, other adults, and I co-created together as participants and researchers, losing the discourse of objectivity intentionally.

I have written this dissertation less as a "researched-based approach that has been validated in our study" and more as an invitation for us all to explore and enter into this type of conversation with youth or whomever we are engaging with in social action/collaborative research and inquiry. In this conversation, I am hoping that we can explore what is gained from this orientation of the use of the word - we - in research and social action.

How I use the word "we"

As a researcher in this project, I sometimes write as "I" and other times I write as "we". I use "we" in three different contexts. First, I use "we" to include the youth in the project with me. At other points I will refer to "we" that include researchers and important adults in the lives of youth. And lastly, I also speak of the collective "we", including anyone who enters into this conversation as a reader and active participant.

The first way I speak about "we" refers to the youth and me. The biggest shift for me in writing this dissertation came when I realized I was struggling because I was using an objective researcher voice, reporting on the results of my research. As I shifted to a more conversational approach–conversational with the youth I was engaged with and conversational with potential readers–the work became a continuing performance of meaning making, an extension of the research. Once I did this, only then did my writing begin to flow and come alive.

> **The assumption of collaborative research as joint action blurs the boundary between the researcher and the participants, who are considered conversational partners or peers; the research is being performed in partnership with the participant (Gerhart, Tarragona, and Bava, 2007, p. 373).**

The second way I speak about "we" refers to the researchers and important adults in the lives of youth. In this case, "we" refers to people who are influential in the lives of youth, other researchers and adult supporters and allies including–parents, teachers, coaches, youth service providers, mentors, administrators, and policymakers. When referring to "we" in this sense, I am hoping to present ideas and possibilities for the shifts we might make collectively in our work to support youth in their positive development.

And lastly, at times I use "we" to refer to you as a reader and me as the writer. In doing so, I would like to pose questions or possibilities for our exploration and conversation. Frequently, when I am reading someone else's writing, I wish I could ask questions or make comments. Normally, a conversation will begin in my head, with the author, other authors, the subjects of the writing, and others. This conversation is mostly implicit, and silent, but nevertheless it is an important part of an ongoing process to create meaning. When I have asked people to give me feedback on my writing, we have been able to engage in conversation around meaning.

- What do I mean? Is what I am trying to say clear?
- What comes up for you when you read what I wrote?
- What stories moved you?
- What questions do you have?
- What ideas or resources do you have to share?

In these conversations, readers often bring their own stories, orientation, and ideas into our dialogue and into my writing. This use of the collective "we" speaks to the promise in the relational space in-between all of us - the many lives that we touch daily in our interactions with each other, and the meaning that is created in this collective space of "we".

Invitation to join in the conversation

I have intentionally designed this dissertation to facilitate ongoing conversation. By going to www.choppinitup.org, readers will be able to engage in ongoing conversation with me and with each other. This dialogue will continue to generate new ways of looking at the ideas in this dissertation and allow us to create new meaning together.

INTRODUCTION

In May 2011, I began my project through a partnership with Families Thrive, the Youth Intervention Network, and the Antioch Unified School District when we invited a group of twenty diverse high school youth to participate in an approach we called Choppin' it Up. These twenty youth committed their time and energy and entered into a partnership with allied adults in a new way to *Chop' it Up* or talk about the impact of abuse in relationships, what healthy relationships look like, and what they think it takes to survive and thrive in the face of adversity.

Building on partnerships

Choppin' it Up integrates with, supports, and builds upon existing efforts, providing an important strengthening of student voice and participation in the co-construction of environments in their home, school and community that support resilience and pathways to health and well-being. Choppin' it Up is being implemented in partnership with a federal demonstration project called Families Thrive of Contra Costa County, the Youth Intervention Network, and the Antioch Unified School District.

Families Thrive works with the community to (1) learn more about the issue of exposure to interpersonal violence and abuse; (2) talk about what works in supporting children, youth and families; (3) work together collaboratively; and (4) develop new resources and strategies to help children, youth and families to thrive. A core value of Families Thrive is to keep children and youth at the center of our efforts to create a more responsive system to childhood exposure to interpersonal violence and abuse. In keeping children and youth at the center, it is imperative to develop a better understanding of their lived experience.

The Youth Intervention Network (YIN) is a model in Antioch CA that was developed out of a response to growing community conflict and youth violence. YIN has taken the first step of integrating and supporting the voices of children and youth and holding them central in a dialogic and mediative process. YIN has integrated the Dialogue for Peaceful Change model as a foundational framework for creating peaceful communities. The Dialogue for Peaceful Change model was developed in Belfast, Ireland and has become a global coalition focused on creating safe spaces to overcome divisiveness in communities that often results from conflict. It recognizes that conflict is a normal part of life and provides practical ways to manage aspects of conflict before they intensify.

The Antioch Unified School District (AUSD) is committed to building a school community that honors diversity, supports equity, and promotes non-violence. AUSD is an active leader and member of the Youth Intervention Network.

Within these partnerships you will hear a story of a community's commitment to creating positive change by coming together to address the increasing violence in their community. Choppin' it Up builds upon this community's commitment to its youth, by engaging the strengths of the teens and developing intergenerational partnerships for social change. And this part of the

story is just beginning. The community continues to support and develop their youth leaders and to integrate the youth into a web of ongoing support and social action.

Project Framework

At times we take things for granted, like our understandings of each other. For example, adults make assumptions about youth and youth make assumptions about each other and about adults. These assumptions can block us from understanding each other, what we experience and ways we find to get along in life. Our assumptions also influence the stories that we tell about each other. This project examines how the stories we tell about youth and the frequency with which we tell them influence the ways in which adults construct their relationships with youth. The project focused on engaging youth to weave new narratives and co-construct action alternatives by increasing our understanding of each other, generating new ways of being in relationships, and imagining positive possibilities for our lives and communities. The project aimed to establish youth as partners with adults in an ongoing conversation that reaches beyond problem-solving to explore how we define problems and to identify and co-construct possibilities and alternatives that support resilience and thriving.

In this project, I worked with youth and supportive adult allies to explore the impact of interpersonal violence on people's lives and to envision alternatives and possibilities that might lead to more positive and generative relationships. In this environment, youth play a role in making sense of their lived experiences, understanding how interpersonal violence impacts them, and sharing what they need from each other and the adults in their lives. Choppin' it Up enables adults and youth to work together to explore and challenge norms that support violence in relationships, homes, schools, and communities.

Choppin' it Up serves as an important step to engage and support youth leadership. In our project together, the youth and I explored the transformative potential of building youth/adult partnerships to weave new narratives based upon new understandings, as well as exploring the possibilities that result from youth-led positive community change. While the Choppin' it Up project is ongoing, I believe this first year has had a profound impact on the lives of both the youth and the adults, and the program has the potential to create real and positive social change. I think it also holds powerful potential for youth to be positive social change agents in their communities.

I will review in this dissertation the principles of a social construction orientation within which Choppin' it Up was developed. I will describe the process of working with youth in Choppin' it Up and discuss ways in which this fresh approach can be used to elevate teen voices, change perceptions about youth who might be identified as at-risk, and bring about positive social change in schools, neighborhoods, and communities.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

"We the people, we the united, we of all humanity"

This chapter provides an introduction to social construction. We will take a journey from a view of self as separate to a relational orientation and examine the implications. Social construction views meaning as an emergent byproduct of relations. From this relational orientation we look at how change is always present and possible. We examine how we can build new, more generative realities when we are open to questioning taken for granted truths and examining alternatives together. This chapter will propose how conversations and the stories that we tell are at the heart of new possibilities. Later chapters will examine the implications and practical applications of operating within this orientation and presents how social construction provides a useful alternative in our work with and for youth.

A social constructionist orientation to our work with youth and in our communities focuses on: (a) privileging a relational orientation and strengthening our relationships with each other, (b) understanding the impact of our words, the language we use, and stories we tell, and (c) building conversational possibilities and engaging in positive action and construction of better worlds. Through this orientation we will explore more generative ways of looking at and working with youth who are often labeled at risk or troubled and their capacity for resilience as well as their potential to create positive social change.

The bottom line is - we have choices. We get to choose how we enter into our work with and for youth. This dissertation will explore implications of the various choices we have.

Privileging a relational orientation

If we pause to reflect for a moment, when we think of relationships, we often think of two separate beings somehow connected to each other through relationships. The unit of focus in on the coming together of separate beings.

> **The individual cut away from relationships is an empty vessel (Gergen, 2009, p. xv).**

In *Relational Responsibility*, Sheila McNamee and Ken Gergen make a useful distinction between selves and persons, viewing our selves as constructions of our relations and persons as individual bodies (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 22). This helps us also situate selves in a relational context and see the impact of relations on the construction of our identity, the multiple selves that make up who we are, how we and others see our selves.

I find it useful to think of the many selves that make up who we "are". As an example, I am a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, an aunt, a niece, a student, a professional, a friend, a community member, a neighbor. Within these many identifies I hold many voices that enter into conversations and relationships in different ways. The different relationships also have an impact on my sense of self and identity.

If we were to write down the many selves that make up who we are, how many descriptions would you be able to come up with?

- Who are we in our family, our work, our friendships, our community?
- What are the voices of these many selves that we carry around with us?
- How do our many voices enter into conversations? What are the implications?

_____

_____

We participate in a rich soup of possibilities in how our selves are constructed. And these constructions have implications for how we participate in relationships–in our families, friendships schools, workplaces, and communities. If we view our selves to be more situated in the social context, constructed in our relationships and interactions with each other, we open possibilities to construct positive alternatives. We can also be more aware and careful about how the accounts and stories we tell of others influence their sense of self and identity, especially during critical formative years of adolescence.

To understand the self as a symbolic social creation is to recognize–as George Herbert Mead, John Dewey, George Simmel, Lev Vygotsky, Martin Buber, and many others have argued–that human beings are essentially modifiable, are open to new development, and are products of the human imagination and mind. We are each made and imagined in the eyes of one another. There is an utter inseparability of the individual from the social context and history of the projective process (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2003, p. 376).

Let's discuss what is lost when we talk about individuals and whether traits are situated within ourselves or within others, defining who we are. Some think of individual identity as a fixed attribute, a foundational part of one's core being. This Cartesian way of thinking about identity is inspired by Descartes "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes, 1912). Through my ability to think as a mind-independent being, I am shaping who I am, independent of my relationships. Alternatively, a view of a person's identity as being defined by others has implications for how people begin to view their own identities as a byproduct of how others define them, and how they are identified by and within social groups.

I began to learn acceptance, to accept the fact that I have no control over the way people view me, but it was a challenge I had to overcome. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Ken Gergen reminds us that the language others use to describe who we are is often beyond our control, where "our identity is at stake, and we can not fully control the way people see us or how we are represented" (Gergen, 2009, p. 51).

> Adaptation of Shel Silverstein's One Sister for Sale (Silverstein, 2002)
>
> One identity to find!
> One identity to make!
> One given and discoverable identity to shape!
> I'm really not kidding,
> So who'll start the bidding?
> Do I hear a dollar?
> A nickel?
> A penny?
> Oh, isn't there, isn't there, isn't there any
> One person that will buy this identity to make,
> This given and discoverable identity to shape?

We may talk about discovering who I really am as if there is a given and discoverable core self. This view of self lends us to believe that if we just peeled away the layers, like an onion, we might discover our true self, who we are, deep inside under those layers. In the movie *Shrek*, Shrek explains to Donkey that ogres are more complex than they seem and have layers like onions (Williams, Katzenberg, Warner, 2006).

> Shrek: For your information, there's a lot more to ogres than people think.
> Donkey: Example?
> Shrek: Example... uh... ogres are like onions!
> Donkey: They stink?
> Shrek: Yes... No!
> Donkey: Oh, they make you cry?
> Shrek: No!
> Donkey: Oh, you leave 'em out in the sun, they get all brown, start sproutin' little white hairs…
> Shrek: NO! Layers. Onions have layers. Ogres have layers. Onions have layers. You get it? We both have layers

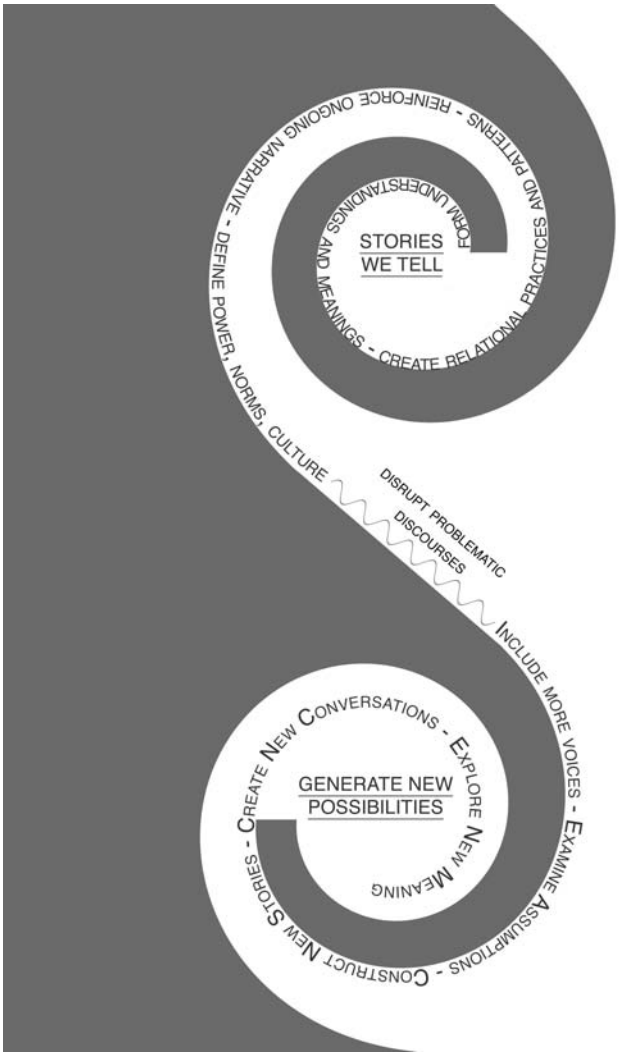
The ideology of the self-contained and isolated individual encourages a separation of I <> Other, posing risks to collaboration, trust, and strengthening relationships. If we hold the separate individual as central, we fall into a pattern of looking out for my interests, or what's in it for me? This individualist orientation can interfere with collaboration and a sense of community and relational responsibility (Gergen, 2009, p. 83).

In thinking about how we talk about "I" and "we", I wonder if there is room for both "I" and "we" in our discourse? When I speak of "I", I am not thinking of the isolated individual orientation, I am speaking of an "I" embedded in a sociocultural context whose self is shaped by

and shapes "we". For me there is utility in talking about "I" – not a dissolved "I" – but a unique and different "I" that belongs to "we".

I walk down the street, what do I see?
Everybody is looking at me.
Am I really that different?
Whatever happened to we?
We the people, we the united, we of all humanity. - Choppin' it Up Youth

What if we were to shift this thinking even further, with relationship as the focus? Relationships then form the backbone of our construction of reality. With a central view on relationship as a creation in itself, we can view relationship as a process that makes and remakes who we are, who we want to be, and who we are always in the process of becoming ("Relational constructionism," n.d.). By shifting our focus from the individual to the relational space in between, we don't intend to render the individual as invisible, but to situate the relationship as central and significant (Gergen, 2011, pp. 72-80). It is a choice we get to make.



So where do we go from there? The orientation that relationships form the backbone of our construction of reality provides us an opportunity to explore realities together that might be problematic and to build new, more generative realities through our relationships with each other. The following image represents a journey within a relational orientation in which we are open to questioning what we might take for granted, certain truths or realities, and examining alternatives. Keep in mind that there are many intervention points, points where we have choices about how we orient ourselves to youth and this work, and that change is always present and possible.

Figure 1: Generative Possibilities

Conversations and the stories that we tell are at the heart of new possibilities. Within our conversations are stories that people may have heard many times. These discourses originate in human relationships (Winslade & Monk, 2000, p. 3). Even our thoughts, feelings, values, and opinions have their origination and function in service of our relationships (Gergen, 2011). Language in these stories is often used to embody the social norms and the taken-for-granted assumptions and understandings about how things are in the world. These ongoing conversations create certain relational practices and patterns. The understandings and meanings we create through our conversations serve to inform our practices and shape our patterns of relating that are then reinforced by ongoing narrative. This plays an important role in defining power, how we relate to one another, and the norms and culture that inform our lives. The resulting circular process often seals off other possibilities, particularly when certain voices are privileged and others are left out (Winslade & Monk, 2000, p. 60). We create possibilities when we disrupt discourses that may be problematic. We can do this by bringing in more voices and alternative stories to create new conversations and explore new meaning and generative possibilities.

> CHOICE ONE: *We get to notice how we orient ourselves - towards the individual, the relational space in-between, or an intertwined individual embedded in a relational orientation.*

Exploring repetitive practices represented as truth and taken-for-granted knowledge

Taking a social constructionist stance challenges us to examine repetitive practices that are often represented as truth and formed by taken-for-granted knowledge, assumptions and stereotypes. By doing so, we are then are able to explore alternative ways of talking or thinking that may be more useful or generative (Burr, 2003, pp. 2-3).

Taken-for-granted knowledge often is embedded or begins with a scientific or modern discourse that invites us to discover the Capital T *Truth*, a reality that can be proven and relied upon. The language we use within these various discourses constructs our realities. In addition, it poses certain definitional limitations on our identities, our worlds, and who we are to each other.

> **The idea of truth within community is of enormous consequence. All construction of the real are embedded within ways of life and all ways of life are value invested (Gergen & Gergen, 2004, p. 20).**

Ways of life and social practices both form and are formed by historical, social, cultural, and local conventions (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004, p. 480). Norms form as standards that influence and provide a model for behavior. They are regularities to which people generally conform and are the specific way the environment translates and affects behavior through cues. Alternative ways of being in response to norms can serve to challenge problematic aspects of a dominant discourse or culture. We can acknowledge and change norms to in order to prevent critical issues such as interpersonal violence (Fujie Parks, Cohen, & Kravitz-Wirtz, 2007, p.5).

Social construction invites us to instead examine ideas of truth in our work with youth and in our communities, and explore these implications in conversation with each other. Instead of asking about how a particular way we think originates within ourselves, we can ask how it serves or functions within relationships. We can also ask how a particular way of thinking or talking, emerges from our conversations. Rather than thinking that ideas or truths are stored inside of us, we can see meanings as articulated in the process of conversation, emerging in our dialogues with each other–dialogues that are always situated.

> **Truth is not to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110).**

The way we see things is often shaped by ideas of truth that create certain paradigms. Findings that fall outside of these paradigms may be seen as irrelevant, useless, or incorrect. Sometimes new paradigms are generated by these anomalies that fall outside of what we know (Gergen, 2009, p. 24). Also, less well-known or less popular paradigms may provide useful alternatives that we can identify and enhance (Waldegrave, 2012). It is important to look at strengthening alternative paradigms or shifting paradigms altogether. We can create these shifts in thinking and talking through the questions we ask, and by stepping out of our known positions and ways of thinking.

The following story is an example of a major shift that occurred in a colleagues work as a result of asking a simple, yet powerful question. In his work with community elders, Phil Stafford shares with us in the following story the "wisdom of unlearning - abandoning our preconceptions in order to see things through a different lens" (Stafford, 2012).

> Questioning Received Truths
>
> Recently, I had the privilege of sitting in with a group of Kansas City elders as they discussed their concerns with the declining attendance at their respective senior centers. These wise folks are the advisors to the staff and leaders among their peers. They felt they offered decent programs, though admitted the luncheon fare was pretty uninspired. One old guy, only partly in jest, suggested, "We have a few dollars to work with. Why don't we pay a few people to come in and play cards?"
>
> I asked what brought them to their centers. To a person, their involvement was centered on creating a good program for those other old people. They didn't come to get something for themselves, but to give to other people. I offered the modest suggestion that perhaps that's a motivation that might drive others there. I suggested, "Why not think of a senior center as a place where elders come to give, not to take?"

> A few weeks later I was pleased to hear that, following the discussion, one of the center directors organized a volunteer food bank event at her center and was thrilled at the participation.
>
> Sometimes, turning something on its head produces surprisingly useful results. I believe this is a learned skill and that our organizations need to cultivate this practice. Actually, it may not be a learned skill as much as a process of unlearning – of deliberately abandoning our preconceptions in order to see things through a different lens.

Phil poses the following question: "What can we do to incorporate this practice into the routine, to question received truths on a regular basis?" Phil's story inspires me to think of how questions might help us see things anew. As we ask questions, we can also strengthen our ability to listen deeply to youth, to their families, and to our cultures and communities.

What questions might orient us to see through another lens and discover previously unseen possibilities?

In your work with youth, what kinds of questions flip the way we see youth and what we think we *know* about youth on its head?

_____

_____

CHOICE TWO: *We get to pay attention to the types of questions we ask that help us better understand youth and flip the script on potentially problematic views of youth.*

Forming understanding through stories we tell, language we use, and images we create

Our lives are filled with stories. Some we tell, but most we are told. Stories construct how we see and are seen. The stories we tell, the language we use, how often we tell stories and who tells them all work to create a dominant narrative or forms an understanding for how we are seen, how we see others, and sometimes even how we see ourselves.

A dominant narrative is a way we speak about, represent, and see a particular issue or group of people. The language we use shapes a dominant narrative and often works to define and label groups of people. At times, we take this dominant narrative for granted. This may lead to assumptions that influence the beliefs we hold, the stories we tell, and how often we tell them. These assumptions often create stereotypes and judgments that can impact and interfere with our relationships and the possibilities and alternatives that are constructed in our conversations with each other. Assumptions block us from developing a deeper understanding of each other, our experiences, and the ways we find to get along in life. In addition, we may neglect to view others in the context of their lived experiences and their unique paths to a powerful identity, sense of

meaning, and positive well-being (Ungar, 2005). We may fail to see the hidden strengths in which we can imagine positive possibilities and build alternative futures together. In turn, these constructions may invite relational responses, choices, and actions that have consequences for our relationships.

> CHOICE THREE: *We get to choose what stories we tell and how to look for hidden strengths and other possible narratives.*

Engaging in new conversational possibilities

Conversations offer opportunities to either continue to reinforce existing relational practices and understandings or form new relational practices or understandings. In conversation we have the opportunity to disrupt less useful or even harmful discourses and engage in a new conversation.

By engaging in active dialogue and strengthening the quality of adult relationships with youth, we are better able to see the strengths and often hidden resilience that youth show in response to adversity. This new way of interacting with teens may shift our thinking from a deficit view to a strengths-based view of youth. Conversational possibilities with youth begin with listening deeply and bearing witnesses to their lives.

> ***My advice to adults in our lives? Don't judge, keep an open mind, and be courageous. A lot of teachers are disengaged with the students. I believe one of the reasons is because they're afraid. They're in a comfortable space and don't want to leave that space… Now when you engage with a student and start to build a relationship, you might know what their problems are and you feel the need to be involved. We need courageous teachers and principals that are going to help us all the way through no matter what. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

From this new relational space, people are able to examine alternate identities and ways of being in relationship with youth, provide more access to meaningful resources and opportunities as defined by youth, and explore alternatives to help support youth.

> **When we tune in to the voices of youth, we hear the absence of sufficient holding environments constructed and honored by adults for youth (Powell, 2003).**

In addition, communities are finding that "there really are not sufficient safe and inclusive places and spaces for youth to grapple with the real life dynamics in their lives and contradictory messages in popular culture about gender roles, sexuality, and relationships" (Pajot & Berman, 2011, p. 7). In Choppin' it Up, we have created an environment where youth have an opportunity

to explore in dialogue what it means to be in relationships and to challenge existing norms that support violence among peers, in families, schools, communities, culture, and the media.

> ***Heading towards 8th grade, my life was heading towards a gang lifestyle. Having a friend already die through gang violence, I believed that this was the lifestyle I wanted to follow. Once I reached 8th grade, my sister, someone very close to me, pulled me aside and told me straight up that I was making a mistake and that I was heading towards the wrong path. From there, she opened my eyes to look at the world of how it is and how it used to be. From this knowledge, I was beginning to realize that there was more to life than I once thought. Also my new discovery for the love of art, it has helped me to express myself, to put it down on paper, or have the whole community look at my work. With this motivation, it has helped me get ready to go to college and make my family proud. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

Our paradigms (or dominant discourses) and the stories we tell are interlinked. To make a shift and create the foundation for building constructive relationships with youth, we can begin with stories. However, this does not just mean we must tell different or better stories. Rather, we must weave new narratives in our conversations. To begin, we can look at what kinds of conversations are useful.

What if, instead, we were to tell stories and strengths-based narratives about resilience and thriving? This way of orienting ourselves is not a new conversational topic. However, it is also not always the first orientation to which we gravitate. It takes some unlearning for us to abandon what is most familiar and try on this different way of talking. Most important, it is a way of talking that can be developed with active participation from youth, listening to their voices and weaving new narratives together.

Multi-vocality is a resource to bring more voices into the conversation. By doing so, we introduce a multiplicity of voices, stories and identities from which to create new meaning and patterns of relating (McNamee, 2000, p. 4). In this collaborative inquiry, we will examine whose voices are privileged, whose voices are left out, the impact of power and voice on the ongoing discourse, and creative ways to disrupt this circular process through supporting a new discourse or dialogue with youth. This exploration into the voices that are included and how they are included in the collaborative inquiry is critical to its very design. In this we can ask ourselves: "Who are the important participants? How might they be included? What are the roles in collaboration?" It also includes an examination into the very foundation of how we define what we are inquiring into. I will discuss how this concept of multi-vocality shaped this collaborative inquiry in Chapter Five.

Dialogue is a practice within which we can bring these voices together to explore new possible meaning, practices and narratives. Dialogue offers opportunities developing a greater understanding about the paths youth take to resilience and ways we can co-construct environments that nurture and support youth to thrive. Harlene Anderson (2007, p. 34) speaks of dialogue as a form of conversation in which "participants engage with each other in mutual or shared inquiry: jointly pondering, examining, questioning, and reflecting." She goes on to say that because we are continually creating new understanding and meaning true dialogue cannot be other than generative and is inherently transformational.

Generating new meaning

A problem-solving model is deeply entrenched in our helping professions. It is a practice paradigm that provides a method of addressing social issues with delineated steps and stages for effective decision-making. In many cases this model focuses on faults and failures and how to correct them. We look for what is wrong and what is missing, while strengths and alternative healthy behaviors are often missed or unseen (De Jong & Berg, 2002, p. 6). Attempts to navigate a way to health, power, or an alternate identity often remain hidden and not heard or understood as valuable. Often these attempts are labeled or judged and not recognized or understood as expressions of strength (Ungar, 2003).

Instead of approaching people as if we have already defined them as deviant or disordered, what if we approached each other with an understanding that our behavior, whatever it is, is possibly working towards health. We would then be encouraged to look at the broader context and ask "in what ways is this action healthy in this specific context?" (McNamee, 2012).

When we make this shift to affirmative ways of seeing, we create a more generative space (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Yaeger, & Whitney, eds., 2001). At the same time, if we can release judgment of what is positive we are opening possibilities and resisting privileging our view of what is expected.

> **Whenever we declare what is the case or what is good, we use words that privilege certain existents while thrusting the absent and the contrary to the margins (Gergen, McNamee, & Barrett, 2001, p. 697).**

Appreciative Inquiry is a resource that allows us to explore who we are and who we want to be–as individuals, organizations, or systems. Through reflection and inquiry about the experiences in our lives, we build awareness of how these experiences impact ourselves and each other. Sharing those experiences can provide powerful insights. The questions we ask can also create different kinds of conversations. A critical element of Appreciative Inquiry is an orientation towards curiosity and the "act of exploration and discovery". In this sense, when we ask questions we remain open to seeing new potentials and possibilities (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 7)

Creating a new story - one of relational responsibility

When we imagine possibilities we create new stories and realities that lead to new understandings and relational practices. When addressing social injustices and adversity that people face in their lives, a new story of relational responsibility speaks to the attentiveness to the process of relating itself (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). When we bring this attentiveness to issues of social justice, we find it is imperative that we not only address the specific needs and engage and build upon the strengths of children, youth, and families within the communities they live in, but that we also address the sociocultural context of their lives. The notion of social injustice is greatly underestimated and under-addressed in our conversations about youth and the problems they face in their lives. These injustices include poverty, lack of housing, unemployment, violence, abuse, and racism (Waldegrave 2012). We must work together to build more social, gender, economic, and cultural equity. A social construction stance invites us to reflect on the privileges and rights that come with being part of a dominant culture or group, and encourages relational responsibility to work for increasing equity between people in our worlds, with a significant focus on those most marginalized or minoritized by dominant cultures. Focusing on social policies that support increased equity is a critical relational responsibility within a social construction orientation (Waldegrave & Tamasese, 2012). The youth of Choppin' it Up worked to identify from their experiences and the experiences of peers different ways of thinking about social injustices in their community. For example, they talked about the issue of gang violence and homelessness. They proposed that instead of "running people out of town" another option would be to address the context of people's lives and the social injustices they face. Lifting up youth stories and voices also makes available to policymakers in their community the issues that are important to the youth.

In the Zen Peacemaker social action training, there are three tenets for social action (Maull & Crisp, n.d.). One of these tenets is effective loving, compassionate and sustainable action. In this respect, relational responsibility in social construction terms might mean that through developing and strengthening our connections among each other, we can address important social issues of marginalization, inequity, and injustice in this world through compassionate action. Through these relationships, conditions of spontaneous compassion and action are created, where people naturally care about each other and do what they can to help each other to thrive throughout the lifespan. This act of responsiveness can be at any level, individual to individual, organizationally, or through systems and political change. When we work to deepen our understanding of each other, and have striking moments where we see things anew and our view has shifted, we almost can not help but move towards social action (Katz & Shotter, 1999). This element brought magic to our project, when we paid attention to our shifts in understanding, when we saw things anew, and were moved to action. This is where the transformative moments occurred. Inspired by Japanese Zen Buddhist teacher Dōgen, a colleague Chris Panos shared with me that compassionate action that leads to transformation becomes spontaneous - like the left hand stopping the bleeding on the right. Jerome Bruner wrote in his book, On Knowing: Essays for the Left Hand, that the left hand traditionally represented the powers of intuition, feeling, and

spontaneity (Bruner, 1962). This thinking has inspired my learning journey about how we can build this type of spontaneous compassion in our communities, neighborhoods and relationships.

In my dreams, developing deeper understanding and connections with each other results in compassionate action that is spontaneous - like the left hand stopping the bleeding on the right (Panos). Within this dream, we also move from *those people*, or *those children* to a collective responsibility and to *our children/our people*.

Bonnie Bernard (2004, p. 96) shares findings from Robert Sampson's research in Chicago neighborhoods that "communities that were willing to intervene in the lives of other people's children, that is communities that shared the belief that all children, were their children, had lower levels of violence than other demographically similar communities" (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997, p. 919).

Principles of social construction hold a promise to increase community empathy and caring towards a move of spontaneous compassion and action. It is important to keep in mind that when I refer to empathy, I am not referring to a quality of a person but as a relational process. An important part of the shift is creating new social processes, norms, and behaviors with an orientation towards our relational responsibility towards each other.

I like to imagine how spontaneous compassion looks within a neighborhood setting. Imagine a community - imagine your neighborhood. Imagine acts of spontaneous compassion.

Imagine an older man in the neighborhood who notices a young teenager who has recently lost his mother and is acting out in anger and fear. The older man reaches out to support the younger one.

Imagine a family who notices that an older couple has been having a hard time taking care of their yard. The family pitches in and helps with the yard work.

What other acts of spontaneous compassionate and loving action can you imagine?

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Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates possibilities for cultivating caring in our families, neighborhoods, schools, and communities. This type of high empathy caring is at the heart of lifespan resilience and thriving. When we are able to build this relational responsiveness together, communities and societies also develop resilience through social capital in the face of adversity and come together to thrive.

> **Social capital is generated through trustful, reciprocal relationships and through creating social connections as a means of facilitating collective agency (Deuchar, 2009, p. 14).**

In this important move from fragmentation to interconnection, social construction provides resources for transformation to cultivate compassion for self and others, caring, empathy and spontaneous action to help others. This can result in a reciprocity or mutuality that the future is ours together and with our rights we have a collective responsibility for each other and our world (Tamasese, 2012).

> **We intend it as an exploration, a call for greater awareness, conversation and broad debate about what we believe is our fundamental interdependence on one another and the crucial role of human relationships in the health of societies (Szalavitz & Perry, 2010, p. ix).**

Through engaging with each other in this relational way, we build a framework from which to move forward and get along together. Social construction offers a useful framework for inviting these new forms of being and living. This orientation offers an opportunity to explore new possibilities and create positive futures for children, youth, families, and communities impacted by relationship abuse and other adversity. Dialogue methods and conversational possibilities provide vital alternatives to current approaches in working with youth. In the next chapter, we will take a look at existing practices and realities when we talk about relationship abuse. From there we will examine possibilities for new conversations, relational practices, and realities.

CHAPTER TWO: IMPACT OF EXPOSURE TO VIOLENCE

"Let's talk about statistics"

In this project, we explored real life issues and challenges that youth face in their lives. In this chapter, I will focus primarily on growing research that is helping us better understand the potential impact of adversity and trauma, including childhood exposure to relationship violence and abuse. This research also depicts how exposure to relationship violence and abuse interrelates with other factors in a person's life and the many other issues faced in communities.

In presenting the following research findings, I do not intend to make a causal argument. While research indicates a high degree of correlation between exposure to interpersonal violence and many presenting social issues, it should be noted that a large percentage of studies are asking questions that emanate from the assumption that violence in the home may be a causal factor. From the point of view of this project, however, it is important to understand how or that other assumptions can orient different questions about the relationship between exposure to interpersonal violence and presenting social issues.

This chapter introduces us to the interrelationships of issues. The present work attempts to explore this issue and the assumptions we make without dismissing prior research. An important question to consider is "what other options are there for understanding the relationship between exposure to relationship violence and other social issues faced by people and communities?" Bringing youth voices central, helps to inform this exploration, hearing from their experiences and those of their peers the connections between abuse and the context of people's lives.

Much of traditional research has limitations in developing a comprehensive understanding of a child's or youth's experience within their families, homes, communities, and in relationships with each other. This project and type of qualitative research helps us create a thicker, more detailed and contextual description of people's experiences. It can help address cultural and researcher bias and interpretation, and explore people's lived experience from a viewpoint of what is most important and salient to them (Ungar, 2005).

The term ''context'' refers to the impact and ongoing influence of the lived experience of people from their earliest relationships to their mature lives as expressed through their culture, gender, and socioeconomic positioning (Waldegrave, 2009, p 85).

Later chapters will examine how we think about these issues and what youth share about their experience and perspectives. Throughout the project we also bring in questions that help us to focus on understanding the experiences of youth and their expressions and navigation to health, rather than the pathology that may result from exposure to relationship violence and abuse.

Before we begin

Work in communities around challenging issues like interpersonal violence can be tough. We are inundated with stories and experiences about violence and other challenges and how they are impacting lives every day. At times, we may begin to lose hope and doubt that our efforts are making a difference.

I hold the stories from the youth in this project close to my heart as I write about our experience. When I need reminding about what is important, I think of the youth. It is helpful for us to remind ourselves of the stories of strength, resilience, and transformation we have encountered in our work. Here is an exercise to develop a story of strength and resilience in your own work or life.

In work with communities and in our lives there are challenging times and rewarding times. Think of a time when you felt positive about what you contributed to making a difference in someone's life. It might be a time when you witnessed great strength, resilience, and maybe even transformation. You might have you experienced it yourself or witnessed it in another person or group of people.

What happened in your story? Who else was involved? What made it positive?

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As we journey through this dissertation, I hope our collective stories will guide us through. If you want to share with others, please consider posting on www.choppinitup.org. In the spaces that may feel a little hopeless, this page may provide hope and inspiration to "go on" together.

Understanding youth's experience with adversity, trauma and exposure to violence

Recent surveys and studies show that approximately 20% to 30% of couples in the United States engage in interpersonal violence annually. Childhood exposure to family violence is a significant and growing problem in the United States. Each year at least 15.5 million children and youth living in dual parent households are exposed to parental intimate partner violence (IPV) (McDonald, Jouriles, Ramisetty-Mikler, Caetano, & Green, 2006) and (Finkelhor, Turner, Ormrod, & Hamby, 2009).

Drawing upon national research and county data, we can estimate the following:

- Each year, close to one in three children in Contra Costa County, CA is exposed to physical or psychological aggression by one parent against the other in their home.

- By the time they are five years old, one in eight children has seen their parents engage in partner violence.
- By the time they reach age 18, more than 30,000 Contra Costa youth have seen at least one of their parents hit or attack the other. As many as 66,000 youth have been exposed to milder types of violence and aggression (e.g. throwing an object without intention of hitting anyone).

Witnessing their parents hitting or pushing is fairly common in the lives of many children. Too often, these physical acts are accompanied by psychological aggression. There is evidence that exposure to psychological aggression is even more harmful than exposure to physical aggression. One in 10 children (13%) is at highest risk when violence is frequent and severe, and close to half of these children have significant problems (Renee McDonald, personal communication, August 1, 2011).

I feel like abuse does have a big impact on people because of the emotion that it puts inside of them, you know like fear, and makes them feel alone and vulnerable. And that's not really a good feeling because we just all want to feel loved, you know? We want to feel surrounded by love. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Current research clearly shows that exposure to interpersonal violence has a profound and significant impact on a child's life, including an increase in externalizing problems, internalizing behavioral problems, and symptoms of traumatic stress (Evans, Davies, & Dilillo, 2008). The more a young child is exposed to violence, the more likely she or he is to have developmental delays and other problems ("InBrief: The impact of early adversity on children's development," n.d.). Across our lifespan, there is a strong correlation between traumatic childhood experiences such as exposure to domestic violence and the likelihood of engaging in risky behaviors, having chronic health problems ranging from depression and obesity to cancer and heart disease, and dying at a young age (Felitti et al., 1998)

I can see that because he doesn't know how to handle things in the right manner and the abuse that's taking place at home it's affecting his son and he's taking it out into the world. He's ready to fight anybody, you know, I mean smoking all the time and it has all these negative effects on him. So abuse in relationships can affect someone in a real big way. - Choppin' it Up Youth

In addition, children and youth exposed to interpersonal violence experience high levels of co-occurring child abuse, physical injuries, poverty, paternal alcoholism, and maternal depression. In the pivotal Adverse Child Events Survey (ACES) study discussed below, only 5% of patients reporting exposure to interpersonal violence recounted no other form of abuse or

adversity (Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 2011, Chapter 11). Cross-sectional studies suggest that the prevalence of community violence and violence exposure among adolescents either as witnesses or victims remains (Stein, Jaycox, Kataoka, Rhodes, & Vestal, 2003). Studies show that adolescents exposed to community violence often have been exposed to other forms of interpersonal violence, including domestic violence and child maltreatment (Herrenkohl & Herrenkohl, 2007). An extensive review of the literature (29 articles) indicates that children who witness interpersonal violence are at risk for maladaptive responses in one or more of the following areas of functioning: (a) behavioral, (b) emotional, (c) social, (d) cognitive, and (e) physical (Kolbo, Blakely, & Engleman, 1996).

The impact of exposure to interpersonal violence and child abuse can continue through adolescence if safety and other interventions are not provided (O'Keefe, 2005). Sudermann, Jaffe, Hastings (Peled, Jaffe, & Edleson, eds., 1995) assert that many adolescents who grow up in violent homes and watch parental patterns of intimate partner violence are at risk for recreating the abusive relationships they have observed and carrying these patterns into their own dating relationships.

In addition, the rest of society also pays a high price for children's exposure to interpersonal violence. The following are taken from the Safe and Bright Futures for Children Exposed to Domestic Violence of Contra Costa County white paper.

- Interpersonal violence substantially contributes to the high cost of law enforcement, housing, civil/criminal justice, health and mental health services, substance abuse treatment, and human and community based services – costing more than $5.8 billion each year.
- Childhood exposure to interpersonal violence has been linked to other forms of community violence. While not all victims of interpersonal violence become perpetrators, many abusers have experienced violence in their family life and early homes.
- Children who have grown up witnessing interpersonal violence are much more likely than those who were not exposed to associate with gangs/ weapons, self-medicate with drugs/alcohol, experience mental illness such as depression or post traumatic stress syndrome, or become batterers/victims of interpersonal violence themselves.

At the same time, we are also learning that the harm that individual children experience as a result of exposure to interpersonal violence varies depending upon many factors, including the level of violence in the family, the child's exposure to it, the child's ability to cope, and protective factors in his or her environment. Problems associated with exposure to interpersonal violence have also been found to vary by the age and gender of the child, the length of time since last exposed to violence, and the child's connections to the non-abusive parent and other significant individuals and social supports in his or her life (McAlister Groves, 1999).

You feel very powerless. When this stuff used to happen, I was like six. So I'm real small and, me, I wouldn't be able to do anything. So you kind of can't do anything but watch. You feel really powerless and helpless, like you can't help the person that needs helping. So yeah, it's a real bad feeling. And it kind of motivates you to never be that guy, like he said, to never be the guy that's abusing. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Adverse Childhood Events Survey

The Adverse Childhood Events Survey (www.cdc.gov/ace/) reported a powerful connection between childhood experiences and the impact on health over the lifespan (Felitti et al., 1998). The study compared current adult health status with the childhood experiences of 17,421 adult Kaiser Health Plan members. The insights from this study reveal a strong relationship between childhood experiences and adult emotional and physical health and causes of mortality in the United States. Adverse childhood experiences (ACE), including childhood abuse, neglect, and exposure to other traumatic stressors were found to be very common (Felitti, 2002). Almost two-thirds of study participants reported at least one ACE, and more than one in five reported three or more ACEs. The researchers discovered that adverse childhood experiences are vastly more common than was previously recognized or acknowledged, and that ACEs have a powerful correlation with adult health. One of the principal researchers, Dr. Felitti found that different adverse experiences are highly interrelated. Through the ACE study, they developed a single adversity index that is strongly tied to adult health: a person exposed to none of the studied categories had an ACE Score of 0; an individual exposed to any four had an ACE Score of 4, etc.

The ACE Score is used to assess the total amount of stress experienced during childhood. As the number of ACEs increases, the risk for the following health problems increases in a strong and graded fashion–meaning the higher the ACE score, the higher the likelihood for one or more of these health problems.

- Alcoholism and alcohol abuse
- Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease
- Depression
- Fetal death
- Health-related quality of life
- Illicit drug use
- Ischemic heart disease
- Liver disease
- Risk for intimate partner violence
- Multiple sexual partners
- Sexually transmitted diseases
- Smoking
- Suicide attempts
- Unintended pregnancies
- Early initiation of smoking
- Early initiation of sexual activity
- Adolescent pregnancy

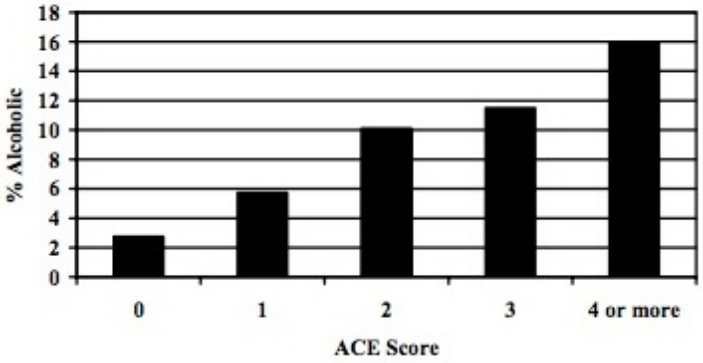

Table: ACE Score vs Adult Alcoholism

As one example, this table demonstrates that 'more than a 500% increase in alcoholism is related in a strong, graded manner (dose response) to adverse childhood experiences (Dube, Anda, Felitti, Edwards, & Croft, 2002).

Dr. Felitti warns that these issues do not occur in isolation and we may "miss the forest for the trees" if we try to study these issues individually. His findings show that a child growing up with an alcoholic parent or with exposure to interpersonal violence does not live in an otherwise well-functioning family, keeping in mind, of course, that the definition of well-functioning can be subjective. In addition, Dr. Felitti offers an alternative to how we are currently addressing many issues that we view as public health problems, such as alcohol or drug abuse. He poses a question - might heroin be used for relief of profound anguish dating back to childhood experiences? Might it be the best coping device a person can find? Is drug abuse self-destructive, or is it a desperate attempt at self-healing, albeit at a significant future risk? He believes these questions might be addressed when considering primary prevention efforts. When we have an incomplete view of high-risk health behaviors we invest in less than effective methods instead of understanding a more complete picture of the potential causes of many intractable public health problems.

Figure 2: Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study Pyramid (www.cdc.gov/ace/)

An important consideration that was not part of this research would be to examine the experiences of Kaiser patients who experienced adverse childhood events and were not presenting with multiple chronic health problems. What if the research had looked at the Kaiser patients with higher ACE scores who were classified as healthy? What might we have learned about health in the context of experiencing adverse childhood events? What is critical here is how the questions we pose frame our research and the utility and application of information in prevention and early intervention.

Impact of childhood exposure on adolescents

While researchers have developed a strong set of findings examining how young and school age children are impacted by exposure to interpersonal violence, research on adolescents exposed to interpersonal and other types of violence is less available. While more research on adolescents must be developed, initial meta-analyses of studies of children and adolescent exposure to interpersonal violence show us that they are similarly impacted, and that youth display heterogenous outcomes including general psychopathology and externalizing behaviors such as delinquency, aggression towards peers or parents, and dating violence and internalizing behaviors such as depression and anxiety (Graham-Bermann & Levendosky, 2011, Chapter 11).

One study that did a meta-analysis of the effect of exposure to community violence and mental health outcomes for children and adolescents showed adolescents reported a stronger relationship between externalizing behaviors and exposure (Fowler, Tompsett, Braciszewski, Jacques-Tiura, & Baltes, 2009). Other studies show that more adolescents are exposed to community violence than very young children - compounding the impact and experience of exposure to violence in the home (Zinzow et al., 2009; Finkelhor, Hamby, Omrod, & Turner, 2009).

Taking a local look at youth violence

The Youth Intervention Network has determined that the top two indicators of youth likely to commit or become victims of violence are truancy and academic disengagement (Archuleta, 2012). These indicators were developed through extensive data review of 8,476 students attendance records for September 2007 to February 2008 (Wong, 2008). The study tracked key disciplinary categories against attendance records. Disciplinary categories included assault/ battery, attempt injury, controlled substance, expulsion, robbery, fight, fight/aggressor, firearm/ knife, gang related act, near fight, School Attendance Review Board (SARB) referral, threat/ intimidation, and truancy.

Out of 5,150 students with absences, 573 had 75 or more absences and 406 of the 573 students (or 71%) also had serious disciplinary actions. The ethnicity of these students was consistent with the general composition of the school population, thus ethnicity was not a defining variable in the research. Also absences peaking at earlier ages demonstrated the need to intervene earlier. A decline in absences at later ages was a result of drop-out rates.

When the research expanded to look at students with more than 15 absences in one month, the numbers increased to 1,711 students, with 1110 (or 65% of the absence cohort) showing serious disciplinary action. These 1110 also included the 406 from the greater than 75 absences in a year cohort. Of the 406 with greater than 75 absences only 82 were truant before their first disciplinary action, implying that a combination of absences and disciplinary action may be an important predictive variable.

Adolescent relationship violence

Let's look at incorporating the issue of adolescent relationship violence and the developmental opportunity at this stage of life in terms of prevention and shifting relationship norms. According to the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, approximately 10 percent of adolescents nationwide reported being the victim of physical violence at the hands of a romantic partner during the previous year. Translating similar data from Mulford and Giordano (2008) into local numbers it is estimated that in the period of a year in Contra Costa County:

- Slightly more than 10,000 adolescents are victims of physical violence at the hands of a romantic partner.
- Between 20,000 and 30,000 adolescents are verbally or psychologically abused by a romantic partner.

According to 2006 – 2008 California Healthy Kids Survey Data,

- Close to 25% of Contra Costa County's students in relationships (in grades 7, 9, and 11) report that they have been hit, slapped, punched, or otherwise hurt by a boyfriend/girlfriend in the past year ("Dating Violence", n.d.).

Conclusion

Research suggests that children who are exposed to domestic violence and other childhood adversities or maltreatments experience a higher rate of hostility, aggression, social isolation and relationship violence and abuse than their peers (Gerwitz & Edleson, 2004). Left unaddressed, these issues may continue into adult relationships and impact an individual's ability to parent their own children without violence.

In order to avoid painting a single story from these statistics and to broaden our view to include the many other stories they leave out, it is important to note that many people who have experienced maltreatment or adverse effects in childhood do not experience relationship violence or abuse in adolescence and present with relatively healthy functioning as defined by aspects of physical, mental and social health, and well-being (Herrenkohl, T. I., 2011; Herrenkohl, T. I., & Herrenkohl, R. C., 2007).

Let's talk about statistics. Apparently I'm supposed to be pregnant, a drop out, disrespectful, and have no morals.

I'm actually in school. I have a 3.5 grade point average. I have goals and morals.

I plan on going to school and majoring in pre-law and criminal justice. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Adolescence offers an important opportunity for youth to examine the impact of relationship abuse, what a healthy relationship looks like to them, and determine what they can do to intervene and create culture change to support their vision of healthy relationships.

The research included in this chapter emerged from questions focused on pathology and presents a clear picture of the impact of exposure to violence and potential negative impacts on children and youth. An important question from this orientation to consider is "what other options are there for understanding the relationship between exposure to relationship violence and other social issues faced by communities?"

While it is critical for us to understand this research, I will introduce in the next chapter the single or dominant stories and pathologizing discourses that can be constructed from this orientation and how these might influence our relational responses to youth.

CHAPTER THREE: CURRENT DISCOURSES

"Thugs, drug addicts, drop outs"

In this chapter, we will explore ways that exist of being in relationship with youth that may limit possibilities for youth and the communities in which they live including how researchers and community responses deal with issues surrounding youth. We will look at the impact of how we see youth on how we are in relationship with them. First, I will consider assumptions that often frame research about youth and look at how certain questions lead us to what we learn in the process. Often what we discover through this process leads to a dominant deficit discourse that misses seeing the context of youths' lives and leads to certain relational responses. Then, I will present how responses and approaches to youth may be taken for granted and examine the potential limitations. Lastly, I will suggest ways that we can begin to reorient ourselves in our relationships with youth in order to create more useful and generative possibilities.

I always find it helpful to discuss concepts within the context of stories of people's lived experiences. Stories are what makes abstract concepts or theories come alive and provide striking moments that move me to see something differently. Consider the following two stories or scenarios as backdrop for this chapter. I will pose questions to help us examine implications from these stories and to facilitate our conversation.

> *I lost my father when I was five years old. From that point on, life only got worse. My mother's boyfriend had a real bad anger problem. When him and my mother got into arguments, he would break all of my mother's things. I watched him do this over and over again, for many years. This made a big negative impact on my life! As I got older, I began my new life in the streets. I started dealing drugs, smoking, and drinking. Fighting was already a big part of my life. I began fighting in elementary school and continued to look for trouble. One thing led to the next. I began popping ecstasy pills and became addicted to nicotine. My life was slowly deteriorating. I was destroying my family because of my selfish ways. To make matters worse, I found myself in trouble with the law, and it landed me in the criminal justice system.*
>
> *I was adopted when I was four. My adoptive parents were abusive, leading me and my siblings to be removed and placed in foster care when I was eight. By the time I was 13, I had been in several foster care homes. I never felt anyone cared about me or my success. This caused me to have anger issues. No one knew the pain and anger I felt inside. School was the place where I acted out. I felt a need to prove myself. My teachers and principals didn't know my background, so I felt they prejudged me thinking I was a problem, when I was really crying for help. I was expelled and suspended multiple times for the anger that I expressed through fighting. When you are a child, you want to be loved and cared about. You want someone to believe in you and motivate you to do better. When you don't receive those things at home, where can you turn?*

The following diagram can help us examine how the ways that we currently think and talk about youth may create certain relational realities and responses.

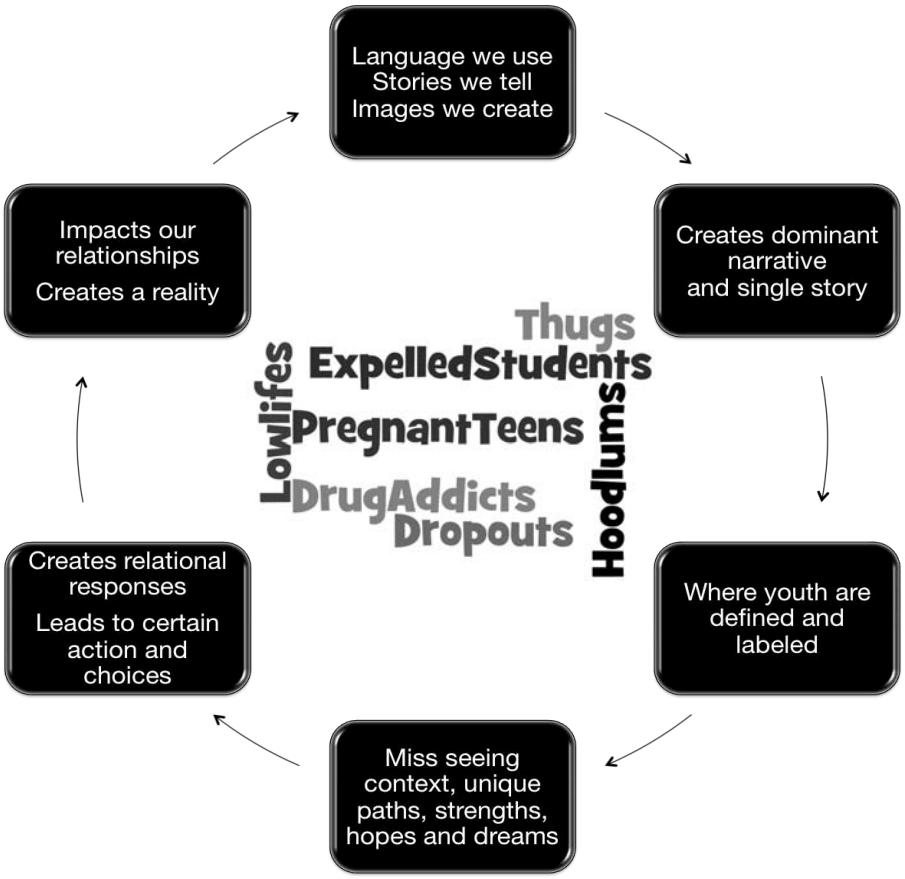

Figure 3: The problem with problematic discourses

Language we use, stories we tell, images we create

As we discussed in Chapter 1, the questions we ask and assumptions we make often emanate from certain historical perspectives or narratives. These questions and assumptions frame what we study and what we see and shapes the language we use, stories we tell, and images we create. Theories of human development influence our orientations, including the way we talk about adolescence and the factors we consider when doing research and designing programs and policies that influence youth. It is useful to look at the historical context of youth development research and the orientation of researchers and practitioners as they worked to understand and support adolescent development.

Early child development studies provided a foundation for our thinking of adolescence as a period of "storm and stress". Granville Stanley Hall (1904), often referred to as the father of the child development study movement, said that adolescence is the time when an individual "recapitulates the savage stage of a race's past." How many times do we reinforce this story when we say: "Those kids" or "Teenagers these days are so (fill in the blank ____)". Here are some of the stories youth from Choppin' it Up say they hear all the time: "Teenagers in our community are–ungrateful, ignorant, ghetto, disrespectful, out of control, have no home training."

Language has an impact on our lives. One story that is told in our community about youth is we are troublemakers. Because of this story that adults tell, that our parents tell about us, we believe that. "Oh, if I am a troublemaker, I am going to do what troublemakers do." We believe what we hear. Other stories we hear or that we are told are: we are a thug, disrespectful, lazy or a failure. Things we hear creates a story in our mind. That story, if we believe it, can disempower us. So who tells the stories? It can be your parents, your aunties, uncles, elders in the community, teachers on campus. They all have a different story about youth. And the story is based upon interpretation, not fact. For instance, one of the elders in our community might see me standing on the corner with my pants sagging, hat turned back, and they instantly label me as a thug because of my appearance. What they don't know is what is going on in my life. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Sara Truebridge (in press) reminds us that words matter. She begins the discussion by asking, "What's in a word?" She responds with: "TONS! Words are powerful and we must never underestimate how our words, our tone, and our body language can impact others." She goes on to share that beyond a simple expression of thoughts, feelings, and experiences - language actually shapes them and produces "fundamentally new forms of behavior" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 24). She echoes what Jordan's wisdom and experience, "words and language we hear about ourselves from others often influences who we are now, how we perceive ourselves to be today, and how we dream about becoming in the future. [...] Negative words and language become difficult things to overcome as they sometimes stick to us like labels on a soup can. Having the capacity to be resilient, hearing positive messages, and replacing negative narratives with positive ones [...] can get us beyond the negative labels, stereotypes, and words people have inflicted upon us and move us in a direction to grow, develop, and thrive as healthy individuals."

Erik Erikson's framework is a useful view into the developmental tasks youth face in their lives. For example, adolescence has been seen as a stage of development that plays an important role in identity formation and transition into adulthood. This stage plays an important role in answering the question - "Who am I?" One of the implications of Erikson's research that lays out the stages of development is a framing of normative adolescent development and adolescent psychopathology. Although it has been said that Erickson himself stressed the fluidity of this model and the impact of cultural variations, experiences and norms (Eccles & Gootman, 2002, p. 319), frameworks like this often box people into certain expectations and lead to classifying people as variant or deviant in their development.

The amount of research on positive youth development is small. Large portions of research on adolescent development

proceed from the assumption that adolescents are broken, are in danger of being broken, or display deficits (Lerner, Lerner, Phelps 2008, p. 4).

If we look for how youth are broken or need fixing, we are orienting ourselves to ask certain questions, resulting in certain observations and findings. "Early researchers and clinicians based their observations and theories on the underlying assumption that adolescents are inherently at risk for behaving in uncivilized or problematic ways; they were broken in some way, and needed repair. Given that premise, that is largely what they saw" (Lerner, Lerner, & Phelps, 2008, p. 5).

Language that is often used to label youth in this context includes: thugs, drug addicts, and dropouts. They can be seen as high-risk or troubled. Descriptions may include words like dangerous, deviant, or delinquent. In addition, youth that have been victims of violence and abuse are often seen as broken and needing to be fixed.

REAL LIFE STORIES: Think back to our stories. What would be the implication of a self or other imposed identity as a troublemaker, drug dealer, or a juvenile delinquent? How would these labels interfere with an adult's ability to see the strengths, hopes, and dreams of these young people?

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Creates a dominant discourse or single story - in which youth are labeled as the problem

In communities struggling with violence, gangs, and poor academic performance, community members often view youth and their behaviors as the problem. In doing so, people begin to share a dominant narrative or single story about youth. Today, many dominant narratives about young people are saturated with perceptions of deficit, disorder, and delinquency. The dominant narratives then begin to reinforce how we define and label ourselves and others. These stories have a profound impact on the way adults see and are in relationships with youth. These stories also have a significant impact on how youth see themselves and how they live their lives.

The media puts all their attention on "bad youth". I don't consider them to be bad, but this is what the media says. They don't see what other youth do, like those who are trying to improve the community or themselves, you know. They just look at the ones who are making the wrong choices. - Choppin' it Up Youth

The dominant cultural representation of youth provides no shortage of constructing youth in a deficit discourse (Best, 2007, p. 17). We are bombarded with messages in the media about youth violence and youth issues.

> **We live in a media saturated world where images, sounds, and spectacles help produce the fabric of everyday life, dominating leisure time, shaping political views and social behavior, and providing the materials out of which people forge their very identities (Kellner, 1995, as cited in Hull, Kenney, Marple, & Forsman-Schneider, 2006, p. 5).**

Research and policy often is framed within this dominant narrative to solve the "problems" of adolescence. These problem-focused responses are influenced by traditional community development efforts in which we often begin with the identification of problems and root causes of failure and continue with an analysis of what needs to change. This problem-focused, deficit-based view continues to impact and reinforce the way we approach research and responses to the important issues impacting children and youth.

Miss seeing context

When we define youth within a developmental framework, we often view ourselves and others as self-contained individuals.

> **Much of Western philosophy has a long history of valorizing the individual. The "individualist paradigm", to the extent that one can mark out such a broad scope of thinking, is based on the notion that the individual exists in some way separate from and prior to relationship with others. According to this viewpoint, relationships are secondary to the knowing individual who is capable of making choices without reference to others or the world. This perspective finds expression in philosophies as varied as René Descartes and Søren Kierkegaard and has important social and political ramifications (Frie & Coburn, 2011, p. xvii).**

The idea of a self-contained individual may result in viewing problematic behaviors as situated within youth, as self-originating, without the imprint of broader relational, social, cultural, and ecological influences. When our conceptualization of adolescent development occurs without considering a broader context, then generalizations are often applied as a broad-brush interpretation and representation of adolescence.

REAL LIFE STORIES: What might be our typical responses to these youth be if we came from an orientation of individual responsibility? How are these responses potentially out of sync with the context and lived experiences or reality of the young people in the scenarios?

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When we talk about children and youth who are expressing themselves in ways that lead to labels of difficult, deviant, delinquent, or disordered, we focus on their faults and failures and what is wrong, what is missing, and what is abnormal. This may lead to a "what is wrong with you?" attitude (implying a need to be repaired or fixed) as opposed to an attitude of "what has happened to you?" or "what influences or factors in your life are impacting your behavior and choices?" (Gergen, 2009, p. 87). When we center our focus on an individual's ability to make choices, without considering the sociocultural context of his or her life, we risk placing blame and further marginalizing the marginalized in a way that does not help solve the social issues that people face in their lives (Holstein & Minkler, 2003, p. 794).

REAL LIFE STORIES: What would be some traditional responses to these identities from an individual orientation? How does this further marginalize these youth?

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By subscribing to and participating in a dominant narrative of "youth as a problem to be solved", we often miss seeing the context of youth's lived experiences and the multitude of their strengths, dreams, and hopes for a more positive future. We also suppress possibilities (Gergen, 2009) and miss tremendous opportunities for youth to actively contribute in positive ways in their community.

> ***Most adults are actually focusing on the mistakes that we made and all the negatives and they are just afraid to trust us. But I think deep down inside, every single person, we actually do have a heart and we do want to get somewhere with our lives and be able to make something out of ourselves. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

REAL LIFE STORIES: How do we risk generalizing the identities of these youth? What broad strokes begin to describe youth like them in our communities? How might we bring in more voices to develop a broader view and deeper understanding of these and other youth?

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Creates relational responses

If deficit-focused youth research, policy, and programming emanate from an orientation and focus on problem behavior or deviation from normative development, then what is defined as normative and what is defined as a deviation from normative adolescent development has implications for the policies, programs, and responses to youth in our schools and communities. The conceptualization of psychopathology and defining youth as at-risk shapes our responses to support people to adhere more to our expectations of what normal development is supposed to be. When we pathologize and view the behavior of youth struggling and labeled troubled or delinquent, we often respond with an individualized intervention or a systems response of disciplinary action or consequences. In doing so, rigid programs and policies are often created and adhered to, thereby creating and reinforcing certain expectations.

Approaches developed from this research were designed to fix behavior "problems" and target "at risk" youth leading to a youth services system that was largely fragmented… comprised of many single programs focused on isolated problems (Piha & Adams, 2001, p. 4).

Stories of adolescent development not only impact how we see youth but also how our systems are designed to support them. When we mainly focus on interventions and prevention of high risk behaviors of youth, our response to youth's troubling expressions often leads to punitive responses, further distancing ourselves from generative and constructive relationships with youth.

When communities create a single story of youths' lived experiences, they reduce complexity in decision-making and developing responses to youth issues. Communities are then able to better channel administrative measures and simplify policy making. However, when making policy about youth, we begin to risk making judgments and assumptions about the problems youth face with growing objectivity and detachment, essentially making youth objects in our decision-making. If we see people as objects, we are more likely to treat them that way, creating policies and programs that may have little resonance with their lived experiences and the complexity of the way they navigate their way in life. Here lies a foundational issue of how we see youth as a problem and respond as a system creating policies and programs designed to change the

problem. The policies and programs then operate out of context to the lived experience and reality of many youth and ultimately produce little of the hoped for change (Pitkin, 1972). We miss important clues as to what a child's or youth's expression might be telling us about how they have constructed their life. We also miss possibilities for supporting this navigation in new and alternative ways based upon the strengths and hopes of that child or youth.

As we search for ways to address important social issues, we come up with different responses. The figure below lays out the limitations of the various responses to how we might view potentially problematic youth behavior.

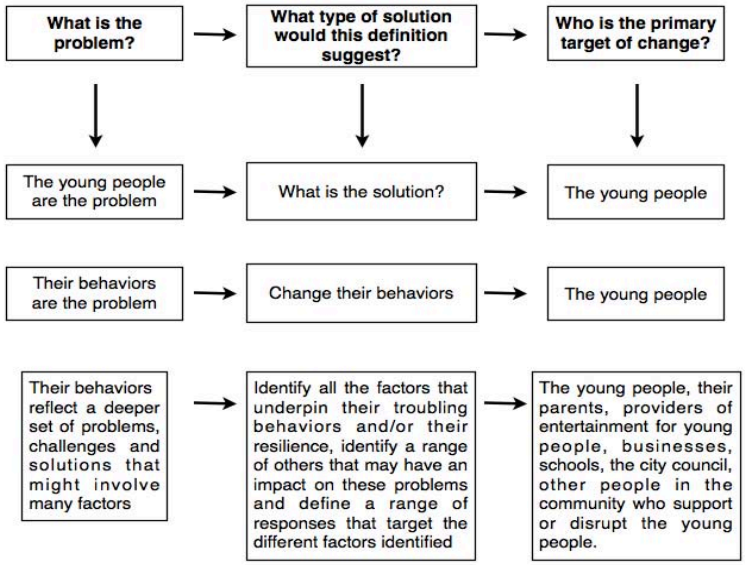

Figure 4: Different ways to define the problem (Ungar & Liebenberg, eds., 2008. p. 367)

Sanders and Munford (2008) share that when we are able to shift to a broader understanding that "youth behaviors may reflect a deeper set of problems and challenges and solutions might involve many factors that our focus then shifts to not only the young people, but also their parents, providers of entertainment, businesses, schools, city council and other people in the community who support (or disrupt) the young people" (Ungar & Liebenberg, eds., 2008, p. 367).

One major challenge that adolescents encounter during their teenage years involves acquiring a sense of personal agency in what often seems to be a recalcitrant world (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2006, p. 45).

Another implication of being alienated from youth in policy making and seeing youth as objects, is that we decrease our moral attitude, or spontaneous identification and genuine empathy and moral responsiveness, for the unique situations and stories that shape the lives of youth. In effect, if we see human action in abstraction from the surrounding accounts of people's lives, we no longer see the person, and in turn they and their individual lives and experiences are deprived of meaning (Pitkin, 1972). We must expand our view to consider the environment and

resources that are available to youth to promote their resilience and support them in navigating alternate pathways to a powerful sense of identity, purpose, and meaning in their lives.

REAL LIFE STORIES: How might we see these youth as objects? How does our view decrease our moral attitude and responsiveness to the unique situations and stories that shape their lives? Are there other ways to reconnect to these youth and their behaviors and actions within an account of their lives?

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Systems designed to address important social issues in communities play a major role in developing dominant narratives impacting how youth are seen and how we respond to them. It is imperative to identify how these systems are supporting potentially problematic dominant narratives and begin to look at alternatives.

Creating alternate realities

The first step we can take to create alternate realities, ones that people might experience as more generative and useful, is to deconstruct existing narratives beginning with identifying the dominant voices that are privileged and those whose voices are limited or left out. Then, it is possible to examine the implications of the inclusion or exclusion of voices. In this examination, it is critical to look at who has the power over the social discourse.

Building on French philosopher Michel Foucault's work, postmodernists like Gergen who describe themselves more specifically as constructionists, argue that those with the most power to control social discourse influence our definition of what is health and what is illness (Ungar, 2004, p. 342).

In contrast, the concept of multi-vocality speaks to the multiplicity of voices, experiences, and identities within an individual and in the makeup of our social worlds. As individuals, we each have many voices and many identities within us and in our experiences and expression. Thus, it would be simplistic and flattening of our experience as individuals to paint a life with a single story. Multi-vocality also exists in a groups' lived experiences. Within a group of youth, there are many complex voices, stories, and identities, and these different voices can make policy making complex and challenging.

As an alternative to designing youth policy with a broad stroke, we can instead embed relational processes that hold this concept of complexity and multi-vocality at the core. Holding the relationship at the center may result in methods, such as Restorative Justice or Conferencing (Winslade & Monk, 2008, pp. 223 −232), that bring multiple voices together, maintain an

openness to the complexity of the individual and their relationships in order to address challenging situations, prioritize relationships, and produce relational accountability and restoration.

Including youth in policy making through a focus on multi-vocality requires much more than giving youth a voice or a stage in which to speak. It involves changing our practices and policies so that youth are not only heard but also responded to in an ongoing dialogue.

Michael Ungar proposes that teens must have a say in the discourses that define and impact them. This is a dilemma when at-risk and marginalized populations have minimal power in dominant social discourses. Challenging the dominant discourse or fixed assumptions thus requires a critical look at differences in the power levels of those who are marginal in the discourses. "Sticks and stones may break our bones, but names will really hurt us." This is how adolescents who participated in the International Resilience Project explained the threat to their well-being that comes from a lack of discursive power. They argued that their capacity to experience power in the social discourses that define them is the most important determinant of their ability to overcome adversity and the risks posed to their mental well-being (Ungar, 2003, p. 127).

REAL LIFE STORIES: How are these youth included or not included in having a say about their identities or how people understand the context of their lives?

What spaces are available or not available for them to have a say in the discourses that define and impact them?

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In a recent press conference, Former Mayor of Oakland Ron Dellums spoke about the young people at YouthUprising, a transformation center in the heart of East Oakland dedicated to community transformation powered by the leadership of youth.

> Look at these brilliant people. I am impressed by you.(…) Why isn't she and this young brother out there an example of what it is. But we talk about the dangerous people so that we engage in the stereotyping and it continues to flow forward. The press can play a very important role. Get beyond the violence and understand that this is a real community that is trying to uplift itself. Then you start to see the beauty of this community in ways that people have never seen before ("Chief Anthony Batts and Mayor Ron Dellums speak about gang injunctions in Oakland and media accountability," 2010).

CAUTION

When we include more voices, in particular youth voices, we can begin to deconstruct the language we use in dominant narratives. Before we discuss shifting our language, we must recognize that there may be a risk in reframing issues from a deficit discourse to a positive orientation. I am not talking about simply choosing to focus on strengths, or reframing things to a positive orientation. The decisions we make may carry the power to define or redefine, thus privileging certain voices. Instead of applying yet another broad stroke, reframing a deficit to a strength, or a negative to a positive, let's consider whose voice is privileged in the reframing and whose experience might be diminished.

When we leave out what we perceive as negative, we provide an incomplete story and may miss important details and dimensions of people's lives and experiences. In addition, when we shift things to a positive orientation, we not only risk privileging certain voices, we also risk privileging certain language. David Denborough (2008, p. 183) encourages us to notice how we might be privileging certain ways of talking that runs the risk of imposing our own bias and replicating our language on others.

Holding the experiences and expressions of youth as central in this ability to define/redefine and frame/reframe is key. By maintaining active dialogue and conversations with youth during the process of framing and reframing we are informed by the voices of youth rather than by our own assumptions, even if those assumptions are well-researched assumptions. We would also keep framing open for ongoing conversation as a fluid element in our relationships with youth. As we work to shift our thinking, it is important to keep the voices of youth at the center of our conversations. We can begin by asking, "What do youth feel is impacting their lives? What shifts would they say are critical in looking at the challenges and opportunities they face?" In the context of this project, we sought to understand how youth feel relationship abuse impacts their lives.

Youth development approaches evolved out of engaging youth voices as more central. However, there are still limitations in engaging youth voices in research and policy development. These challenges center on how power is addressed in supporting and stewarding youth voice and how we engage in interpretation and meaning-making. There is often a narrow incorporation and interpretation of youth voice (Pittman, 2002).

Studies focused on capturing the needs of a group of people tend to follow a common pattern: there is an assessment that is analyzed and reported by a professional or expert on the needs or voices of the people. Once we give voice to others' voices, we are representing them, and, effectively, they continue to be without control. This approach can be problematic as it often undermines the very voices we are trying to capture. This is less of an argument for the accuracy of definition, and more an attempt to look at "the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself" (Gergen, 2009, p. 51).

The crucial question…is not who the social agents are, but the extent to which they manage to constitute themselves (Laclau, 1990, p. 36).

When we work from personal bias and impose our own interpretation or definitions of others in research and policy, we move away from trying to understand others and miss an opportunity to create shared meaning together. In addition, we miss opportunities to engage, strengthen, and elevate voices that can spark our imagination, connect us in a deeper way to one another, and spur positive change. We might ask, "How then do we give voice?" Therein lies another issue. Can we find opportunities to reframe this question to - "How are opportunities created for voices to be heard, and held central? What would support the speaking of and the hearing of?"

REAL LIFE STORIES: How would we keep the voices of youth in our stories central in reframing dominant narratives that impact how they are seen? What kinds of opportunities can we create for the voices of these youth to be heard? What steps can we take to find out what youth need to support their participation, so that they feel heard and understood?

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Conclusion

We have an opportunity to critically analyze theoretical frameworks that impact the way we think about adolescence and then to remain reflective and responsive to the complexity and fluidity of human development over time. Within this approach, we can look at alternatives to using language that situates responsibility for behavior within an individual, resulting in an individual orientation that misses the broader relational context of young lives.

Understanding this, we can look at how we might shift our focus to a relational orientation that may provide more generative possibilities for youth and our communities. A powerful place to start in this transformation is to look at the way we think and the language we use to shift from an individual orientation to a relational context. When we do this, our own transformation becomes central in the equation. When we shift adult language, orientation, and ways we are in relationship with youth, we have begun the path to transforming the relational space and context that impacts youth in their daily lives. The most important part of this shift begins with engaging in ongoing conversations, being responsive to what we learn that helps us create new and deeper understandings of each other.

In the next chapter, I will present a way that we can shift from a way of talking that situates the problem within an individual to one that focuses on the relational realm and the sociocultural context of young people's lives. By doing this important work, we are preparing a solid foundation for building community capacity that supports resilience and thriving.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESILIENCE AND THRIVING

"I kind of know I'm supposed to be a hero for something"

In this chapter, I will introduce a strengths-based view framed by resilience research that helps us to shift from defining children, youth, families, and communities as a problem and instead focuses on how a system can better support the creative strengths, resources, and relationships that already exist to help address problems people face in their lives. Within this shift to a strengths-based view, I am proposing that an individual's strengths, relationships, and resources are critical assets for addressing the challenges that people and communities face.

> **A positive view of the strengths of "at-risk" individuals, families, and communities does not ignore their problems or difficulties or the critical need to ameliorate or prevent the harm caused by these difficulties. The key assumptions of this strengths-based approach is that individuals, families, and communities are defined not by their difficulty, but rather by their multiple strengths, and that the amelioration of current difficulties or the prevention of future difficulties begins with the identification and marshaling of these strengths (Maton, 2004, p. 7).**

At Families Thrive we found the concept of resilience provided a useful framework to help us shift from a deficit view to a strengths-based view of children, youth, families, and communities impacted by domestic violence (and other trauma). We wanted to keep the lived experiences and voices of children and youth at the center of a systems approach to addressing the impact of childhood exposure to domestic violence. This chapter will give an overview of what we are learning as we attempt to create environments that first create safety and then support people as they make their way to health through marshaling strengths, relationships, and resources. To do this, I will tell the story that led the Families Thrive project team to engage youth to learn more about relationships and resilience from their perspective. Our goal was to strengthen, build upon, and increase access to important protective factors that promote resilience. What youth are teaching us is that resilience is more complicated than a simple model. They have also extended our thinking beyond resilience by sharing with us stories of thriving. Indeed they are asking us to consider the potential of youth as powerful social change agents in their communities and what they need from adults in their lives to support them in this important role.

Resilience orientation

One of the central themes of this collaborative inquiry and our work around childhood exposure to domestic violence is to examine how resilience is situated within a relational context as patterns of coordination youth and other people in their lives and community make to cope with adversity–ways we find to go on together. In this context, my interpretation of the phrase of Ludwig Wittgenstein, "to go on together" is a reference to the ways we live our lives together.

This creates an important shift for me. Rather than only thinking of how we support *individuals* to navigate their way to health, we can think about how we strengthen the relational contexts in peoples lives that support generative ways of *going on together*. We can look at how patterns of coordination, or ways we live our lives together, either are useful or are not useful and are no longer serving us. We can examine alternative forms of practice and alternative ways of talking and coordinating our actions.

In our work at Families Thrive we are interested in how people can provide support for each other in this relational process of resilience. Caring relationships are one of the most important elements in people's lives that can contribute to resilience. In this context, resilience is socially constructed in relationships in response to adversity and challenges. Through relationships, people create meaning and actively construct resilience through coordinating with the resources and other people around them to survive and thrive in the face of challenge and adversity.

What stuck out for me was that when I came to this group I saw that there were adults that actually were here to help us and that they believed in us and they think we have a bright future and that we're not just kind of messing things up and that we can actually do something good. To be honest, when I first came here, I thought all the adults were just trying to get in my business. But it turned out not to be that way. So, you know, I'm good. It feels good to know that there are adults that actually want us to go places. - Choppin' it Up Youth

How we think about people's lives has implications for how we work to create conditions in our communities that support resilience. We can focus on deficiency or disorder, or we can focus on the strengths, resources, and relationships that support resilience in the face of adversity.

Resilience is not a new concept. People have officially been studying resilience for the past half-century. There are many ways that people think and talk about resilience. Some resilience literature uses terminology that relates resilience as a trait, a quality, an experience, or an expression. However, it may be more helpful for us to think of resilience as an ongoing process in our lives, rather than something an individual has or experiences (Truebridge, 2012). As suggested by resilience researcher Ann Masten (1994), I will be using the term resilience to refer to a process, rather than the terms resilient or resiliency, which often can be used to refer to a trait or quality.

Luthar et al. (2000) offers a definition of resilience as "a dynamic process encompassing positive adaptation with the context of significant adversity" (p. 543). Recent resilience research claims we all have the capacity for resilience. This view is a shift from a historical view that only a

privileged few had the innate capacity for resilience in the face of adversity. Ann Masten believes that resilience is common and typically arises from the operation of normal rather than extraordinary human capabilities, relationships, and resources. In other words, she refers to resilience as ordinary magic and proposes that the potential for resilience exists within all of us (Masten, 2009).

The following is a useful definition of resilience that situates resilience in a relational orientation:

> **In the context of exposure to significant adversity, resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2008, p. 168).**

We can bring the theory of resilience to our work to help see how people navigate their way and coordinate with others to define themselves as healthy amidst even the most adverse conditions.

> ***People feel that the problems they're going through are only with them or only with their family and they can't talk to their friends about it. But if you talk to somebody about it, like what happened last night was pretty messed up, and they're like, oh, yeah, that happened to me last week or something similar– people start relating and you feel closer to that person because they're going through the same thing. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

In this context, resilience research provides the rationale for "moving our narrow focus in the social and behavioral sciences from a risk, deficit, and pathology focus to an examination of the strengths youth, their families, their schools, and their communities have brought to bear in promoting healing and health" (Henderson, Benard, & Sharp-Light, 2007, p. 6). Choppin' it Up moves us from studying the "problems" of youth to understanding that youth experience and behavior as narratively complex and open to restorying (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). It also examines who has the power to define youth identities as problematic or positive, and the impact of engaging youth voice in the process of restorying. It is important to be aware in this restorying process that there is considerable debate about the best criteria for good adaptation or adjustment, particularly in regard to defining good adaptation in different cultural contexts and determining who should define these criteria (Masten & Powell, 2003, p 7). Keeping youth voice central in this process will help center their definition of positive adaptation and resilience in this project.

In adopting a strengths-based view, and at the same time not ignoring the problems or the risks that people face in their lives, we continue to invest in building effective early intervention to reduce harm caused by exposure to domestic violence. However, Michael Ungar reminds us that improving children's well-being is never as simple as removing risk from children's lives. He shares that when caregivers, professionals, and communities participate in the construction of problem-saturated identities, it impedes their healthy development. Youth feel that the social discourse that defines them as high-risk is biased and is also the greatest barrier to their experience of well-being (Ungar 2003, p. 8).

The fostering of resilience operates at a deep structural, systemic, human level: at the level of relationships, beliefs, and opportunities for participation and power that are a part of every interaction, every intervention no matter what the focus (Henderson, Benard, & Sharp-Light, 2007, p 7).

When looking at how we create environments and relationships that promote resilience, we consider things like protective and risk factors. Another way we can think about risk factors is to think about what gets in our way that is not useful or even harmful. Protective factors can be thought of as those things that support us, or ways we have found to go on together that are useful. Current discourses on resilience provide a way of understanding risk factors as those things that harm children and protective factors as those that support a child's positive development.

John Hall and Alex Zautra (2003, p. 17) from Arizona State University Resilience Solutions Network assert - "what gets measured gets done". If we focus solely on risk factors, where is our focus? If we focus on protective factors and measures of health as defined by local context and voices, where do we invest our energies and resources? The focus of our work in Choppin' it Up is to channel our time and energy into building productive relationships with youth and their communities and in turn to collectively create and enhance protective factors that support resilience among all individuals.

Socio-ecological view

At Families Thrive, we found three conceptual frameworks useful when we began researching resilience: Brofenbrunner's socio-ecological model (1979); Bernard's resilience in action model; (1994); and Ungar's contextual view of resilience (2004).

Since the aim of Families Thrive is to create a more responsive system, it made sense to use a socio-ecological view of resilience in which we could focus on creating the conditions that support resilience. If we focus only on the individual or the family in our community, we are missing an opportunity to co-construct environments that provide opportunities, protective factors, and relationships and supports that promote resilience, healing, and transformation.

Much of domestic violence prevention and intervention focuses on the individual and or their family. As we work together around the issue of children's and youth's exposure to domestic violence, we are asking ourselves how community and the surrounding environment that the child, youth, or family lives in influences our response in a new way. We are talking about the very gritty reality of families, communities, programs, government, and changing the opportunity structures around children to make positive adaptation more likely in a locally and culturally determined way.

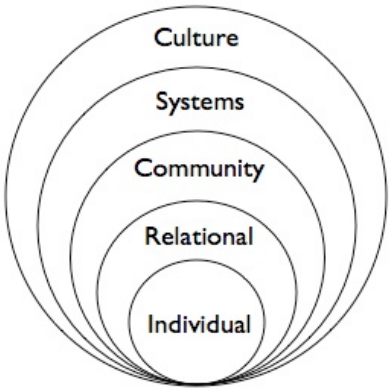


Figure 5: Socio-ecological framework

Using the social-ecological framework to build upon a definition of resilience as the ability for successful adaptation in the face of trauma, adversity, and/or stress, we can look at how people coordinate with the important relationships in their lives as they navigate their way to what they define as healthy. Resilience is impacted by a child's interaction and relationships with the various levels that influence their lives, beginning with early childhood and the important primary relationships of caregivers and family (depending on local culture early childhood primary caregivers may extend beyond these relationships). The model then allows us to extend our view as children grow older to other important relationships with teachers, coaches, the faith community, and peer groups to the organizations and communities in which they interact and live. These relationships are embedded within our communities–the communities that we participate in–neighborhoods, schools, and youth programs. All of this is influenced by the contextual view and impact that systems have on our lives–and might include cultural and historical influences, services, politics/policies, and the media.

This socio-ecological representation takes into account that our experiences of health and well-being are socially constructed, complex, and contextual.

Resilience in Action model

Once the Families Thrive project team understood the implications of the socio-ecological model, we asked ourselves, "What would this look like in action?" We engaged a resilience researcher, Dr. Sara Truebridge, to help us figure that out. She introduced us to what became our second conceptual framework, a useful model developed through extensive synthesis of longitudinal research by Bonnie Bernard.

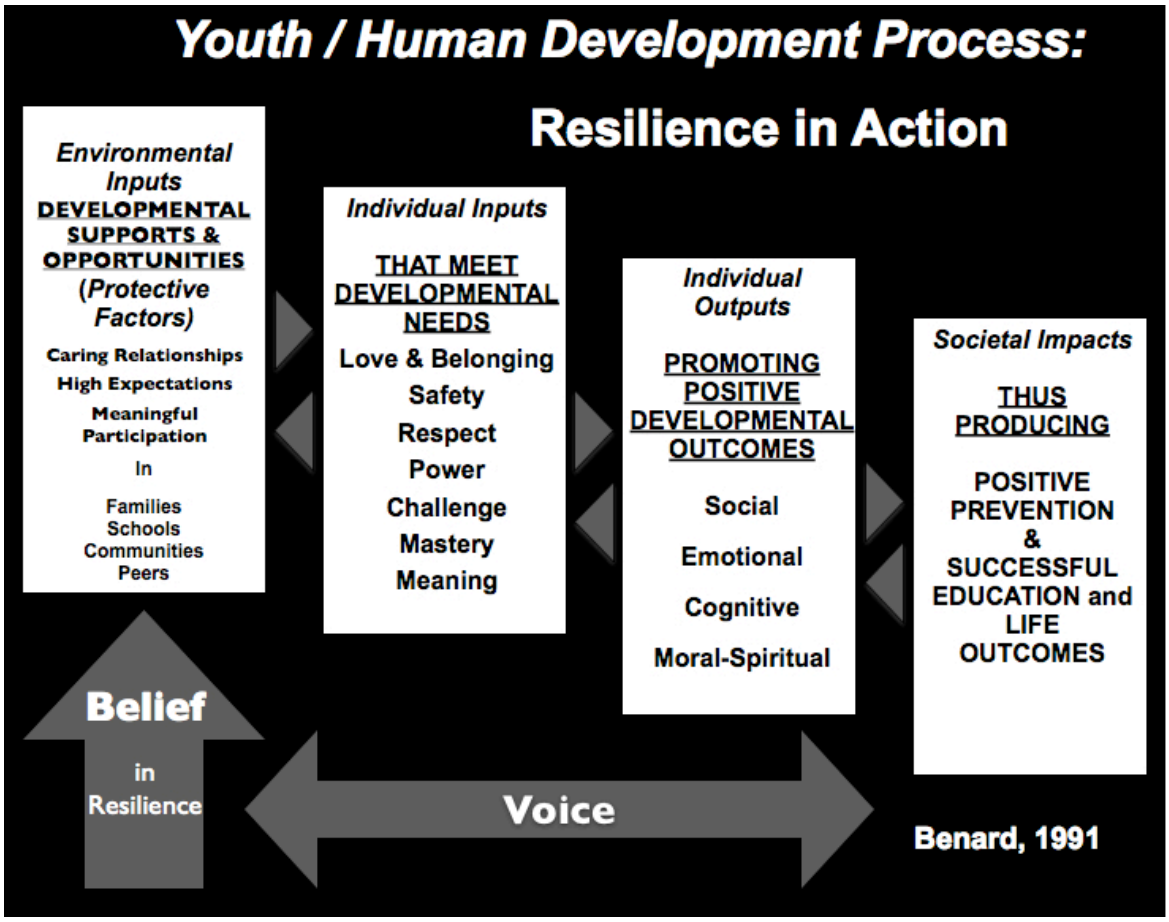


Figure 6: Resilience in Action Model (Benard, 2004)

In this model, Bonnie proposes that important developmental needs such as safety, respect, belonging, power, and meaning can be met by offering developmental supports and opportunities (protective factors) such as caring relationships, high or positive expectations, and meaningful opportunities to participate and contribute in the various environments that kids live in including, their families, schools, organizations, communities, and peer groups. Bernard proposes that meeting these needs will contribute to positive developmental outcomes.

From a social constructionist view, we know that language is very important. We discussed in the last chapter that discourses of human development, developmental needs, and developmental outcomes carry with them certain implications that may universalize and decontextualize adolescent development. When we look at this model from a positivist paradigm, we depend upon research to tell us what evidence demonstrates positive developmental outcomes. In many cases this evidence is seen through a western middle class lens (Ungar, 2004, p. 345; Luthar & Burack, 2000, p. 29). With this in mind, conversations about how we socially construct "positive developmental, prevention, and successful life outcomes" and how we define developmental needs such as love, belonging, and respect are important in using this framework.

A constructionist interpretation encourages openness to a plurality of different contextually relevant definitions of health, offering a critical deconstruction of the power different health discourses carry. Each localized discourse that defines a group's concept of resilience is privileged, more or less depending on the power of those who articulate it. This understanding of resilience, based on discursive power rather than objective measures of health, has implications for the way researchers study resilience and intervene to promote health in at-risk populations (Ungar, 2004, p. 345).

This then brings up the question–who gets to define what a caring relationship looks like or what safety, power, and respect mean? And who gets to say what positive prevention and successful life outcomes looks like? If all of this depends on local definitions, we find it important to engage and support youth voices to help us understand their interpretation of what is meaningful to them. As part of Choppin' it Up, we work to support youth to have a say in how things are defined. We need to look at our definitions of developmental needs and developmental outcomes and engage more voices in defining what these look like for them in a more contextually and culturally responsive way.

The resiliency discourse imposes prescribed norms of school success and social success upon underprivileged children identified as at risk. The effect is that non-conforming individuals may be pathologized as non-resilient. Emphasis remains wholly on the individual and thus, individualism is a dominant ideology embedded in the mainstream resiliency discourse (Martineau, 1999, pp. 11-12).

Despite the many challenges that children and youth might face in their lives, many of them not only survive but also thrive and flourish. The research has been quite clear on the impact of childhood exposure to domestic violence, that children can experience significant behavioral, social, and emotional issues. At the same time, many children also experience a great deal of health and resilience. As we will see in upcoming chapters, the line that distinguishes the experience of resilience can be somewhat blurry as we learn to see the paths children and youth take to navigate the resources that are available to define themselves as "healthy".

It is important to note that there will be varying constructions of what we define as healthy. There are multiple definitions of "healthy" and different ways of talking about what constitutes healthy development. Within certain contexts healthy child and youth development means that individuals meet established developmental milestones, participate constructively in their environments, and demonstrate capacity and competency in school. Looking at these definitions of wellness that integrates cultural and local views is important. There is an ongoing opportunity in our relational, organizational, and systems responses to engage each other in dialogue about how we understand local constructions of health or wellness (Cicchetti, Rappaport, Sandler, & Weissberg, eds., 2000).

In this ongoing movement towards health, health is often defined as the absence of disease and is understood in the context of what health is not. Resilience research supports looking at health in the context of both what a person's definition of health is for their life and what a local community defines is health for their community. This view urges us to ask, who gets to define what is health or what is healthy? (Hall & Zautra, 2003).

We can then ask questions that help us to better understand how people experience and define these various factors in their lives. In our work we felt that there were several ways to do this. The first was to ask ourselves about the impact of our belief systems and values in this process. The second was reflect on the importance of language and listening to youth voice.

Benard's work in resilience and youth development consistently affirms that resilience and positive youth development begins with what one believes (Truebridge, 2010). Truebridge (2007) builds upon the work by Benard (2004) and contributes empirical findings specifically to support the claim that the theory of resilience and youth development begins with beliefs and that providing those who work with youth with opportunities to understand youth development and the theory of resilience coupled with opportunities to reflect upon our own beliefs is a positive step in the field. Truebridge suggests the telling of one's own personal resilience stories is an effective way for people who work with youth to reflect upon their own beliefs about youth resilience and a powerful way for them to increase their understanding and appreciation of both resilience and of youth.

Contextual view of resilience

Michael Ungar offers our third conceptual framework that is an alternative discourse on resilience, one that recognizes the contextual specificity required in all resilience-and health-related studies to demonstrate sensitivity to the level of access young people enjoy to health resources (Ungar, 2004, p. 359). He poses questions for us to ask in our research and practice: "Might deviant and disordered behavior be a search for health resources in specific contexts. Can resilience be achieved through alternate pathways typically thought to indicate vulnerability? Within each particular social and cultural context, what do people themselves discern as healthy functioning? How do their views compete with the dominant discourse on health as articulated (and privileged) by health care providers? Who, then, is to decide what is or is not an acceptable expression of health?" (Ungar, 2004, p. 360).

Ungar asks us to consider the following story and whether we normally label this kind of behavior as resilience or as at-risk behavior.

> **A young person leaves home to avoid abuse and lives on the street. Might this be seen as resilience? Might not the self-esteem, competence, problem-solving, and other related factors be important factors in this young person's resilience (Ungar, 2004, p. 360).**

Michael Ungar argues that the possibility of this story being considered resilience is usually not included in traditional discourses that favor predetermined outcomes or behavioral goals.

> **A constructionist perspective invites us to examine how race, gender, class, ability, and other factors affect not just access to health resources but, at a more fundamental level, our definition of resilience itself (Ungar, 2004, p. 360).**

In *Nurturing Hidden Resilience in Troubled Youth* Michael Ungar talks about the patterns of behavior that teens might use or solutions they may find in "authoring identities that are powerful and health-enhancing" (Ungar, 2003, pp. 125-126). In some cases these behaviors or solutions might be seen as deviant, when in reality it may be a teen's path to accessing the power they need to self-construct a healthy life.

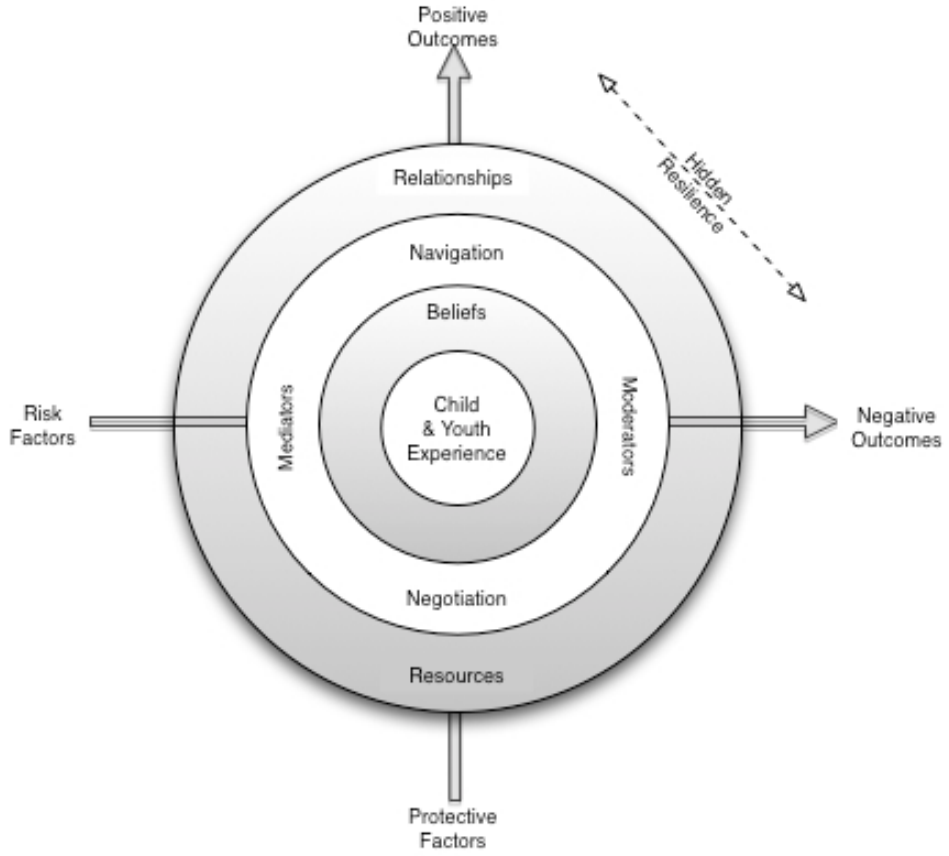


Figure 7: Hidden Resilience (Ungar, 2003)

Power to negotiate and navigate the resources and relationships becomes a critical component to a teen's resilience in the face of significant adversity. There is an opportunity from within a relational orientation to look at what we might view as negative outcomes and to find alternatives and subordinate stories of strength that are useful in helping a teen find their way and in supporting their resilience.

Resilience also may look and feel different to different people. In Choppin' it Up, you will see how youth explained their descriptions of resilience and how they get along in life. In doing so they build richer descriptions of their lives, experiences, and capacity for resilience (Ungar, 2005). Youth also explore what they and others in their community need from each other to thrive. From this place we can explore with youth ways of negotiating alternatives to help support them in their paths to meaning, health, and well-being, and provide more access to meaningful resources and opportunities as defined by youth.

> ***One thing that helps me survive and thrive is self-motivation, knowing that I have the potential to get somewhere. And that I just have to put that potential to use. I also have people who have high hopes for me and I don't want to let them down, you know. They have so many high hopes for me that it's kind of like a goal of mine to get somewhere in life to make all those people proud of me, but not only them, also make myself and my family proud. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

Michael Ungar reminds us that our understanding of resilience is negotiated discursively, in our conversations with each other, and is influenced by the culture and context. Thus, it is a dynamic process embedded in our relationships. This means that all of this is local–up for defining and constructing locally. Thus an important point is how we coordinate together within these various relationships in ways that are meaningful and salient to us depending upon our experiences, our culture etc. (Ungar, 2004).

This theory rests on an understanding of mental health that relies on our discursive empowerment, the power to define one's self as healthy (Ungar, 2003, p.4). Ungar goes on to suggest, what if youth had the power to define on their own terms what resilience looked like in their lives–developing their own narratives of adaptive development and thriving? Ungar shares a useful trend towards shifting our focus from categorizing youth based upon how society views their adaptation to an appreciation that they go on in life the best they can given the resources they have available, while also considering the broader context of their behaviors (Ungar, 2003, p.7; Ungar, ed., 2005, p. 65).

> ***I feel once people really start talking that a lot of us have a lot in common. Like, we want to work for the same things, like peace for an example, you know, make the community better. I guess that's what I've found out from everybody when they start speaking up. I feel when one person starts to open up, then another person starts to open up and then more people start to open up. Then once we all open up, we really realize that we all have a lot in common and that makes us connect even more. I found out when people start sharing something personal to***

them, you kind of relate to it. You see that you're really not going through that problem alone and that somebody else is going through that same thing and it's just when you open up with each other it's easy to make friends and to help go through the problems that you're going through together. - Choppin' it Up Youth

An individual approach from a deficit view of pathology might provoke disciplinary action to a young person expressing their search for resilience, power, and identity in what might be classified as unhealthy ways. For example, imagine a young man who gets into a fight in front of a strip mall where kids hang out after school. A typical response might further label the youth as dangerous or deviant rather than stepping back and looking at what alternatives are available to this kid to navigate his way to a powerful identify. What is this kid telling us he needs? What alternatives can we provide for him? How do we negotiate a more responsive approach to his pathway to a powerful identify for himself? Looking at this situation within an ecological model, we might focus on changing the environment to provide alternatives to youth who are expressing themselves in dangerous or deviant ways. We would start by involving the youth in this process. For example, we might engage this young man in a dialogue that helps us understand his expressions of resilience and negotiate alternative pathways that are supported and sustainable. Helping professionals and supportive adult allies can bring their expertise in supporting youth to explore what is important to them and helping them to identify the possible solutions from their own life experiences, responses to adversity, and what they value. Taking this one step further, we might align strengths within an ecological and contextual model to wrap support and relationships around this young man and other youth in our communities.

Relationships - key to resilience

As we construct meaning in and through our relationships, we have the opportunity to promote resilience. We can look at the power of relationships to support our resilience and thriving.

One relationship that was important would be with my eighth grade English teach, Ms. Renfrow. I think she impacted me in a positive way because she actually took the time to understand who I was and where I came from. She wasn't just there to teach, she was also there to build a friendship with the students. During the summer, she even took me to Six Flags. I think a teacher that's willing to go out of her way to be there for her students is a good teacher. She inspired me to do good in school. As of now, I have an A in English. I'm not saying it's all because of my English teacher, but I think she has a great impact on why I'm passing. I guess I would say, that yeah, I am passing English

with an A and my positive relationship with my teacher has helped me to this day. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Research describes how important relationships are to healthy human development. The American Academy of Pediatricians recently issued a policy statement on the effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. In it they stress the critical importance of "the buffering protection afforded by stable, responsive relationships" (Garner & Shonkoff, 2012, p. e225).

In contrast to positive or tolerable stress - toxic stress is defined as the excessive or prolonged activation of the physiologic stress response systems in the absence of the buffering protection afforded by stable, responsive relationships. The prevention of long-term adverse consequences is best achieved by the buffering protection afforded by stable, responsive relationships that help children develop a sense of safety, thereby facilitating the restoration of their stress response systems to baseline (Garner & Shonkoff, 2012, p. e225).

Looking at resilience from a relational perspective and as a relational process has shifted my thinking about what we can do as a responsive system to promote resilience by focusing on how we can help strengthen relationships with children, youth, and families. This relational lens offers a powerful orientation for resilience research and community building that promotes resilience. Listening to voices of youth, they share with us that prolonged and dependable relationships are critical.

That's the benefit that you have. You can rely on other people, I can't. I've been disappointed a lot, so I've trained myself not to. Well, I'm skeptical about relying on others. Okay, Jordan says he's going to pick me up. I listen to his words. I hear what he's saying. I believe him, but like, I don't prepare myself to depend on what he says. I'm going to have a B plan. If he doesn't come through, I'm going to have to jump on the bus at this time and blaze', blaze'. I've been let down a lot, so it's like I have no other choice but depend on myself. - Choppin it Up Youth

We continue to learn more about the impact of exposure to interpersonal violence, abuse, and other trauma in relationships. These and other relationships are at the core of what youth experience in their lives and may present significant challenges and adversity. At the same time, relationships are also a key to our resilience.

Bottom line is—we are shaped by our relationships. The relationships that you have with other people are really what kind of makes you and shapes you. What you have early on and throughout your life in the way that you deal with people and the way that people treat you, is kind of what makes the person that you are. - Choppin' it Up Youth

When youth are labeled with problematic identities, experiences of control and competence in relationships support youth working to construct alternate identities. When answering the question, "Who am I?" the task of developing identity, can be a lonely one. What if we were to reframe this task of adolescence and support youth to find a sense of self through reflections, relationships, and connections to others? The question might be different. Instead of "Who am I?" it might be "What is my part of or what do I contribute to the whole?" Discursive empowerment in these relationships helps youth to shape and maintain identities that might be more congruent with how they see themselves, while challenging aspects that they find conflicting (Ungar, 2003, p. 133).

I feel like what helps me survive with that, I feel like in the end, I'm supposed to be a hero for something. I'm not sure what it is, but I kind of feel it in here. I kind of know I'm supposed to be a hero for something, I just haven't figured out what it is yet. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Let's talk about the word empowerment for a moment. In many cases we view power as an ability to control others. What if we were to view power as something we build collectively in our relationships with each other? What if we can build empowerment together? A core assumption of the following definition of empowerment is that we are all interconnected. If we see empowerment as "an interactional process in which people are dependent on each other for activities that support feelings of well-being" (Ungar, 2003, p. 133), then we must recognize our relational interdependence. I often have a hard time with the word empowerment because in some cases it means "I" will empower "you", which feels like it diminishes another person's being. At the same time, I recognize that there are different power structures constructed by history and discourses that define who has power, and who does not in the eyes of the dominant culture. A core activity for those with more culturally defined power is to recognize this inequity of definitional power and work to support a shift in these discourses and cultural norms that limit other people's power to have a say and participate and contribute in this dance of interdependence that promotes resilience and supports each others' health and well-being.

My relationship with my older sister helps me the most. She's 19 and she's my best friend. She's always there for me. I can, we can talk about anything at all and she doesn't judge me. She's

always there; she's like my second mom. Yeah, she just encourages me. Like, when I feel I can't do something, she's always there saying, you got this, you can do it and she's just there for me. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Transformation >> thriving through social action

In this research project, we are talking about more than simply bouncing back, a common way of thinking about resilience. We are extending beyond what might be considered positive adaptation in the face of significant adversity. We are talking about exceptional stories of human thriving, and we are talking about what thriving looks like in our lives, our relationships, our schools, and our communities.

As I entered into this research project for my dissertation, I began with a focus on resilience. By strengthening our relationships, and developing our ability to come together for positive social action, the youth shifted our focus beyond resilience–towards thriving. From our experience, it was clear that the relational context that supports resilience also supports thriving. The pathway to thriving was through transformation and social action. There was transformation in our thinking, in our selves, and in our relationships with each other. We learned how to create transformational spaces together that supported thriving. We also learned that thriving happens when we come together to create positive change in our communities.

I think one of our main goals is to fix our community one step at a time. I think one thing we have learned is how so many youth actually want to change. Without this group, I wouldn't have known about all these people who actually want to do something in the community. But now that we have been brought together, it just amazed me how many want this, that I'm not the only one just trying to change. There are others around me who also want to change.

I honestly saw that Antioch was becoming kind of a horrible place that nobody really wants to live in. And I thought, oh, it's just probably a few people here that want to be able to change it. Because people make a bunch of mistakes and they know that they are making them, but they don't decide to change that. So I thought I was alone.

But then when I came here, I realized that other people actually really do want to change Antioch, but they're sometimes scared to open up to people outside of this group.- Choppin' it Up Youth

Positive Youth and Community Development

As we discussed in the previous chapter, historical research on adolescent (and really human) development offered concepts of what normal development looks like, and in doing so has built an orientation towards deviations from these models. Choppin' it Up asks us to see adolescence in a different way and to consider the possibilities if we were to orient ourselves to youth development research by asking questions about assets, resilience, strengths, and the varied pathways adolescents take to health and well-being. In supporting youth social action, I wanted to provide a quick review of the research on positive youth and community development. I have chosen to use terminology related to positive youth and relational development to represent the concept of what it takes to strengthen our relationships with each other in a way that leads to thriving. One primary reason is to also align with and build upon the current literature of positive youth, community, and leadership development.

Positive youth development asks us to instead of focusing on youth as problems to be solved, to ask–how are youth the problem solvers? Fortunately, over time, research and practice in adolescent development has come to be less about "fixing broken kids" and more about a process of promoting conditions for positive development. Seeing adolescent development as a process allows us to recognize the influence of the many dimensions of context–of relationships, communities, and policies. Within this frame, there is an opportunity to engage community broadly around the positive dimensions of young people and their needs. (Cicchetti, Rappaport, Sandler, & Weissberg, eds., 2000). In addition, positive youth development helps us shift our thinking from youth as broken to youth as "developing individuals who display considerable assets, and can be supported as positive and constructive contributors to society" (Lerner, Lerner, & Phelps, 2008, p. 4).

Problem-free isn't fully prepared. And fully prepared isn't fully engaged. Supporting youth development is not just about building the competencies, confidence, character, and connections of our future leaders. It is about actively engaging young people in their own development and that of their peers, families, schools, communities, cultures, and country (Pittman, 1999, p. 1).

Current research in adolescent development is supported by Brofenbrunner's model for human development that is predicated on the importance that contexts and relationships play in human development. This supports us to shift our way of thinking solely about youth towards considering the complexity of human development and the impact of family, peer group, school, neighborhood, community, society, and cultural relationships on the lives of youth.

Within this contextual orientation, Richard Elmore (2004, p. 196) asserts that this time of life would ideally provide a "period of nurtured growth on multiple dimensions, accompanied by a gradual transfer of agency over life's choices from adults to young people." This proposed view of

adolescence allows us to create possibilities in schools and communities to help shape the meaning of this phase of life, by creating spaces for teens to move in and out of activities, environments, and relationships to explore their sense of who they are in this world. Adults in this role would play an important role in coaching and helping to shape young people's lives, and provide them with maximum opportunities to succeed, fail, and try again (Elmore, 2004, p. 195). In these relationships with their peers and the important adults in their lives, youth are able to co-construct their sense of identity. These relationships, Elmore proposes, are influenced by context, structures, norms, and policies within our schools and communities. Stephen Hamilton shares a view that youth development can be seen in three ways - a) a natural process, b) our values and philosophy (what we believe about young people), and c) an approach working with youth–how we work with youth (Hamilton, Hamilton, & Pittman, n.d., p. 1).

While positive youth development has made great inroads in nonprofit and after-school programs, it has progressed much more slowly in areas like the juvenile justice, educational systems, and resource-stressed communities (Jaffee, ed., 2000, p. 14; Silbereisen & Lerner, eds., 2007, p. 245). Although all young people need opportunities for positive development, it is critical for us to focus our resources and attention on young people living in communities with high-risk environments and challenges, and few resources for positive youth development. These groups of young people might include youth living in higher-risk homes, school, and neighborhood environments, youth facing repeated discrimination, and youth with limited opportunities to contribute meaningfully to their communities (Eccles & Gootman, eds., 2002, p. 299).

Community youth development captures the essential role of context and community in preparing and promoting the advancement and development of young people (Pittman, 1999). Positive youth development in this context refers to the factors that influence development of youth and enable them to have a positive impact on their communities (Connell & Gambone, 2002; Lerner 2005; Lerner, Lerner, & Phelps, 2008).

Program and policy planners need to better understand the role and impact of youth in the community development process. Historically, youth input in decision-making, problem-solving, action, and evaluation in communities has received limited attention. However, recent trends suggest that youth are playing an increasingly important role in the development of their communities (Barnett & Brennan, 2006, p. 1).

In addition, Werner and Smith assert effective community development efforts must reinforce the natural social bonds–between young and old, between siblings, between friends–"that give meaning to one's life and a reason for commitment and caring" (Werner, E., & Smith, R., 1982, p. 82) In Resiliency in Action (2007, p. 8), Bonnie Bernard writes that James Coleman claims the most fundamental task for parents, educators, and policy makers is linking children into our social fabric. Our task is to look at the whole fabric of our society and say, "Where and how can children (youth and elders) be lodged in this society? Where can we find a stable psychological

home for children (youth and elders) where people will pay attention to them?" (Olson, 1987, p. 14-17). In particular, older youth tend to have fewer supports and opportunities and their participation in community programs declines as they grow older. At the same time they often have the greatest capacity to be engaged in solving complex issues in our communities, particularly within strong adult/youth partnerships (Pittman, 2002, p. 21).

Community resilience

If we view resilience as situated in relationships, we then build community resilience as we strengthen our relationships. As we develop relationships and learn how to go on together, we build upon our experiences and strengths to develop community resilience. Thus, engaging in dialogue and collaboration are central to building community resilience. In partnership with youth, this project explores how communities can create the kinds of conversations and relationships that allow all community members, of all ages, to access their knowledge, create knowledge, develop greater understandings of each other, and support positive action (Anderson & Gehart, eds., 2007, pp. 367-387; Anderson, 2001).

When I think of community resilience, I think about how this one community in Antioch, CA wrapped their arms around their kids in response to growing community violence. This type of community responsiveness has been key to the implementation and ongoing sustainability of this project. This is relational responsiveness in its collective form. I would not be able to tell the story of these kids, without the commitment and responsiveness of this particular community to their youth.

Building community capacity is critical to support community resilience. In *A Handbook for Working with Children and Youth: Pathways to Resilience Across Cultures and Contexts*, Ken Barter (Ungar, ed., 2005, pp. 352) writes that building capacity means strengthening the social connections and capacity "of people", "by people", and "for people". When I refer to people in this context, I am referring to all community members, of all ages, making a mutual commitment to work together, in partnership and collaboration. Ken Barter uses this phrase to suggest that we can enhance community capacity by doing the following:

1. Of-people - Strengthening and renewing people's skills, self-knowledge, and capacity for self-determination by identifying the needs and interests important to people based upon their experiences.
2. By-people - Supporting people's commitment, engagement, and application of enhanced capabilities, skills and knowledge, participation, collaboration, self-governance and ownership.
3. For-people - Mobilizing people's capacities to take action and work toward change. Providing equal opportunities and access to resources in order to promote the collective good.

Youth have an important role to play in building community capacity. As Marge Schiller says, "Don't do anything about me, without me." Many times, we include youth voices to some degree, or engage them in a specific strategy, but we often don't invite and support them to be active co-

constructors of change. Inviting and engaging youth as partners as a core element of community change work offers many benefits, and also calls upon us to develop our capacity as communities to actively support youth (Barnett & Brennan, 2006; Pittman, 2002).

> **Significant progress has been made in promoting the argument that community change is critical to youth development– indeed, young people do not grow up in programs, but in communities. And the argument that meaningful participation is critical to youth development has been well documented– especially among older youth who are ready not only for more choice and voice, but for more opportunities to have a visible impact. But the idea that youth participation is critical to community change has not been firmly embraced. Without persistent advocacy, youth participation will be promoted as a community program rather than as a community principal (Pittman, 2002, p. 20).**

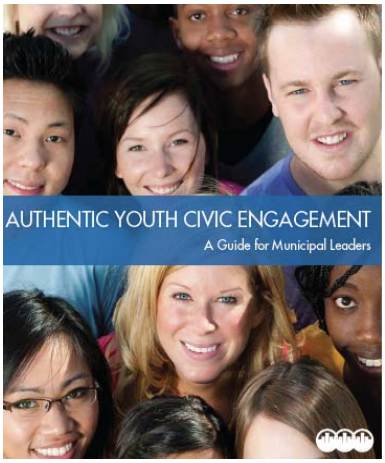
Javier Briseno offers his perspective on the role young people can play in restoring their communities.

> ***Why couldn't he get the chance to know me rather than judge me? My intentions are not to destroy the community, but to restore it. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

The Family Centre in New Zealand (www.familycentre.org.nz) encourages communities to look at how they invest in any community or human development initiative by making a commitment to ensure the resources are available for groups to develop their own approaches (Waldegrave & Tamasese, 2012). This commitment to youth development would promote investment in programs that engage youth to develop their own responses and approaches to what they think they need in their lives to survive and thrive. Maori people in New Zealand developed the idea of a cultural audit to investigate how communities and systems are investing their resources. A cultural audit for youth would look at where youth are being served in systems and how resources are made available for youth and their cultural groups to have a voice and an active role in what impacts them. It might look at how many youth actively serve as advisors to programs or in making important decisions in their schools. It might also look at the employment of youth and adults from their respective cultural groups within these programs and services.

This leads us to think about who we actively work to engage in this work. Often, when we think about youth and leadership or community service, there are certain images that are included and other images that generally are not.

Consider the following image. Who is included and who is left out? What image of youth are we including in our call for youth civic engagement?



Let's look at some alternative images of youth in our communities. Many times, youth are labeled or viewed as troubled or at-risk. In this project, we look at how to engage all youth, particularly youth who have experienced or are experiencing significant adversity. We also look at engaging youth as active leaders who represent their community makeup.

Important questions to consider are: How do we engage this group of youth? What are the implications? What is gained? What is lost if we do not?

Shifting Systems

Many of us who work in community development see the strengths and hopes that youth bring to creating positive change and actively engage them as an asset in the community. All too often however, we also recognize that the systems we are embedded in may have a different orientation that impacts the dominant narrative and the way we see, talk about, and respond to youth. While many people who are part of the systems impacting children, youth, and families are working to change these orientations, they also often find themselves mired in the slow work of systems change.

In addition, much of the interventions proposed by systems still place the primary responsibility upon individuals versus structural-level conditions. To address this, Seccombe (2002) proposes that we need to change the way we talk about resilience from a place in which people "beat the odds" to how we can collectively work to "change the odds".

Conclusion

It takes practice to shift to more generative and relational ways of thinking about issues and opportunities in our communities without abandoning the real problems and challenges that people face on a daily basis. Instead of saying that we are going to transform challenging, troubled, or difficult youth, we might say that we are going to transform the environments that impact youth, including our ways of talking about and relating with youth. To do this we need to have a better understanding of the context of the lives of youth. This contextual view helps us to see things from the youth's perspective and how youth navigate their way to health and well-being.

At Families Thrive, engaging youth voice is a critical element in creating a more responsive system where we look at whose voice is included and whose voice is left out or marginalized. In the beginning of the project, we engaged youth to help us understand more about their lived experience and the impact of exposure to domestic violence. The result was a series of powerful stories of what life is like for youth who have been affected by domestic violence called *Hear Our Voices - Stories of Children Exposed to Domestic Violence* at www.familiesthrive.org.

Last year, the project team decided it was time to re-engage the voices of youth and begin a new conversation about relationships and resilience to help us deepen our understanding. This is where our story with Choppin' it Up began.

In our work with youth, we found it critical for us to shift to a relational and strengths-based orientation (Ungar, ed., 2005, pp. 295-311). Once we collectively are able to unpack the discourses and narratives or stories that are told that negatively impact how we view and orient ourselves to youth, we can begin to see how to shift this orientation to one that is more useful and more generative, a shift in orientation that leads to collective and positive social action. We can be aware of the stories that are told and how often they are told in our organizations, partnerships, systems, and communities and work to actively introduce new stories. Most importantly we can engage youth to "flip the script", weave new narratives of strength, and support their roles as active social change agents in our communities. This supports an important move towards transformation and thriving.

As we work to build community capacity to address the issues that children, youth, and families face in their lives, principles of positive and community youth development offer a roadmap for our way forward.

CHAPTER FIVE: SITUATING THE RESEARCH

"I never knew that just one story could change a person's life"

With a roadmap in hand, the youth and I created a path as we engaged in our collaborative inquiry called Choppin' it Up. The contours of the path and the directions we took were in response to what we continued to learn and what emerged from our journey. This chapter will provide an overview to the roadmap and the methods, tools, and resources that helped us to navigate. It will situate the research within an emergent process that calls us to be attentive and responsive to the research/inquiry, the participants of the research, and what we are creating together.

> Traveler, there is no path. You make the path as you walk. - Antonio Machado

This type of participatory action research invites us to create a fluid, interactional, and conversational space in which emergence is supported and nurtured. Saliha Bava (2012) calls this the "performance of research". In this chapter, we will present how we performed and are performing the co-construction of emergent research. I will review several areas that we found important to attend to: 1) how we frame the research/inquiry, 2) relational reflexivity, 3) positioning and roles of researcher(s), participants and other actors, and a 4) focus on what we are creating together.

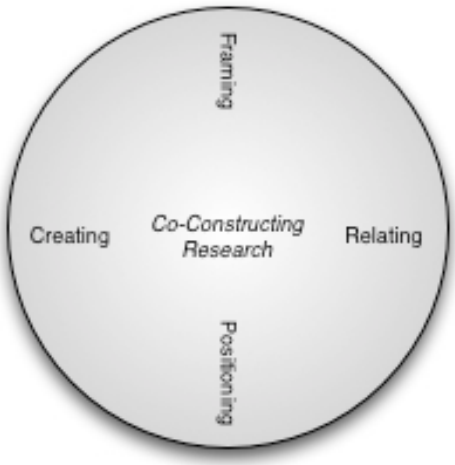


Figure 8: Responsive research: being responsive to the purpose, participants, and experience of the research.

Framing the research

As I entered into the research project, I had an idea of what I wanted to explore with youth, as well as a mandate from our funding source to engage youth voices and learn more about resilience in the context of childhood exposure to domestic violence and other forms of relationship abuse. An interesting element with a mandate is to simultaneously hold this in the emergent research space. So it is not just a conversation I was entering into with research

participants, but also a conversation that is responsive to funders, community members, school administration, parents, policy makers, and the research community. At the same time, I vowed to prioritize being responsive to the voices of youth in our conversation. It was a dance, a fluid interactional space, in which youth and I explored together questions that emerged in our conversations and interactions.

> Journal Entry: I came into the dialogues with some assumptions about what would be important for youth to give voice to. To be heard and understood. To give voice to their lived experience. I am tracking and following the path the youth are developing through their conversations and growing relationships with each other that are mapping a broader and bigger perspective.

In *A Collaborative Approach to Research and Inquiry*, the authors talk about a researcher as a nonexpert in another person's lived experience, their personal accounts of their experiences in life (Gerhart, Tarragona & Bava, 2007, p. 375). In this role of nonexpert, an orientation towards not knowing or curiosity leads us to be learners and to have a multitude of questions. Researchers within a social constructionist stance would acknowledge the multiple views of reality in the framing of the research.

> **Any single view of reality is one of many and has been constructed within the relationships and institutions with(in) which one, historically and currently, interacts. (Instead) curiosity fuels the process: a desire to understand how others are experiencing a particular phenomenon (Gerhart, Tarragona & Bava, 2007, p. 375).**

Within this orientation, a researcher role is a learner about the context of people's lives and how these contexts shape who they are. These contexts include the families, schools, workplaces we belong to and the socioeconomic conditions and power relations of local culture that influence our lives (White, 2007, p. 7).

Throughout my research, my research questions would evolve and transform. I began by looking at the concept of resilience as situated in a relational orientation and how this concept could inform a system to be more responsive to childhood exposure to domestic violence. During the research it began to feel that having one overriding research question felt constraining and too directive of an emergent research process. Instead of having one research question, I found I had many. Through the emergent research process, others continued to form. Only until midway into my research did a few research questions become more prominent. These were shaped by an ongoing commitment to understand the context of the lives of youth. Curiosity and the process to understand became a central element of the developing research questions.

Questions about how we engaged in co-construction with youth provided important framing for the project. Uwe Flick writes in *Designing Qualitative Research* (2007, p. 104), "The primary research question of these types of research is: How is a specific issue constructed in some sort of communication and which 'methods' do participants in this communication use for this construction?" The methods we chose to incorporate in Choppin' it Up kept co-construction and active participation in mind. For example, in order to privilege youth voice and the experiences of their lives, it was important to me to have the youth perform the qualitative data analysis from their dialogues. This allowed them to construct the specific issues and areas of focus based upon their interpretation and how they assigned meaning to the data. In Chapter Six, I will explain in more detail how the youth engaged in ongoing meaning making as they analyzed and organized the dialogue data into overarching key themes.

As an active participant with youth, I also played a role in shaping the research. In the introduction to *Stories as Equipment for Living*, Thomas Cole shares Barbara Myerhoff's journey as an anthropologist, reflexively inserting her own participation into the text (Kaminsky & Weiss, eds., 2007, pp. 1-16). In this context, being a reflexive researcher invited me to reflect on how I was participating, both shaping and being shaped by the research. I brought to the research my own ideas of what is important based upon my research interests, background, and experiences. One example is that much of my work has focused in areas that impact all ages. I continue to find it important to address opportunities to bring generations together in any work that I do. This influenced the role of youth looking to other generations as partners in social action and broadening voices to include multiple generations.

Relational reflexivity

Choppin' it Up is a methodology that embraces emergent process and calls us to be attentive and responsive to the multiple ways of being we each bring to the research/inquiry. It is a relational stance in research that invites us to be reflective of each other along the way.

> Journal Entry - It is an interesting process staying committed to co-constructing with youth instead of having a set agenda and process. It means I have to be much more attuned to the energy in the room, what the kids are communicating through their energy and, what is developing in this space. It is like navigating a river, paying attention to the tides, ebbs and flows of energy as the input for co-construction, checking in to make sure I am reading the energy correctly. I feel my role is more of a guide and the youth are steering. Together we are navigating the terrain of relationship.
>
> I found myself responding to energetic changes in the group and those participating in the periphery, reading what engaged people and where their energy dropped. It was a practice of listening

deeply. By paying attention to this energy in their conversations and relationships, it is possible to sense and track what is developing. Sometimes just staying in the lull of energy provides a breakthrough to greater understanding.

For example, when we were talking about challenges that people have faced and how they got through it, there may have been some hesitation to first test and see what others were going to share in order to feel safe to share their own stories of challenge and adversity. Once people started sharing, there was more opening. In this case, it may be a combination of having modeling from peers to get a sense for what is acceptable and safe to talk about. Another important possible learning about this lull is that the level of trust might not have developed yet to venture into a particular area.

Sometimes though, the lull also provided important feedback to direct the dialogue where there is greater energy. The greatest energy has been when youth are able to connect their stories of strength to positive joint action. The narrative of strengths, of possibility, and of unity had great resonance and power. What is developing for me is an image that the doorway to transformation is through positive possibilities and social change.

It appeared important to connect voice and the centrality and connection of their lived experience and stories in order to be effective at social change. It became the gateway to powerful message development and storytelling for effective social change. The possibilities for positive social change provided the glue where they discovered commonalities and strengths that fueled connections for action. There was a big energy shift in the room when the youth connected their lived experiences and stories to the positive change they would like to see in their community. There was a palpable appreciation that others want to make a difference and that as a group they could do something together. You could feel the enthusiasm and energy for contributing to positive change in the community.

There are choices we have in how we orient ourselves as a researcher to the subject in question and people's lived experiences and to how we orient ourselves to each other in the

research. How we talk about the issues at hand and how these issues are presented in society, influences and has implications for our relationships (Burr, 2003, p. 18). This is of no minor importance in our work and research in communities. If we talk about the youth in our work and research as troubled teens, delinquent teens, youth at risk, there carries certain implications and ways for how we treat each other. If we refer to older generations as seniors, elders, old folks, there are implications in how we treat each other and how we engage in dialogue and action together. For sure, this is no small challenge. When we write about or interact with groups of people, we find it easier using labels of convenience; labels that help us make sense of the world. But we must place a high priority in being attentive to how we label and talk about people.

In *Research as Relationally Situated Activity*, McNamee shares a story of a group brought together to discuss the "problem" of women and leadership on campus (McNamee, 1994). Leadership was re-envisioned as a process that invites others to participate. A "good" leader in this case was one who attends to what is going on in the interactive moment such that others feel free to contribute and participate in the construction of their local worlds. This spoke to me as a researcher role, one who attends to what is going on in the interactive moments of research, inviting more voices into the conversation.

What would happen if we engaged in interested inquiry where we accepted the notion that any action must have a location within which it makes sense? Rather than confront situations attempting to find the best solution or path, we turn our attention to the various ways in which participants enter into the conversation and how these various ways open multiple possibilities for action (McNamee, 2000, pp. 1-2).

Journal Entry - This project keeps reminding me that when I am stuck on something to go back to the kids. They have the answer.For example, I was really worried about making sure folks would show up to their May 31 community event, to hear their voices.I have a pet peeve when we say we want to hear someone's voice and then no one shows up to listen.Well, I was fretting about it and then I brought it to the kids. I said," I see there are a couple of options. What do you think of these? Can you think of others? We can have May 31 either as 1) a celebration of what you have accomplished, 2) a showing of your media to the community, or 3) a show of your media and a dialogue with

the community.They chose the show of media and dialogue. They really wanted people to see and experience what they had been learning and doing.So then I asked," Who would you want to be there on May 31 to hear, see and participate in this dialogue?" They responded-their family and friends.My assumption that they would feel heard if folks like the school board, principals, city council etc. showed up was quickly clarified. They wanted to be seen and heard by their family and friends. To be clear, I still wanted them to be heard by folks who can make decisions to support them in their further development and support the positive changes they wanted to contribute to in the community.

It appeared the audience of family and friends is important for their message. They were going to be acting out various themes of what relationship abuse looks like and the impact it has on them, as a tool to help their friends see what relationship abuse looks like and what contributes to a healthy relationship. They wanted to shift norms about how people communicate with each other and open doors to more trust and connection in their relationships with their peers and families.They wanted to invite others to see how together they can improve relationships and how people treat each other. They wanted to invite everyone to see that we are not so different underneath and that accepting and appreciating our differences leads to peace.

These kids are cool. They keep teaching me.I love it.

Positioning - roles of researcher, participants and other actors

One of the specific ways of being relationally reflexive in research is to be aware of how we consciously or unconsciously set up roles through our positioning and interactions as an important element of developing an environment of co-construction. Are we constructing adult roles as leaders, disciplinarians, teachers, or supporters? Are we constructing youth roles as leaders, delinquents, or students? It is critical to be mindful to how our day to day interactions

represent different positioning and roles that may be available in creating a culture of co-construction.

> **Participants understanding of what kind(s) of interactions this is will radically affect their perception of what subject positions are available to them and whether they wish to claim or resist those positions (Burr, 2003, p. 114).**

Journal - I remember a point in our project that brings this point to life. As you will see in the next chapter, the youth developed agreements for their work that included, listen while others talk. About midway through the project I noticed that the noise level was increasing and it seemed everyone was talking at the same time. I also noticed adult facilitators shushing and hushing throughout the afternoon. I stopped what we were working on for a check in. This was a critical point demonstrating our positions as active co-constructors of the process in our work together. At this moment, I shared that I noticed the noise level was increasing and it seemed that there were many conversations happening while someone was trying to talk. I reminded them of their agreement and proposed that the group revisit their agreements and consider if they wanted to adapt them to reflect what might be important to them now. It seemed to me there were at least two options, one was to reinforce the previously made agreement and the other was to recognize that there was a high level of interaction, energy, and desire to connect with each other and to modify their agreement. I then asked the kids what they would prefer or if they saw other options. The group decided without reservation that their agreement remained important to them and they took responsibility to hold themselves to it.

Attention to positionality raises questions of how to attend to historical power differences and create shifts and conditions that allow co-construction to occur. This project has focused on how to privilege and elevate youth voices and at the same time recognize the ongoing challenges to do so. Similar to narrative therapy, a de-centering of the researcher or adult role is important to

invite youth in as active co-constructors in the process. This de-centering isn't necessarily about placing researchers and adults outside of the circle or in the margins, but rather intends to bring all participants into a circle together. Sometimes, however, it may mean bringing youth to the center with supportive adult allies in a circle around them.

There is an ongoing opportunity to find ways of ensuring youth have a voice in the process design, around important and daily decisions, in what is developed and written, and what is said about the project. With this in mind, Choppin' it Up was designed in active partnership with youth beginning with learning about dialogue and experimenting with and experiencing potentially new ways of conversation. We worked to not leave it to the researchers as experts, but rather shift our thinking to the youth as experts. An example of how this showed up in our research was again in the data analysis methods. Instead of having me or other "experts" interpret the data or assign meaning from the dialogues the youth held, the youth interpreted the data and organized it into themes that were meaningful to them.

Privileging youth voice has also became an important element in my writing. I intentionally worked very hard to maintain an orientation of co-construction with the youth and the process throughout the project. When it came time to write my dissertation, I was challenged to figure out a way to continue co-construction and privilege youth voice. I resisted what felt like a natural response to write about the findings of the project, shifting to a more "researcher as separate"' from the participants and as an expert in the process, the paradigm of "you research and then you write and report your findings". I didn't want to go from being a "relational" researcher to a "reporting or expert" researcher. I struggled through for several months, until I realized that I needed to find ways to continue conversations with the youth about what we experienced and learned together. I wanted to find every opportunity to include their voices throughout the process of writing the dissertation. While the reality is the youth involved in Choppin' it Up are very busy with school and other activities, they also have remained quite involved in continued writing and meaning-making through activities we have designed together, training we have provided to our and other communities, writing we have done for publications, and ongoing Facebook discussions.

I also wanted to ensure that we provided every opportunity to continue to privilege youth voice when we shared with the community what the youth were doing in Choppin' it Up and their continued leadership development activities. Wherever possible, I try to include youth videos or the youth themselves in workshops or on the website, so that they are able to tell their stories, in their own voice, not through my voice or lens which may impact people's interpretation and ongoing meaning-making. By continuing to support youth voice, we are also building effective capacity and youth leadership to bring about important changes in our community.

I found it important to think about what is gained and what is lost as researchers retell the stories of their research, of their relational engagement with participants in their research. One of the narrative realities Jerome Bruner (1996, p.137) talks about is the interpretive or "hermeneutic comprehension" of narratives, that no story has a single unique construal. As researchers retell stories of the co-constructed experiences with participants, there are likely

multiple comprehensions, interpretations available for the retelling. Thus, being reflective of this role of researchers in the retelling, we can work to frame our interpretive voices to not construe a new reality or truth in the retelling and to make clear the role we are playing. Patrick Lewis (2008, p. 2) reminds us that listening is an important task of researchers. He shares a concern that we fall short of our primary goal of listening by overemphasizing the importance of analysis and interpretation. The resulting re-marginalization of the very voices that we are supposedly giving voice to can occur through the interpretive voices of the researcher. Instead, he suggests we (re)establish our trust with(in) the stories of others and resist interpreting their personal narratives. (Lewis, 2008)

In my role as an engaged researcher, I was significantly impacted by the research and my work with the youth. Sometimes I would feel silly with the magic I found in the little and big moments with the Choppin' it Up youth and their world. I felt like a giddy little filly running around a fresh spring meadow and was worried other people might not see the magic or worse yet, view the magic as normal or common. *In Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (2008, p. 100), Anne Lamott wrote: "I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world - present and in awe." This felt like permission to be giddy with the recognition of what felt like magic to me. For some reason when I read this, I thought of the word "raw". As a researcher, I was totally willing to be affected by the world, and to allow it to "catch me off guard and create a sense of wonder." My hopes are that this magic is evident; woven into our story, and that others can be touched by it too.

Focus on what we are creating

A key element in emergent and participatory research is to pay particular attention to what we are creating. Within a social constructionist orientation, we acknowledge that through our social practices we are constructing reality and the world. Social constructionist research would then be an inquiry into relational processes, what we are creating through our social worlds, and what we create through our inquiry.

> **Inquiry is a relational practice and (re)constructs or constitutes relational realities (McNamee & Hosking, 2012, p. xvi).**

Sheila McNamee and Dian Hosking in *Research and Social Change: A Relational Constructionist Approach* (2012, p. xvi) remind us "all research intervenes in the lives of those who participate as well as in the lives of the researchers themselves. This means that professionals who work in fields focused on social change, such as health and human services, organizational development, education, and community development, are just as much researchers as they are change agents. Similarly, researchers are change agents; they are not simply scientists making discoveries about the world; they change the world as they examine it."

If we approach emergent research from a place of not-knowing, we open a space for creative co-construction where what we create is an attentive ongoing relational process in the making, through our conversations with each other. Choppin' it Up is an invitation to create new

conversations and constructions through dialogue. It is in our conversations, within ourselves and with others, that new stories and realities can be discovered and shaped.

> **Stories have lineages, they have histories and futures, they carry culture, they bestow meaning, and they construct the world (Kaminsky & Weiss, eds., 2007, p. 8).**

When we are creating something, we must attend to how we are creating it and how we are responsive to each other and the experience of research. It is useful to first focus on building our skills in the creative process. The metaphor of jazz improvisation has often been used in describing a method of creativity that helps propel social action. Michael White proposed the craft of musicianship as foundational to improvisation, that everyone must first learn how to play and only then can they improvise (White & Denborough, 2011, p. xxxiii). In Choppin' it Up, adults and youth spent significant time learning together and developing skills and collective leadership in order to "perform" research and social action. This has major implications to individual, organizational, and community change initiatives. First, we must learn together and develop our craft, in order to improvise and create something new.

The first skill that we focused on was to strengthen our ability to enter into dialogue through a collaborative approach. We chose to base this approach upon transformative dialogue principles and incorporated elements from Appreciative Inquiry and Dialogue for Peaceful Change–supporting a shift from a deficit-based single story to reflective, strengths-based, narrative, and dialogic relational processes. While Appreciative Inquiry is often viewed as relatively discrete methodology, its applications can be varied and diverse, ranging from three day AI Summits to integration of the principles in our daily living. Choppin' it Up applied principles of Appreciative Inquiry to how we oriented ourselves to the issues at hand and in our conversations with each other. What emerged was a "mashup" of transformative dialogic processes that supported the co-construction of generative conversations and relationships. These processes supported dialogue as a powerful way for connecting in a relational space and supporting multi-vocality by engaging many voices to strengthen the relational space-in-between the various direct and indirect participants, while also paying attention to the tensional and mediative dynamics in working through areas of conflict and differences. This framework created a space for multiple perspectives to be mutually transformative (Stewart & Zediker, 2000), providing opportunities for being heard and hearing another, increasing our understandings of each other and developing new stories and realities together (Barrett, 1995). In this context, dialogue went beyond listening to youth voices, to providing the opportunity to build relationships that are meaningful to those engaged in the dialogue for building better worlds and positive futures together.

Choppin' it Up integrated principles and provided training for youth to enter into transformative dialogue as a resource for the re-authoring process (McNamee, 2008, pp. 11-14).

Over the course of a month, youth worked together to explore the following principles to develop their skills. How we did this will be elaborated on in Chapter Six.

- Examine our assumptions and judgments we hold.
- Create a safe space by developing and committing to shared agreements.
- Speak from our personal experiences.
- Inquire into and be reflective of our reactions and responses.
- Be curious about and work to understand different viewpoints. Continue to expand the dialogue and engage more voices.
- Search for local meaning and relevance and construct knowledge through social processes.
- Imagine the future and positive possibilities. Move towards and support social action. These new understandings and ways of seeing and knowing carry a number of possible actions or responses. In other words, knowledge and social action go together.

Through the principles of transformative dialogue and engaging in narrative practice we can transform our descriptions of ourselves and others by sharing stories of strength, of our abilities, talents, resources. There are many ways that our stories about youth increase the distance between adults and youth. We can work to create a new story that reinforces our interconnectedness and builds bridges to understanding and positive social action. Narrative practice provides a roadmap for re-authoring problem-saturated dominant stories that lead to new stories and positive possibilities. It is helpful to understand the process for how we develop dominant stories in our communities in order to unravel the opportunities to form new narrative understandings.

I never knew that just one story could change a person's life. - Choppin' it Up Youth

To illustrate this concept, I have outlined below a process of therapeutic narrative practice presented by Michael White as a model for re-authoring problem-saturated dominant stories that impact the lives of youth in our communities (White & Denborough, 2011).

1. Stories are one of the resources for coming to terms with the events in our lives and our communities that we find problematic or unsettling.
2. Individually and collectively we share understandings and reflections of these events and identify and associate various themes with those events.
3. These reflections often ascribe certain motives, traits, characteristics or disorder that begin to form negative identities of ourselves and others.

4. These accounts or unfolding developments have certain identity conclusions that accompany them and shape problem-saturated narratives - often represented as a dominant story in our communities.

Our task and opportunity is to unpack dominant problem-saturated stories, deconstruct the negative identity conclusions associated with the stories, and reconstruct other possible accounts of identity along with new options for action. In doing so we can begin to see how the ways in which youth are commonly understood and the language used to describe them are up for examination. In this orientation we examine what might be taken as once-and-for-all truth about youth, and what might also be a case of mistaken identities or harmful misrepresentations of youth. As we begin to dismantle taken-for-granted knowledge, it is sometimes helpful to expose how it came to be by asking the question - how was this made (Holstein & Minkler, 2003). This may lead us to a better understanding of how it can be remade or restoried in an ongoing process of social construction (Pearce 2009). We might ask ourselves - "What are the stories that we tell that influence the identities of youth? Who has the power to decide what is meaningful? How does this influence how we see youth in our communities?"

Narrative practice also provides a method for identifying events or stories that are identified as "aspects of life to which people have accorded value" (White & Denborough, 2011. p 125) that includes purpose, values, hopes and dreams that help develop a positive sense of identity and agency. These stories often fall outside of dominant stories. We can then see that one story is only one of many stories that might represent someone's life–we are a multiplicity of stories. In this process, we can attach significance to these potential subordinate stories or counter-plots and develop new identity descriptions. Our lives and our communities become more multi-storied or narratively resourced, providing alternative options for meaning-making. These new responses to events in our lives and to who we are provide possibilities for action in our communities. The re-authoring process has a "life-shaping effect as we engage in the performance of our lives and communities, transporting us, where we become different than what we brought into the conversation" (White & Denborough, 2011. p 130).

Through their developing leadership, youth expanded and continue to expand the domain of conversation to others who are touched by the challenges and opportunities surrounding them and the communities they belong to, including parents, teachers, community members, policy makers and the media. Inviting more people into the collaborative inquiry not only expands the research but also brings more voices in to explore and challenge discourses of power, deficit and pathology and present opportunities for a shift in discourse (ways of speaking or understanding) that allows for more constructive and positive possibilities for youth, schools, and communities.

Conclusion

Choppin' it Up incorporated and embedded important relational processes centered in *how* we perform research together that offer powerful possibilities for transformation in our schools, communities, and relationships. Through this transformative dialogic and narrative process, youth and their adult allies are creating a model in their schools and communities that supports

ongoing communication and restorative practices around conflict and experiences of adversity. This model offers powerful possibilities for transformation in relationships with youth, embedded within conversations and dialogue with each other. In these conversations, youth and the adults in their lives are able to examine current narratives that impact them and to reflect on our most "practiced ways of being" in relationship together. From here they can explore new relational patterns of coordination that may generate alternative forms of practice and traditions for going on together or living our lives and promoting resilience and thriving (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). It also engages, builds upon, and strengthens the capacity of youth to create positive change in their schools and communities. In addition, allied adults can engage and support the strengths of youth as they work to create positive social change. Choppin' it Up builds upon existing efforts and engages youth as primary change agents. The focus of the research is on what we are creating in these new forms of relationship.

> ***We're all just trying to reach out for help and to make a change. Everyone's goal was to see a change in ourselves and in Antioch, to change the way people see things, to put others in our shoes and see what we see. We're all trying to get an understanding of who we are and what we are capable of doing. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

My experience with the youth that participated in Choppin' it Up is now "tattooed on my heart" as Father Gregory Boyle says. In the next several chapters, I will attempt to share the details of our work together in ways that capture what was created.

CHAPTER SIX: CHOPPIN' IT UP

"On that day we became family"

I have organized this chapter to explain what we did in this process. The training we developed, while we held it emergently with youth, was intended for us to experience different ways of being in relationships together. Be aware that it was not necessarily as linear a process as this chapter may depict or one that we had carefully designed. It was one that emerged throughout our work together; with what I brought as a researcher, what other adult allies brought with their expertise, and what the youth brought in with their life experiences and wisdom. What I hope to share is less a fixed process that can be repeated with similar outcomes, but also a "way" of working together that leads to a process that is meaningful to all participants.

Michael White shares with us in Maps of Narrative Practice (2007, p 76) how Jerome Bruner (1986) inspired his thinking around how people (re)construct stories of their lives as a journey.

> **....it is as if they were embarking on a journey without maps– and yet, they possess a stock of maps that might give hints, and besides, they know a lot about mapmaking. First impressions of the new terrain are, of course, based on older journeys already taken. In time, the new journey becomes a thing in itself, however much its initial shape was borrowed from the past. (p. 36)**

Project Team

I would like to take a moment to introduce the other adult allies and recognize them for their contributions to the project.

Families Thrive - Devorah Levine and Kathryn Burroughs provided extensive support in helping to develop the project vision around childhood exposure to domestic violence. Juliana Carson was a top notch project manager and kept our budget and details on track. When the youth chose to tackle the issue of teen dating abuse, Devorah Levine and Kathryn Burroughs saw their leadership potential and supported their involvement in a county-wide teen dating abuse initiative. Sharon Turner and Alex Kelner from Stand for Families Free of Violence were important partners in this effort, supporting the Choppin' it Up youth to be strong advocates for teen dating abuse. www.familiesthrive.org and http://www.standffov.org

Youth Intervention Network - When I approached Iris Archuleta about the idea for Choppin' it Up, she recognized the importance of not only giving youth an opportunity for their voice to be heard, but of also 'tooling' them up and giving them the skills to be effective advocates for positive change. She and her team's partnership and support made this project what it was, from rallying school district partners, getting their support and involvement, to shaping the project in a way that was consistent with the dialogic and mediative approaches embraced by the Youth

Intervention Network. Along with Iris's unwavering leadership, vision, and support, Dineen Burdick provided important administrative support and Lesia Bell provided her expertise in training. Dorian Archuleta was a partner in getting the youth involved and engaged in the project. www.facebook.com/youthinterventionnetwork

Dialogue for Peaceful Change (DPC) - Colin Craig and Jaap van der Sar from Dialogue for Peaceful Change provided important input as we developed the training methodologies for Choppin' it Up. Shona Bell provided her expertise as a trainer for the DPC youth mediation training. http://dialogueforpeacefulchange.blogspot.com/

Antioch Unified School District - Superintendent Don Gill provided his leadership and support of the project. Principals John Jimno, Louie Rocha, and Scott Bergerhouse identified and invited the youth to participate in the project and provided the administrative support for the youth to participate. http://www.antioch.k12.ca.us/

The Williams Group - Part of the Youth Intervention Network, Vernon Williams III from the Williams Group, an organization that engages youth in positive alternatives with a focus on gang intervention and prevention, brought his expertise in leadership, training, and youth development to the project. As part of the initial planning team with Iris Archuleta and the AUSD principals, Vernon identified youth to invite to the process. He also not only provided training during the initial Choppin' it Up dialogue training, but continued as a lead trainer in the Dialogue for Peaceful Change mediation training and the subsequent Emerging Leaders training the youth went through. He provided his leadership and support as the youth engaged in the countywide teen dating abuse efforts. http://www.twgempowerment.org

One Day at a Time - Part of the Youth Intervention Network, One Day at a Time focused on gang intervention and prevention. Johnny Rodriguez provided recommendations and support for youth to the principals to consider.

Antioch Police Activities League (PAL) - Ron Bennet and CA Robinson provided the important link for the Choppin' it Up youth to continue their leadership development as part of the Antioch Police Activities League Youth Directors Council. They worked to get the funding that would enable the youth to continue their work contributing to positive change in their community.

Center for Digital Storytelling - I saved the Center for Digital Storytelling for last because of the key role they played in the entire project. As we were looking for a partner who could help develop media, we turned to Center for Digital Storytelling for their expertise in not only digital story development, but their continued partnership around the issue of childhood exposure to domestic violence and their expertise in storytelling for positive social change. Joe Lambert and Rob Kershaw quickly gave their full support and helped to craft the overall project design to engage youth in powerful storytelling and media development. Rob Kershaw was a partner from the beginning and throughout the project in not only designing and but also implementing Choppin' it Up. Joe and Rob brought together a stellar team that trained youth in storytelling and provided important adult ally support as youth developed their media. This team included Ann Galjour who is both a playwright and performer who focused on theatre and performance;

Dave Room who is a storyteller, performer and social activist brought his expertise in storytelling and "flipping the script" on limiting narratives; and Seed Lynn who is a multi-media specialist, cultural organizer, and spoken-word artist. This dynamic team participated in the entire training from day one to the community event on May 31. They brought their wisdom, expertise, and love to the work with the youth.

This chapter covers the training on dialogue methods, holding dialogues, training on relationship abuse and media literacy, and the development of digital stories and performance. The chapter is organized as a timeline that begins with day one on May 9, 2011 and ends with the community event on May 31, 2011. However, the story doesn't end there. Later chapters will include what we learned from this process and what the youth have continued to do as a result of their engagement in this project.

The following image represents the terrain that we explored in our first month together.

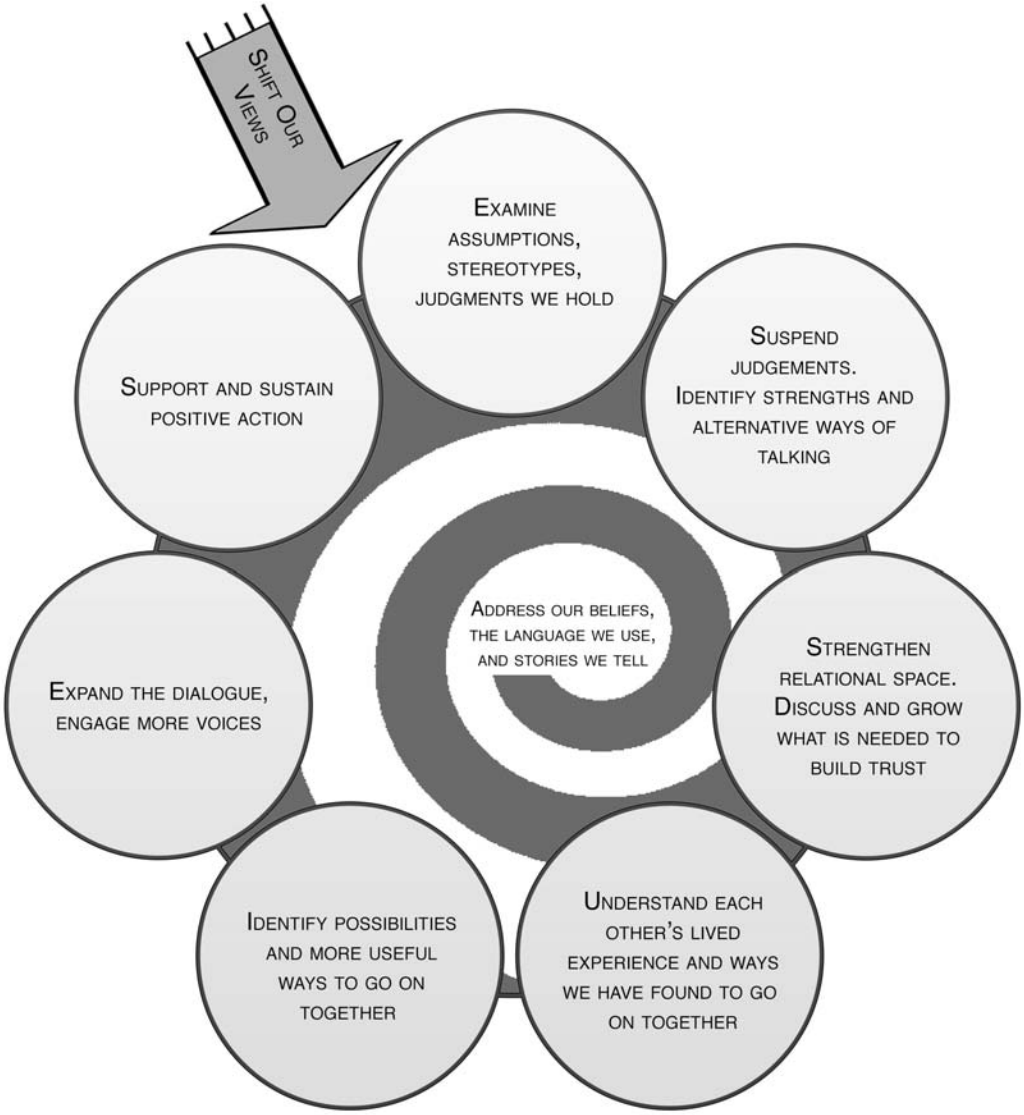


Figure 9: Shifting our View

Examining our assumptions, stereotypes and judgments we hold

The project itself was designed with positive assumptions about youth with the intent to model a strengths-based approach and framework. We were attentive in our planning to identify strengths-based processes and ways of talking about youth. In addition, the training focused on how youth might reflect on the impact of the assumptions, stereotypes, and judgements they hold of themselves and others to help shift our view and be able to suspend judgments in order to find alternative ways of talking and relating with each other.

Day One May 9, 2011 – Dialogue training

On May 9, 2011, we hold our first Choppin' it Up training. The kids arrive along with their respective principals. They sit. The room is quiet. It is obvious many of them do not know each other or the adults in the room. We begin with our first activity. I ask them to write down all of the judgments they have about themselves and others, whether they be positive or negative, judgments we have each other, other youth, parents, teachers, other adults on index cards. Examples of judgments include: "I am not smart enough or I am smarter than others", "I am not pretty or I am prettier than others", "I am stronger than others or not strong enough". We write down all of the judgments that we can think of. When everyone finishes, I ask everyone to pick up all of those judgments, walk over to the trash can, and throw them away.

From there, we began our work together.

We discussed the importance of being aware of how our judgments of ourselves and others impact our communications and if possible, to leave those judgments or check them in at the door. We learned how judgments can sometimes get in the way of effectively hearing another person—really listening deeply and being able to have meaningful conversations with one another. This exercise was designed to develop the skill to suspend judgment and develop reflexive inquiry about the judgments we hold of ourselves and others.

We then moved on to introduce ourselves to each other. In addition to sharing names and schools, the facilitation team had developed a question to help us get to know each other better: "What is one thing about you that no one knows about?" One of the young ladies, Dominique, raised her hand and said that she felt it was too early to share this kind of information, that we didn't know each other yet. Bingo. The active co-construction began. The group discussed the importance of having trust in each other before sharing personal information. We brainstormed about what we would feel comfortable sharing. We threw different things around. As we were beginning to settle on sharing one thing that is our passion and that we each love to do and would do all day every day if we could, Sydney raised her hand and suggested we share how we are stereotyped. Everyone agreed that we could choose one or share both.

The following are some examples of how people felt they were stereotyped:

Syndey - Average black girl
Jacob - Lazy

Gerardo - Gang member
Karena - Outcast
Victor - Graffiti punk
Nick - Pothead skateboarder

What still strikes me is as I got to know these young people, how much I realized that these stereotypes were not how I saw them and were shallow descriptions of the vibrant lives they are.

> Journal Entry: A note from me to the Choppin' it Up youth: The first day we were together and we were introducing ourselves to each other, I was struck by how brave and wise you all were. One of the basic principles of Choppin it Up is that we co-construct our experience together. What that meant to me is to really co-construct together, we needed to privilege your voices over adult leader voices. I wanted to flip the traditional script of privileging adult over youth voices.
>
> So when you all spoke up that the question we had designed for introductions might be too personal for this stage of our work together, that we hadn't built the level of trust together as a group to share that type of information, I was struck and saw the power and wisdom in privileging your voices. I also really appreciated watching how you all took leadership to negotiate together what you would feel comfortable sharing and then jumping in together to create the space that would build trust. I have to share that when you told each other how you were stereotyped, over time I wanted to shout out – "You are so much more than how the world might see you!" I want the world to see all the greatness, the brilliance I see in you.

Strengthen relational space

After our introductions, we ran through the schedule, what Choppin' it Up is, and what they could expect. Then youth developed shared agreements to create a safe space for our time together. Agreements generally serve two general purposes: 1) They discourage old ritualized patterns of communication and 2) they foster a respectful, safe environment in which participants can have a purposeful, fresh, and personal exchange of ideas, inquiries, and experiences (Herzig & Chasin, 2006, p. 9).

The Choppin' it Up youth brainstormed and discussed what they could agree upon in their expectations for ourselves and each other in our work together. There was much discussion about what these agreements actually looked like in principle and action. These are the agreements they developed:

Shared Agreements

- Respect Each Other
- Listen While Others Talk
- Be Open Minded
- No Judgment
- Look at the Other's Point of View
- Our Emotions are Real
- Find Our Common Qualities
- Agree that Disagreements May Happen
- Don't Yuck Someone Else's Yum
- Be Open <> Be Safe
- We Have a Choice to Share or Not
- What is Shared in this Room Stays in this Room (Names & Details of People's Experiences or Stories)
- Don't Down it, Crown it. Give Positive Feedback

We had an interesting dialogue about what respect looks like. As the group explored the issue of showing respect, we were able to expand on different ideas of what demonstrated respect to them. For example, people felt that respect to them was listening while someone else was talking. The ideas ranged from "listen while other people are talking" or "one conversation at a time" to "don't yuck someone else's yum"–meaning if you don't agree, it is not always important to say so.

Another important discussion was around the agreement of "Be Open <> Be Safe". They had active dialogue about allowing themselves to open up to each other - but also to be safe - having the choice to share or not. People were encouraging each other to be open in the group. In response they also discussed being safe, if something felt too private or sensitive, that it was OK to keep it to yourself. This led to the agreement of "We Have a Choice to Share or Not".

The other agreement that generated much discussion was 'What is Shared in this Room Stays in this Room". When Rob proposed confidentiality as a shared agreement, the youth dug in and talked about the value of being able to share what they were learning. They thought it would be useful to share each others' experiences if it is helpful for someone else, while also honoring that peoples names and the details of their story would remain confidential. The group agreed that it would be OK to share what they had learned as long as they didn't share personal details of someone else's story.

The group also discussed the importance of finding common qualities, while still also appreciating differences. They proposed that we look for connections but also agree that disagreements or differences of opinion and points of view may exist and ideally be accepted that as part of the process of communication.

In the beginning we made a list to explain what we want from each other. The most important ones were 'trust and respect'. Over time we showed those two aspects when we shared with one another and we started gaining trust for one another. The group made us feel safe and comfortable sharing our inner thoughts, secrets, and stories. We allowed ourselves to trust one another and really get to know each other and open up. If we didn't really trust the person, then we wouldn't be so open in telling our secrets to share and learn from. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Understanding each other's lived experiences

The next part of the day was designed to help us be better storytellers about our lived experiences. Joe Lambert writes in Digital Storytelling (2002, p. xvi), "We see storywork as only valuable when it is owned as a technology of healing by a local population." He goes on to say that recovery and healing is possible in the face of forces that impact our identities, on our connections to each other, on the way we make our communities cohere and our societies healthy. He says we do this through listening, making stories, and marking places with narrative. In doing so, storytelling renews and changes everyone in the process. When we listen, deeply listen to what others are saying, magic happens (p. 86). It is transformative. In this section of the training, Joe Lambert and Rob Kershaw from the Center for Digital Storytelling shared a digital story another youth had made and the group discussed the elements that were important for an impactful story.

Vernon Williams III of The Williams Group then led an exercise with the Choppin' it Up youth to develop and declare a positive stand for change by looking at the important experiences that had had a significant impact on their lives. From these experiences, they created visions for the positive change they would like to see in this world, based upon a deeply held value or belief.

Vernon has an ability to inspire youth and really see them. He has a gift in being able to articulate back to youth what he sees and hears them say - pushing them to more deeply connect and articulate what they value and feel passionate about. The goal of the exercise is to locate transformation by starting within our selves in a way that provides an anchor for transformative work in our relationships and in the community. Youth located within their experiences of social injustice their stand for an alternative, a social justice version for everyone. So instead of saying, "I am discriminated against and this is unjust", they would say they stand for equality for all, or they stand for equal access to education. This process allowed youth to envision positive change and to see the unique gifts they can tap into to bring about their vision in the world.

The next part of the training was among our favorites. Lesia Bell and Vernon Williams III are both Dialogue for Peaceful Change (DPC) certified trainers. They brought one of the DPC foundational training methods into Choppin' it Up to help us practice how to be active listeners

in our conversations with each other. Lesia and Vernon had the kids count off to form two groups. They then led the kids through several exercises that provided an opportunity for them to experience what it feels like when they are not listened to, interrupted, not heard, talked over, and in contrast, what it feels like when someone listens intently to them. They also experienced what it felt like to be the one who did not listen, interrupted, or talked over, and then intensely listened. There was active discussion during this exercise and many interesting aha's and shifts in thinking.

Jacob told the group that the exercise felt really familiar to him because the norm in his peer group is to interrupt one another. He also said that interrupting limits their ability to connect with one another and feel heard. He told us that he would not normally go to his group of friends for support or advice with a problem or situation because of their pattern of communication. Sydney shared her experience that not listening actively felt normal to her. She was surprised that not being listened to felt uncomfortable to others in the room because the norm in her family was to interrupt each other. Victor chimed in that he is often interrupted in his family, and this makes him feel like he could not share anything with them. He said he would not normally go to his mom with a problem for help. He would not feel that she was listening or hearing him.

During the active listening exercise, the energy changes in the room were palpable. At first when people were not being listened to the noise level was loud as people were trying harder to tell their story and to get their partner's attention. But then slowly the room became more silent, rather cold and uncomfortable. People slowly stopped sharing their stories and didn't know what to do. When people were interrupting or telling their stories at the same time, the noise in the room grew louder and louder as everyone struggled to be heard. When people were trying to actively listen to one another, and feeling listened to, they drew into each other, paying close attention. The room felt energized but also calm.

Go to >> http://vimeo.com/familiesthrive/listen to view a video of this exercise.

Now that we had learned and practiced several of the important skills of dialogue, we jumped into a practice Appreciative Inquiry dialogue with each other. In this dialogue the youth identified their strengths in a situation that was challenging where they were proud of how they handled it. Through this dialogue exercise we wanted to provide an opportunity to understand how to unearth strengths and narratives of positive possibilities.

I was excited and a little nervous. I had been training and holding dialogues with adults for years. This felt different. I felt a newness and a rawness in the room. I was not sure how the youth would engage in the dialogue. They had made it clear through their words and actions that trust was an important element to open up to each other and I wasn't sure if they had developed enough trust in each other or the adults yet. I was soon to find out.

The youth had some questions about terminology, so we spent some time talking about dialogue and Appreciative Inquiry. We then discussed the topic that would frame our story sharing. Mostly, I thought the learning would come from actually being in dialogue. They seemed ready to jump in. The youth divided into groups and we began the dialogues.

I regularly hear from adults that they often need time to think about a question or topic before they feel able to jump into sharing stories with each other. I thought we would begin the youth dialogue with a moment of personal reflection and journaling about the dialogue question. I designed this question to help identify strengths and skills in which youth could put into action through imagining the future with their "skills, knowledge and abilities as the foundation" (Denborough, 2008, p. 195).

Imagining Positive Possibilities

Often people in our lives are focused on "what's wrong", our weaknesses, problems, or what needs fixing.

We are going to switch this energy and look at what is right. In each of us there are many things that are right, strong, positive. We all have many strengths.

This dialogue is going to start with what is working well in our lives - our strengths and talents. We will work to recognize the best within ourselves and in others around us.

Step One - Journal

Think back to a moment in your life–a time that you were really feeling good about what you were doing or accomplishing. A time that you were at your best.

Write down the story.

- What was the situation?
- Who was there with you?
- What were you doing?

Write down three strengths you identified in your story.

As the youth started to write in their journals, several raised their hands and asked "What if I can't think of a story? What if I don't have a moment that I feel really good about what I was doing?" I encouraged them to write about anything, it could be big or it could be small, to simply pause for a moment and then just write what comes to their mind. There was a silence and a calmness in the room as people were pausing with reflection or furiously scribbling away.

When I noticed the kids were slowing down and finishing up their writing, I asked them to now share with a neighbor in their dialogue group a little about their story and share at least one of the strengths they identified.

> ***Step Two - Tell a Neighbor***
>
> Turn to your neighbor and share at least one of the strengths that you identified. Write it down and post them on the strengths wall.

As I walked around the room I noticed something I had not thought about, dialogue partners were reflecting back strengths to the storytellers. Some of the youth had a hard time identifying their strengths, but their partners were supporting them and helping them find words that worked for them. I heard things like, "How you solved that problem showed great courage." I noticed the storytellers nodding and asking for more feedback. The dialogue groups began to come together to share their stories and give each other feedback. A strengths-reflecting journey had begun. I travelled through the room, checking in on how the groups were doing. When I noticed they were nearing completion, I asked them to write their strengths on the paper on the wall.

Here is what they wrote:

Identifying possibilities

We started a discussion about the strengths that were written on the wall. We talked about what could be accomplished if these strengths were combined, or woven together.

> ***Step Three - Weaving together our strengths***
>
> Take a moment to look at the strengths on the wall. What does this say about the talent and strengths in this room?
>
> In a small group, explore if we were to weave all of these strengths together - what could you imagine accomplishing or doing together to make a difference in your community or school? Share with the large group.

The kids then brainstormed all sorts of great ideas of things they could do, or would want to contribute to their community. Ideas ranged from creating activities downtown for all ages to come together and revitalize what was once the heart of the community to addressing important issues in their community like gang violence. They discussed with great sensitivity issues like homelessness.

We took a moment to envision this possible future in the next step of the dialogue. We closed our eyes and imagined what Antioch would be like in 2015 if the youth were to put their ideas into place. They were invited to image Antioch as a community where young people are valued for these contributions and looked upon positively by other community members. I asked them to think about what three things had happened or would need to happen to help make their future vision a reality.

> ***Step Four - Imagining the Future***
>
> As a large group, let's look forward to the future. The year is 2015. Antioch is a community where young people are valued for their unique contributions to their families, neighborhoods, schools, workplaces and country. Youth are looked at positively in the community.
>
> Imagine three things that have happened to support this in the community.

Jacob raised his hand and said, "2015 is too soon." When I asked him to tell us more he replied, "We need help from others, adults in our community to achieve this vision. To do that, we need to change their perception of us." This started a new conversation than the one we had been having, focusing on how adults perceive youth, how critical support from adults in the community was to achieving their vision, and what they could do to begin changing the way that youth were viewed in their community.

I was struck in this moment, by what Jacob said and the wisdom in his statement. It shifted my thinking. I was "moved to notice a critical element that had not occurred to me". In fact in

retrospect, I think it may have shifted the entire group in a certain direction that had a major impact on their ongoing work together. In this transformational moment, there was a bridge to social action, to creating new forms of life, a new way of seeing, acting or approaching youth driven community change (Shotter, 2011).

Only through our connectedness to others can we really know and enhance the self. And only through working on the self can we begin to enhance our connectedness to others. - Harriet Goldhor Lerner

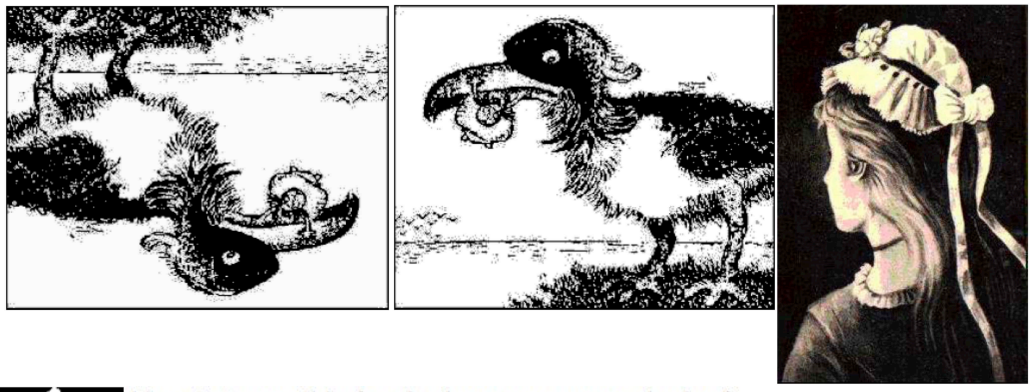
We spent the remaining part of the day talking about what we would be doing next as part of Choppin' it Up. The training on how to hold dialogues was in preparation for the youth holding dialogues about relationships and resilience. They had some important decisions to make about how they wanted to do this. Originally we had planned to have the Choppin' it Up youth engage their peers and hold dialogues within their schools. They discussed their options, should they hold dialogues in their schools? Invite other youth to participate in the dialogues? Or should they hold the dialogues on their own?

The youth felt strongly that they should continue to develop and fine-tune their skills for being in conversation with each other and hold the dialogues with each other before engaging more youth. This remained a consistent theme throughout their work together, with a commitment to strengthen and refine what they were learning to then take out to broader participation in the community.

Day Two May 16, 2011 - Engaging in Dialogue

The evening arrived for our dialogues. It was hard to believe the kids had mostly just met each other the week before. Training on foundational principles and skills not only provided a framework for youth to engage in and conduct Appreciative Inquiry dialogues, but also had drawn them closer to each other. To begin our dialogues, we did a warm up activity. One fundamental skill of dialogue is being able to see different perspectives. Much of the time we are clear about how we see the world but not so clear on how another person does, let alone the surrounding community. Not only that, but often one has to hold their own and others' multiple perspectives at the same time. Genuine dialogue among various voices reflects different perspectives as well as moments of connection and understanding.

In this training, we introduced a number of exercises that help people to see different perspectives. The first multiple perspective exercise presents images to look at and describe what they see. We asked: "In the following exercises what do you see?" The youth had fun considering what they saw when they looked at these images and were at times surprised by what others saw. Even when others might explain what they saw in the image, there were times it was challenging to shift our view to see something differently.



How is it possible for the horse to get to the hay?

Next, we did an exercise in which people thought about a conflict they had had recently with someone else or something they feel strongly about. I then asked them to turn to their neighbor and tell them all the reasons they thought they were right. After they finished their compelling arguments, I asked them to take a moment to think about the other side and this time tell their neighbor all the reasons the other person thinks they are right. When the energy abated in the room, I challenged them to think of yet another way of looking at the issue so as to not polarize their thinking but to create openings to see more than two perspectives.

I think we need to teach middle schoolers what we are learning. I would have really benefited from being able to see that there are multiple ways of seeing things and that it is OK to have different views and perspectives.- Choppin' it Up Youth

The youth divided into groups of four to hold their dialogues. Each dialogue was facilitated by an adult and was recorded. The purpose of the adult facilitators was to help hold the space and support youth to engage in dialogue using the skills that they had been learning. The groups began with a story circle process. Each person got a chance to share a story in response to the dialogue question with the freedom to pass if they preferred. They then opened into dialogue to reflect on what they heard from each other, build upon and make connections, and invite alternate viewpoints. In this process their goal was to search for and create understanding and meaning together. The dialogues focused on the impact of abuse in relationships, what positive relationships look like, and what contributes to resilience in the face of challenges.

Dialogue One: Chop it Up - How Does Abuse in Relationships Affect You?

Relationships can be full of challenges. What kind of challenges do you face in relationships? What impact does that have on you?

One particular challenge is abuse in relationships.

- We can witness abuse in relationships in many ways, in our homes, on the streets, in our schools, in the media and in our relationships with each other.
- How does abuse in relationships affect you?

Dialogue Two: Chop it Up - What Helps You to Survive and Thrive?

We all have good days and bad days and sometimes the bad days are really really hard.

Think of a time that has been really challenging and you got through it.

- What did you do to face the difficulty AT THAT TIME in your life?
- What ELSE, OR WHO ELSE helped you get through?
- How do you describe people who grow up well here in Antioch despite the many problems they might face?

Dialogue Three: Chop it Up - What Does A Positive Relationship Look Like to You?

Did you ever notice that some relationships we have with friends, our family, or teachers impact us in positive ways?

Describe a relationship you have had or seen that you have felt impacted you in positive ways.

- What did you do or say in your story of a positive relationship that made it positive?
- What did others do or say in your story of a positive relationship that made it positive?

Day Three Wednesday, May 18 - Identifying positive possibilities

Because our main project framing was around abuse in relationships and how to build healthy relationships, we thought it would be important to cover 1) what relationship abuse is, 2) the impact of norms that influence how we relate to one another, 3) how norms show up in the media, and 4) how to flip the script and provide alternative narratives to counter norms that promote violence.

First, we began talking about teen dating abuse and healthy relationships. Adolescence and the early adult years are also critical periods of transition. Adolescence offers a unique window of opportunity for prevention efforts to help teens become more aware of how violence in relationships can occur, the impact of relationship violence on our lives and to teach healthy ways of forming intimate relationships.

Before we began training, we made sure to have information on hand and online about teen dating abuse and resources for healthy relationships, including how to help a friend who is in an abusive relationship. Many times in these trainings, a light bulb will go off for people when they recognize some of the patterns either in their own or other people's relationships.

To begin the training, I provided more context about relationship abuse, a working definition and what it might look like in teen dating relationships. I shared the importance of their voices in informing the countywide initiative as we worked to keep their experience and wisdom central in our planning.

An adapted version of the power and control wheel for teen relationships was useful to explore how different behaviors show up in relationships and how youth feel about them. The power and control wheel was developed from the experience of women who had been abused by their partners. The wheel is often used as an educational tool that documents the most common behaviors or tactics in abusive relationships. It is called the power and control wheel to represent the patterns or actions that someone uses to control or dominate their intimate partner, like threat, intimidation, and coercion. The different types of potential behaviors are the spokes of the wheel (Duluth Model 2012). It has been adapted to address teen dating abuse, because while there are many dynamics of power and control that are similar, there are important differences as well.

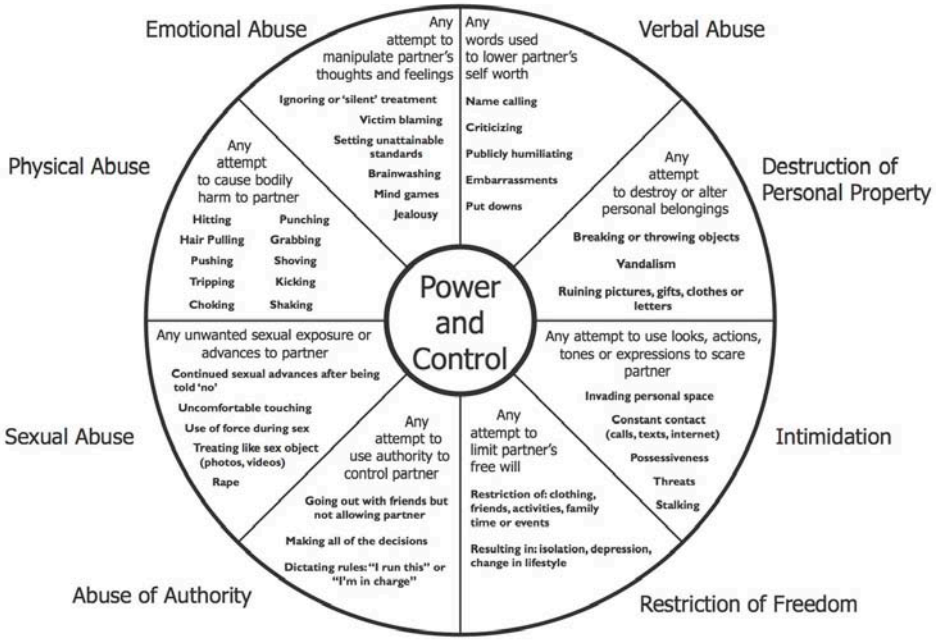


Figure 10: Teen Power and Control Wheel (www.teensagainstabuse.org)

We also viewed a video by www.thatsnotcool.org that demonstrates different kinds of potentially abusive behavior including digital dating abuse such as constant texting, pressure to send nude pictures, and social network spying or hacking. We talked about these behaviors as being a repeated pattern of using power and control over another person.

That's Not Cool - http://youtu.be/GpeLgLL8Umc

Bringing it home, we discussed how they see these behaviors in their or their friends' relationships. Several of the youth asked what they could do if they were worried about a friend who might be experiencing dating abuse. We talked about what 'research' tells us is helpful and discussed their response.

We then discussed the role of media and social norms that promote abuse and violence in relationships. The purpose of the media literacy training were two fold:

1. To examine how relationships and violence are portrayed and supported through media, including images and language. In particular we examined five social norms - violence, traditional masculinity, limited roles for women, power and privacy.

2. To raise awareness about the messages we receive through media and become critical consumers and producers of media to advocate for change.

To begin the training, we first discussed how norms sanction behavior in our society and are often taken for granted, and are based in culture and tradition. Thus norms are more than a habit, they in effect tell people what is OK or not OK to do–they are behavior shapers. Norms also influence our attitudes, beliefs, and ways of being (Cohen, Chávez, & Chehimi, 2007, p. 22). In our workshop, we talked about how we change or replace harmful norms with norms that promote respect and equality in relationships. Michael White talks about these norms or 'truth claims' as techniques of power and constructions of identity that are sponsored by the discourses of men's culture and are given an objective reality status that are considered to be universal (White & Denborough, 2011. p. 99). The first step we took was to deconstruct the norms that are represented in media and in our culture that promote relationship violence (Fujie Parks, Cohen, & Kravitz-Wirtz, 2007, p. 4).

1. **Traditional masculinity** - Traditional gender roles of men in society, including those that promote domination, control and dangerous risk-taking behavior;

2. **Limited roles for women** - Traditional gender roles of women in society, including those that promote objectification and oppression of women and girls;

3. **Power** - Power, where value is placed on claiming and maintaining control over others;

4. **Violence** - Violence, where aggression is tolerated and blame is attributed to victims; and

5. **Privacy** - Privacy, where norms associated with individual and family privacy are considered so sacrosanct that secrecy and silence is fostered and those who witness violence are discouraged from intervening.

By examining the dominant discourse, or cultural norms and notions around traditional masculinity, we can look at the most practiced ways of being a man or telling boys how to be a man that promote violence in our relationships. We can also identify how these norms and messages of what it means to be a man are represented in our families, communities, schools, society, and in the media. These norms and messages about ways of being, are "communicated through traditions, patterns, values, behaviors and culture, and can be named, described, pulled apart, or built upon" (Sax, n.d.).

The youth could then choose whether they wanted to incorporate, reject or develop alternatives in their own life. Possibilities and alternatives began to emerge as youth worked on reconstructing norms around strength that provided more positive alternative ways of being, based upon their own experiences and strengths. They found points of intervention in the traditional story where they could challenge, change or insert a new story - or flip the script for social change. In the rebuilding, these alternatives built hope and joint action (Sax, n.d.).

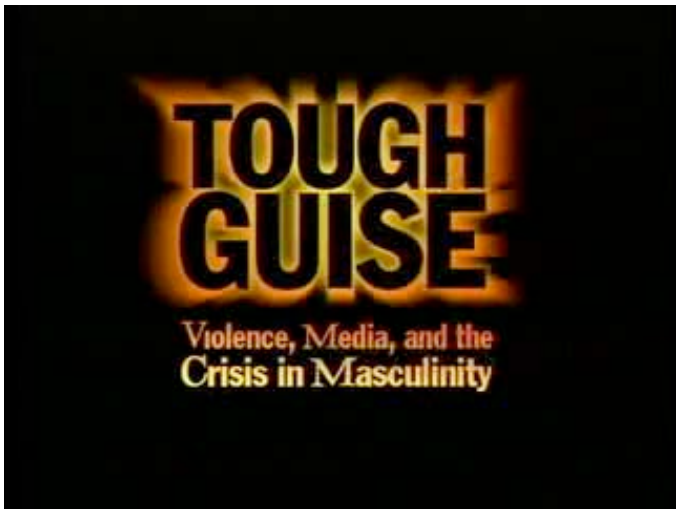
Watching media is a good way to refer to our experiences of the world and what we witness to identify and deconstruct norms. It also highlights for us the subtle messaging we are exposed to every day in common media examples. I struggled with the implications of how much violent media to show to demonstrate this principle. On one hand, the kids were already bombarded with violent images and exposed to media on a daily basis. On the other hand, why would I choose to expose them to more violence and potentially traumatic material? In particular, I previewed a media montage developed by the Youth Relationships Project in Ontario, Canada. While the video provided useful images of the amount and type of violence and sexualizing of girls and women our children and youth are exposed to daily in their lives, I did not want to contribute to further traumatic and inappropriate sexual exposure.

Media Montage - http://www.communitystrengths.org/resources/MediaMontage.mov)

I chose to show two videos. "I am Man" is a commercial produced by Burger King that communicates messages of traditional masculinity and limited roles for women (I am man - Burger King, n.d.).

I am Man - http://youtu.be/vGLHlvb8skQ

In addition, I showed "Tough Guise: Violence, Media and the Crisis of Masculinity" with Jackson Katz (2006). Tough Guise is a video that examines the relationship between pop-culture and the social construction of masculine identities.



Tough guise: Violence, media & the crisis in masculinity -

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3exzMPT4nGI&feature=youtu.be

> All of this is going to take a lot of work. And it is not going to happen with just individual boys and men being more reflective about their choices. It is going to have to happen at both a personal and an institutional level. Everyone has a role to play here, and not just men. While girls and women

> are not responsible for men's violence, they too have an important role to play because the 'tough guise' is attractive to men in part because they see many girls and women validating it. Girls and women have to show they are looking for more in men than bad boy posturing and in particular that they value men who reject the 'tough guise'. We also have to work to change the institutions that create our present choices. For example, we need to break the monopoly of the media system that we have been looking at, where mostly rich, white men dictate to society the kinds of images and stories of manhood that surround us. Many men today are searching for new healthier, self-respecting ways of being men in a rapidly changing world. We need to hear their stories too and learn from them. In different ways, all of us have to struggle for real cultural and structural changes in this society if we want our sons and their sons to have a chance of being better men. (Katz, 2006)

Following viewing the videos about traditional masculinity we discussed the norms that youth see in their schools, community, and in the media that promote violence. Dave Room, a community-centered media advisor who is leading efforts to use media for social change and political advocacy, led the youth in a discussion to flip the script on norms and narratives that promote violence in relationships. Dave set the stage for how norms in media form a dominant narrative of power and how to break down stories as youth listen to them. He urged them to find points of intervention, reinforcing how to critically analyze and then to take action in a powerful way.

In this portion of the training, youth worked to deconstruct narratives and re-imagine and build new generative narratives. They traveled a path that went from viewing youth as the problem (dominant narrative) to viewing authority as the problem (subordinate narrative) to new narratives that don't polarize or scapegoat anyone and offer opportunities for co-construction of other possibilities. The training provided a foundation for the stories the youth would develop that present an alternative view to dominant narratives they chose to address (e.g., violence is the answer, norms about what it is to be a man, youth are the problem) and then supported a constructive and generative dialogue with the community about concrete opportunities and solutions.

A particular story in our discussion affected me deeply. Victor, one of the Choppin' it Up youth, approached me and shared his reactions: "*After we watched those videos about men and violence, I felt really bad about being a man.*"

Recent scholarship on identity regularly champions the fluid nature of identity affiliations and calls for research that reveals multiple versions on masculinity, but there are not many answers to these calls–especially regarding young boys of color (Hull, Kenney, Marple, & Forsman-Schneider, 2006).

I was struck by Victor's statement. It was not my intention for these young men to identify with the identities created by the discourse of men's culture (White & Denborough, 2011, p. 99). I felt my heart break. Unintentionally, I had supported a message about who these young men were and what they represented by being men. I asked Victor if there were examples of men in his life who represented other ways of being a man that didn't promote violence. He replied that he couldn't think of any. Then I asked if he could see within the group or within himself alternative ways of being a man. He replied, "No, I see myself the way the media presents us." This broke my heart even further, because you see, that is not how I saw Victor at all. I saw a beautiful, young man who always showed up with a positive attitude, supported his peers, and was caring and loving. He demonstrated this in many ways, on a daily basis. So, I had an idea. I asked the girls to help me and share the positive qualities they saw in the guys that didn't promote violence, but rather provided an alternative story around strength. The girls had no problem at all, surprising themselves with how many positive qualities the guys demonstrated every day. They had rich examples and stories to back the qualities up. I took the qualities and made a video to surprise the guys. It was important to me to provide an alternative script or strengths narrative in what I and others saw in the young men.

Reflections on Strength - (http://vimeo.com/familiesthrive/reflectionsonstrength)

I wish I had read Michael White's approach for working with men who have perpetrated violence against women before this exercise. I would have stressed that what I was presenting was not a "totalizing assumption" or "truth-claim" about men. Michael White shares two assumptions that support this non-totalizing view: 1) men who perpetrate violence are not the originators of the techniques of power they employ and 2) men are not the authors of the constructions of identities that are associated with acts of abuse and violence (White & Denborough, 2011, p. 99).

Day Four Friday May 20 - Data analysis and theme teams

The qualitative data methodology continued to privilege youth voice and incorporated a basis for the ongoing development of shared meaning. Interpretive theory calls for the imaginative understanding of the studied phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006, p. 125). What the project sponsor, Families Thrive, sought to understand better in the dialogues with youth was their experiences of abuse in relationships, the impact of abuse in relationships, how they survive and thrive through

the challenges in their lives, and what they think positive relationships look like. In the process of the dialogues with these key questions, the young people were supported to share their experiences with each other and to explore what emerged in their discussions. Through the data analysis and interpretation, the project team aimed not to explain reality, but acknowledged subjectivity in the analysis and placed emphasis on ongoing dialogue to increase our understanding of key themes that emerged through continued storytelling and interpretation on the part of the youth. The process we chose for initial data analysis relied heavily on a "striking moment" methodology by paying attention to those moments that seem important and when we are were "struck by something, when we imagined something not previously imagined, when our view shifts and we see things anew" (Katz & Shotter, 1999, Shotter, 2011). We also explored other data analysis methods including coding the dialogue data. While subsequent data analysis may be useful for unearthing other key themes and data, for the purposes of this project, we prioritized participatory methods that led to action and emphasized the social processes in how we construct and act on our imagined interpretations and multiple realities (Charmaz, 2006, p 126-127). Of upmost importance was paying attention to the social dynamics of research and to find more innovative methods for doing social and participatory action research in ways that avoided the social organization of research and resulting hierarchies, privileging of adult voice and inequities that often embedded in traditional research processes (Best, 2007, p. 27).

The following description summarizes the data analysis process that led to data elements for the youth to engage in with in further dialogue, interpretation and meaning making. On Tuesday and Wednesday (May 17-18), the dialogues were transcribed as a tool to facilitate data analysis. On Thursday (May 19), four UC Berkeley graduate students from the School of Social Welfare prepared the data for the youth to analyze. In teams of two, the graduate students reviewed each transcript to identify striking moments. The graduate students highlighted the sentences and wrote them word-for-word on index cards. The teams discussed what struck them and why, noting these reasons in the margin of the transcript. When each pair of graduate students had finished reviewing their transcripts, they switched with the other pair, to provide a second review. The data was now ready for the youth to work with.

On, Friday May 20, the youth analyzed the striking moments identified by the graduate students from their dialogues. I arrived with a pile of index cards that I shuffled and distributed to the youth. Each person had their own stack of index cards. They formed groups and individually read each card and wrote a key word or phrase about what this card meant to them. When they finished their stack of cards, they traded with another person in their group and then discussed the cards as a group.

Groups began noticing connections between cards and natural groupings. As a large group, they shared the main themes that emerged. They also talked about what was missing. We then spread the cards, some in groupings and some on their own, meaning side upon the floor. The kids continued to organize cards into four main groups or analytical categories, placing primary theme cards above subordinate or supporting cards. They reviewed the cards in their grouping to

develop what they thought was an overarching theme. Once they were finished we discussed what these four groups meant to them and why they had organized the cards in this way.

I asked them to take a moment to walk around the cards, pausing and reflecting on the main theme groupings and to notice what resonated for them. When I noticed them slowing down, I asked them to sit where they felt the most energy. This began the formation of theme teams. Several of the youth were torn between themes so they chose multiple groups. The groups then spent time discussing their themes and what it meant to them, and worked together to develop a 'name' for their theme.

These are the four main themes:

I. Appreciating Differences
II. "Real" Strength
III. Misrepresentation of Youth
IV. Abuse in Relationships and Resilience

The youth worked in these theme teams for the next week to further develop their understanding of what these themes meant to them, examined their personal experiences around these stories and developed media to share what was important to them around these key themes.

As you read the youths' stories in Chapter Seven and watch their videos, their voices will create a collective narrative that represents the four main themes. I have made a decision based upon the principal of privileging youth voice to not represent my own interpretation.

Days five through nine Monday May 23 - Friday May 27 – Developing stories and media

The kids began to develop new rituals together and were getting used to being active co-constructors of how we spent our time. Play helped us to experiment and perform a way of becoming in the world. Lois Holzman believes social activities move us from a study of what is to a study of what is becoming (Holzman, 2009). I would add another element of "what we are producing or creating". Each day, a different person would lead a check in to share how they were feeling that day. Seed Lynn, a Center for Digital Storytelling adult facilitator started to introduce group activities to get us working together and have some fun. He introduced us to activities such as Big Booty:

Everyone in the group gets a number. The leader starts out by making a step/clap rhythm The leader starts by saying "Big Booty Big Booty Big Booty, oh yeah, big booty." Then the leader…the "Big Booty" calls to someone in the circle...number 4 for instance by saying "Big booty number 4" then number 4 says "number 4, number __" then that person goes. If you mess up, you go to the end, and everyone's number shifts up one.

Every day I provided food that the kids decided upon. At the end of our daily work, someone would lead a closing to share something they learned or that impacted them that day. These rituals and performances became an important part of our time together.

The next focus of the program was to create compelling stories and powerful messages around the key themes through the use of media, including written and spoken word, digital stories, and live performances to build bridges for social action - new ways of seeing, acting, or approaching changes in our community. The theme teams met with adult advisors to discuss their media options and to develop plans for their work the following week. Adult advisors brought specific skills to the teams including live performance, storytelling, and script/media development.

The entire next week, Monday May 23 - Friday May 27, the youth built upon the main themes with their personal stories and experiences. This week focused on how we perform or create our stories. First, they started exploring their own connections to the theme they were drawn to in a writer's workshop. Rob Kershaw from the Center for Digital Storytelling facilitated a workshop where each of the youth wrote an insight story about a significant experience in which people or events impacted their life. They were instructed to not only write about the event, but about their feelings about the event. The youth then traded stories with each other. Each person read silently, with great sensitivity and caring, the story of the other person. Then they performed the person's story to share it with others. It was a powerful moment in their work together, seeing and being seen through the lens of personal experience and creative expression. Through these performances the youth created a relationally reflexive space, reflecting back to one another what they read in each others stories. By being other than oneself they also created a source of development for themselves and each other (Holzman, 2009; Shotter 2005, Bakhtin 1993)

I loved the day we wrote down stories and other people performed them. That connects with what Jordan said about teachers being courageous. Really seeing people. -Choppin' it Up Youth

The youth then worked with their adult advisors to flesh out their stories and find the main points along with the intersections and connections between each of their stories. We also explored the possibilities for using their stories to flip the script or provide an alternative narrative to dominant narratives they identified as limiting. They began the process of becoming authors of their stories - making an authorial move to events and experiences in their lives. As the youth were developing their stories, they were also developing their narrative voice. Importantly, they also began to explore the implications for their developing messages, what was the positive

change they would like to see from their stories, and how did they see themselves contributing to this change? This began the shaping of their media. Would their message be heard best as individual stories or a narrative strung together. Should they use video or still images? As the youth began to construct their stories in various forms, the messages became clearer and the stories began to take on their own lives. They were creating something new in this space together.

> **When two or more such forms of life 'rub together', so to speak, in their meetings, they always create a third or a collective form of life (a) in which they all sense themselves participating, and (b) that has a life of its own, with its own 'voice' and 'callings', and its own way of 'pointing' towards the future (Shotter, 2011, p. 124).**

Under Anne Galjour's direction, the youth developed performance skills, practicing spontaneous and dynamic body movement and use of voice. Within these activities, the youth learned improvisational skills that brought to life the retelling of their stories as a performance.

> **Postmodernism would view performance more along the lines of improvisation that we have certain resources which we can use to create a spontaneous act in response to invitations we receive in interactions with others. Improvising is being able to act and respond to change in ways that creates the next conversational and relational turn (Bava, 2012, p. 1).**

Throughout the week, the youth began to collect images and take photographs and videos for their digital media. They also began practicing their scripts and performances. Rob from Center for Digital Storytelling recommended the youth find images from their work together and to reflect on what images the script is calling for. They then recorded the scripts they had developed from their stories and work together over the course of the week. Each person found a quiet place and recorded as many versions as they needed in order to have a full working narrative.

Rob Kershaw's talent was ever present in our work with the youth. The icing on the cake was the Center for Digital Storytelling team's production of the digital stories with the youth. They applied their keen sense of storytelling along with their skillfulness in digital media production to their caring for the youth and their stories. The results were moving–the music perfectly chosen, the positioning of the images with the narrative thoughtfully handled, and the pace and transitions cleverly done. The youth and their adult advisors had created masterpieces.

In addition to the digital stories, the Abuse in Relationships and Resilience Theme Team developed a performance with Anne Galjour. Their performance spoke of abuse in relationships and other adverse experiences in their lives. They started the performance with the question: "What if?" They then explored their experiences and what got them through the hard times.

The first time the youth did a dry rehearsal for their community event and ran through all of their stories, performing them for each other, I was speechless. Twenty pairs of eager eyes, looked at me expectantly, searching for feedback. My throat closed up and tears began to run down my face. I was moved and deeply touched. Each one of these youth is a gift. My life has been changed forever.

Day Ten Tuesday May 31, 2011 - Choppin' it Up Community Event

The *Choppin' it Up* youth hosted a community event on May 31, 2011 in an effort to engage and mobilize support and action for positive change. This event expanded the domain of conversation to others who are touched by the challenges and opportunities surrounding them and their communities, including parents, teachers, community members, policy makers and the media. Refusing to accept the violence experienced by many youth in Antioch, *Choppin' it Up* teens invited the community to come together to talk about the impact of violence, and to create positive visions for change. The youth presented live performances and digital stories. They then led the audience in discussing what the community can do together to build on existing strengths and imagine positive possibilities for Antioch.

Performance is one way to understand our everyday lives and activities (Bava, 2011-2012).

As we engage in our daily activities, we can think about how we are performing and what we are creating. We might think of performance as meaning making or that we are performing our relationships. Saliha Bava asks, "Do we see performance as metaphor or do we see all as performance?" How do we use this word? What are the possibilities that are limiting or are created with the ways that we think and talk about performance?

Knowledge and understanding are not in the person but in the performance (Raskin, ed., 2004, pp. 37-50).

There were many ways the youth participated in acts of performance. The rituals, metaphors, and play that we engaged in became embedded in our interactions and ways of being. The moment had come for the youth to share their stories. They wanted to share them publicly to create positive change–to inspire others and to spark action. Supporting voice in the construction of our stories supports agentive action that grows from the telling.

As we perform our roles in society, we add our voices to how our community describes us and others (Ungar, 2006, p. 6).

Throughout the performances, youth involved participants to expand voices in the dialogue. They invited other voices, their interpretation in the social construction of meaning and shared understanding. For example, after one of the performances, "What is Your Strength?" youth

requested the audience write on their white t-shirts the qualities that community members had that represented strength. They then summarized back to the participants the collective strengths that were reflected on their t-shirts.

Many cultures have rituals around the movement from childhood or adolescence to adulthood, marking within the community a change in role, how these people are seen. This community event reinforced the importance of ritual and the recognition of youth as celebrated members of their communities (Buckley & Decter, 2006, p. 9). Victor Turner (1982) talks about rights of passage as a performance of ritual as "distinct phases in social processes" that accompany an individuals, groups, or community's movement or change in social status. He shares "from this standpoint the ritual symbol becomes a factor in social action, a positive force" (p. 24).

> Human history is rich with accounts of rituals and rites of passage. Times of transition – including birth, coming-of-age, marriage and death – provoke heightened individual and community emotions and instability. So, humans have traditionally created and used rituals to acknowledge and celebrate these times of change – to help us grow as individuals and to strengthen the bonds of community (Blumenkrantz, n.d.).

David G. Blumenkrantz from the The Center for the Advancement of Youth, Family & Community Services proposes questions we can ask to test whether an event was a rite of passage (Blumenkrantz, 2012):

- What did you learn from it? How can you put what you have learned in service to yourself and the highest good of others, the community and nature?
- What is different now that was not different before? How has your relationship with the community changed as a result of the experience? Has the community witnessed, affirmed and celebrated the experience?

Blumenkrantz and Goldstein (2010, p. 44-45) provide twenty elements that contribute to an effective, contemporary community-based rite of passage that represent adolescent development in an ecological manner, connected to a broader community development process.

The youth followed the performances with a community dialogue they facilitated about what the community could do to build on its existing strengths and to imagine positive possibilities for Antioch, performing their roles as leaders in positive community change. The dialogue engaged participants strengths and imagination in envisioning a better Antioch, and also acknowledged and affirmed the important role of youth as social change agents.

Thriving occurs as a result of aligning individual strengths, the talents, energies, constructive interests or sparks that every young person possesses within a community's external or

ecological assets which are conceived as environmental, contextual, and relational features of socializing systems (Lerner et al., 2001, p 44).

Inviting more people into their dialogue helped the community explore and challenge deficit narratives and present opportunities for a shift in conversations that allows for more constructive and positive possibilities for youth, schools, and communities. The dialogue served to dissolve the boundaries between the youth, their families, and community members. Upon reflection this symbolized an integration, a coming together of adults and youth in partnership around the stories of their strengths and their positive visions for the community.

Public ceremonies and events that engage more voices in the witnessing of the youth's stories provides opportunities to engage other community members into conversations about the following (White, 2007, p. 178):

- The expressions of the telling people were drawn to,
- the images that these expressions evoked,
- the personal experiences that resonated with these expressions, and
- your sense of how your lives have been touched by these expressions.

The community dialogue engaged participants' strengths and imagination in envisioning a better Antioch, and also acknowledged and affirmed the important role of youth as leaders and social change agents. We will continue to identify and develop these public ceremonies in Antioch, throughout the county, and beyond. We will broaden the voices involved and the witnessing of the youth stories by inviting people to participate in online conversations. For example, Vicky Lugo and I presented the youth's stories at a workshop at the Enriching Collaborative Practices Across Cultural Borders conference in Merida, Yucatán. In the workshop design, we asked participants to reflect in dialogue with each other, what impacted them? What moved them? Their responses will be posted on the website www.choppinitup.org, expanding the witnessing and affirmation of the strengths, hopes, and preferred identities of the youth.

The responses of the audience and others have been as Michael White wrote "clearly influential in acknowledging the preferred developments in the youth's lives, in contributing to the endurance of these developments, and in extending them." In addition, Michael White proposed that events like this can serve as "definitional ceremonies" providing a context for rich story development and providing a ritual that acknowledges people's lives and affirms their chosen stories (White, 2007, p. 178). Michael Ungar encourages young people to perform their new or chosen identities (Ungar, 2005). He suggests for their identity stories to take hold, they must perform them. When we "enact" our identities in front of others, our personal and collective identity stories come to be invested with power. Our hopes are to continue to enrich the story development of these youth's lives, and support their development as social change actors in their communities.

My best memory is the community event that we held. Everyone's performance, everyone's sharing, everyone's energy, everyone's love for one another … on that day, we became family. - Choppin' it Up Youth

The Choppin' it Up youth developed messages of positive social action through their stories. Their stories are included in Chapter 7 and throughout this dissertation. You can also view them on www.choppinitup.org.

Conclusion

The youth shared the importance of relational connection in their storytelling and work together.

- Appreciating learning that others have similar experiences.
- Realizing they have more similarities than is apparent on the surface.
- Appreciating being able to talk to each other about challenges they face. Not feeling so alone in challenges and experiences.
- Developing a sense of unity, connection and family with each other.
- Growing trust to be able to open up and share.
- Identifying the experiences in family as important and shaping who we are and having a space to share these stories of family experiences.

The youth have continued their commitment to their leadership development and ability to create the positive change in their community that they have envisioned. After the first month of training, the youth completed a forty-hour mediation training and a 16 week leadership program. They are also taking leadership in a countywide adult/youth partnership to address teen dating abuse. Through Choppin' it Up, we see the power of youth to effect social change that addresses issues across ages and across cultures. The adult allies are also learning with youth what it takes to support and sustain positive action.

This remarkable group of youth in Antioch, CA have shown us how they can be active social change agents in our communities and they have identified what they need to help support them in this role. As they develop their role as social change agents, we see new ways of understanding and seeing each other, and how shared knowing or meaning carries a number of possible actions or responses. In other words, understanding, knowledge, and social action go together (Gergen, 2009).

CHAPTER SEVEN: YOUTH VOICES AND STORIES

"Marking a new path"

This chapter provides an introduction to the youth that participated in Choppin' it Up, the context of their lives, and the stories they created through this project. You will hear their wisdom in their voices and their stories. The narratives that the youth created highlight their lived experiences, their strengths, their hopes, and their dreams. *Be prepared: These are stories of transformation–in ourselves, our relationships, and our communities.*

There is a place where the sidewalk ends
And before the street begins,
And there the grass grows soft and white,
And there the sun burns crimson bright,
And there the moon-bird rests from his flight

To cool in the peppermint wind.
Let us leave this place where the smoke blows black
And the dark street winds and bends.
Past the pits where the asphalt flowers grow
We shall walk with a walk that is measured and slow,
And watch where the chalk-white arrows go
To the place where the sidewalk ends.

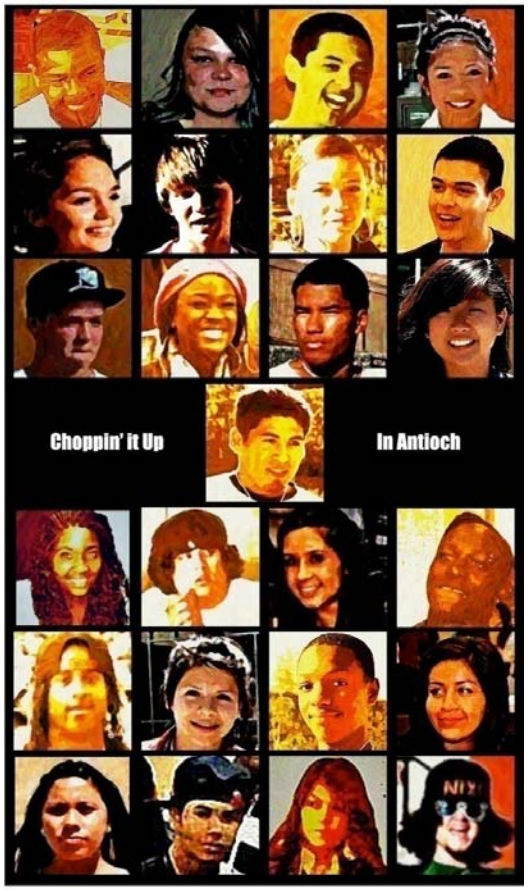
Yes we'll walk with a walk that is measured and slow,
And we'll go where the chalk-white arrows go,
For the children, they mark, and the children, they know
The place where the sidewalk ends. Shel Silverstein (2002)

Context of the lives of youth in Antioch, CA

In 2007-2011, Antioch saw an increase in anti-social behavior among youth and a marked trend towards full-blown violent crime. There was a 31% spike in violent crime by and against youth. Gang activity increased at an alarming rate. In 2005, the Antioch Police Department (APD) recorded 161 gang-related calls for service; that number rose to 207 in 2006, and in 2007 APD recorded 266 gang-related calls for service–an increase of 65% in just two years ("The Youth Intervention Network story," 2009, p. 5).

When the Antioch Chief of Police, Jim Hyde, reflected on the growing community violence, especially violence that included the community's youth, he turned to a brilliant and compassionate woman, Iris Archuleta, and said "what are we going to do to address this issue?" In response, Iris and Chief Hyde began to mark a new path for the youth of Antioch. They first created a strong collaborative of stakeholders called the Youth Intervention Network, (YIN) that

works to build and support a robust coalition of service providers, government agencies, community organizations, faith-based organizations, and community members to work together to serve the youth identified as likely to commit or become victims of violent crimes. This path built a strong foundation in Antioch, upon which Choppin' it Up was integrated. Choppin' it Up extended this coalition to include youth as active partners and leaders in their efforts.



Marking a new path

The Choppin' it Up youth have marked with chalk-white arrows this path for us to go, for indeed they know, where the sidewalk ends, before the street begins. In this place that Shel Silverstein has painted such a lovely vision and alternative, lies a promise of peace. The youth from Choppin' it Up have also painted a lovely vision and alternative for us to consider. Let us listen to their stories, and go where the chalk-white arrows go.

As you read these stories, you are invited to go to www.choppinitup.org, view the videos, and participate in discussion. We invite you to continue to develop these rich stories through "engaging one another in conversations about the expressions of the telling you were drawn to, about the images that these expressions evoked, about the personal experiences that resonated with these expressions, and about your sense of how your lives have been touched by these expressions" (White, 2007, p. 165).

When you view these stories, please consider the following questions:

- What were you drawn to?
- What images came to mind as you listened to the stories?
- What personal experiences have you had that were similar?
- How has your life been changed or touched by watching this video?

Theme I - Appreciating Differences

Heart

I walk down the street, what do I see? Everybody is looking at me.

Am I really that different? Whatever happened to we? We the people, we the united, we of all humanity.

I hear everybody saying normal is what you got to be to fit in with this world. What about people like me? Where do I belong? Where do I stand?

Every day, every hour, I hear it - I am a messed up freek that nobody wants. Nobody sees it, but there is pain in my eyes, pain in my heart.

Every night, I look up to the sky and I pray to God. I ask him, "Is there really such a thing as normal?" Just because I was born with one less thing, does that make me that much different from you?

I may not have working thumbs, and I might have been born with a hole in my heart, but don't tell me that I don't have a heart. I'm no longer going to let other people create my story. It's mine to tell.

I am unique. And I am beautiful. - Rosie

http://vimeo.com/familiesthrive/heart

I am Change

I am Latina, I want to see change.

Once when my cousin came to visit us from Santa Barbara, she told me an inspiring story. She told me about going to Arizona to march in protest against SB 1070. Her and I both agree that the law doesn't accept us for who we really are. My cousin works hard in college, she has to if she wants to success. Yet she knows her dreams can be taken away.

Her experience and her story has changed me, it has inspired me. Right now I am a junior at Deer Valley High, but one day I want to have a college degree and be a midwife. This is really important to me, it is my dream.

I am Latina. A strong, committed young Mexican woman.

I AM Change. - Maricarmen

http://vimeo.com/familiesthrive/change

I am Equality, Empowerment and Peace

My moms crying. Here oldest son is being handcuffed. We looked at each other and then I am led away.

I was locked up for three days and then 5 months of house arrest wearing an ankle monitor.

In those first 3 days I knew I needed to change my life, inside and out, how I saw myself, and how others saw me. I began to learn acceptance, to accept the fact that I have no control over the way people view me, but it was a challenge I had to overcome. Some thought I was nothing more than a troublemaker. I even heard from someone in a school meeting that I was

being labeled as a terrorist. I couldn't believe it. I wasn't a terrorist. This is when my spiritual life began. Slowly over time, I learned commitment, acceptance, and separation. Separation from my friends who weren't making the choices I was now committed to making. I stayed committed to my schoolwork in order to graduate on time. Credits were a big problem; I was almost 130 credits behind. But I did it!

I am equality, empowerment, and peace. - Jordan

http://vimeo.com/familiesthrive/empowerment

Accepting Difference - But Only if it Stands for Equality

The moment I realized I was going to have many obstacles to get where I wanted to get and be who I wanted to be, was also the moment I realized I wanted to be someone. To be remembered. If I was going to become someone, I had to overcome whatever was thrown at me. Society is going to label me, tell me where I am going to get, but I will continue forward. I will come out of the labels of society. I accept difference, but only if it stands for equality. - Mary

http://vimeo.com/familiesthrive/equality

Theme II - "Real" Strength

What is your "Real" Strength?

Earlier in my life, I was in a very weak state. I couldn't handle any kind of pressure, could be persuaded really easily and always closed up. The way I was raised and the things I have witnessed have made me become very antisocial. I begun hanging out with guys that I thought could help me and make me tough. I began getting in all sorts of trouble. As things between me and my friends got more serious, I realized what I was becoming.

"Being Known for Fighting, Killing, Physical Strength"

Although thugs are different, they taught me a lot. They gave me confidence, strength and the rules of survival. They taught me how life was in the streets.

One thing I always noticed about myself, is the reason I didn't fit in with thugs, was because I had too much intelligence. They couldn't comprehend how I looked at things.

A few years later I decided to make a change and stop hanging out with them. I learned one thing you can always work on is yourself.

"Having Faith, Being the Change, Headstrong, Peace"

I have never had to wear a rest in peace shirt, for that I am thankful. When I hear gunshots and sirens, I know my own are safe.

My cousins I have known since their birth, I fear are choosing the wrong path. No matter what I say or do, it is too late to change their mind.

"Showing No Emotion, No Self Control"

I feel harm is in my family's future. I feel the next time I hear guns or sirens; I will be the next one wearing a rest in peace shirt.

"Wisdom, Supporting Yourself and Others"

She was in and out of my life, my mom. My birth mom. If I counted the actual time I spent with her it would be 846 hours. During one of those hours, maybe around the 600s or the 700s, her and I had an argument. She was getting at me, trying to step in and do the 'mom thing'.

"Putting Food on the Table, Protecting the Ones you Care About"

Me being the little, sassy girl I grew to be, I wasn't having it.

"Being Tough, Mothers Being the Backbone of the Family"

One, I felt it wasn't her place to say anything. She lost her rite in my eyes. And two it didn't seem real. Of course, I respected her and tried to stay in my place. But through the argument, I didn't feel the sincerity nor love.

"Being Heard, Muscles"

I had cried all my life over the 'mom thing', making my little heart hurt, wondering why she didn't want us. I thought in order to have a successful life, I needed my mom. That day, I realized I didn't need her, or anyone else to be who I wanted to be.

"Survival, Respect, Emotion, Mentally and Emotionally Strong, Strength in Oneself"

So there once was a time in my life, I felt lost. Like I didn't know who I was or why I was here. I felt like my life had no meaning or no purpose. I would have thoughts like, if I died who would miss me? I guess I had these thoughts because I was never really good at anything, so I could never really find my passion.

"Not Showing Your Feelings"

Sometimes it would get so bad as to where I would sit in a dark room and wonder who I was. I felt so empty and alone. I would hate the nights when I felt like that.

So I started searching for my thing. The thing I was good at, no-one could tell me I wasn't. And then I stumbled across art. Ever since that fateful day I chose to make my own purpose, my own path and my own identify.

"Reaching Limits, Going Beyond Them, Patience"

Heading towards 8th grade, my life was heading towards a gang lifestyle. Having a friend already die through gang violence, I believed that this was the lifestyle I wanted to follow. Once I reached 8th grade, my sister, someone very close to me, pulled me aside and told me straight up that I was making a mistake and that I was heading towards the wrong path. From there, she opened my eyes to look at the world of how it is and how it used to be.

"Intimidation, Bullys"

From this knowledge, I was beginning to realize that there was more to life than I once thought.

"Fighting with Words Instead of Physically, Being Positive on Negative Emotions"

Also my new discovery for the love of art, it has helped me to express myself, to put it down on paper, or have the whole community look at my work. With this motivation, it has helped me get ready to go to college and make my family proud.

I used to always ask for advice, now even my parents come to me for advice.

I do appreciate my loved ones, the ones who helped me be the strong young lady I am today.

"Knowledge, Wisdom, Strength in One-Self"

I now have a large role of responsibility.

From here I began to gain motivation, to pursue the achievement I once set.

I am looked upon as strong, wise, and mature.

I found myself that day.

This is my strength.

What is your REAL STRENGTH? - - Rodney, Jacob, Crystal, Victor, Gerardo

Real Strength - http://vimeo.com/familiesthrive/strength

Theme III - Misrepresentation of Youth

Checking our Assumptions. At the Door

One day after school my friend and I decided to walk home. As we reached the corner of the school, we realized that our campus resource officer was following us. He looked us straight in the eye and flashed the middle finger at us. Angered by what he just did. I decided to keep my cool and continue walking. Minutes later I realized he continued following me and he did so the whole way home. I started to question why he would possibly follow me, then it came to me. I am a young Latin male, I was wearing a solid black t and some dickies. I am guessing he assumed I was a gang member. But that's not the case. Why couldn't he give the chance to know me, rather than judge me. Regardless of what my appearance was like, I don't feel like he had the right to do that. I mean let's not forget, he is a resource officer. Part of his job is to be a positive role model in the community. How are we supposed to look up to people like that, when sometimes they are the problem starters, not solvers.

I am fed up with the media affecting me on a daily basis. I wear a black hoody and people see me as a hoodlum, a troublemaker. I enter the store and all eyes are on me. But I bet those people don't know that I average a 3.86 GPA in high school. And I also bet you that those people don't know; my intentions aren't to destroy the community, but to restore it. - Javier

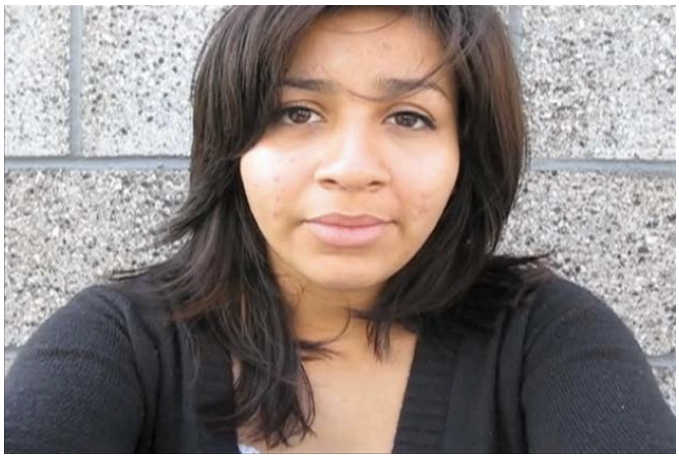
http://vimeo.com/familiesthrive/checkingassumptions

Continuation School

Hoodlums	Pregnant Teens
Drug Addicts	Expelled Students
Dropouts	Thugs
Lowlives	Drug Addicts

I didn't go to school for most of my sophomore year. It had nothing to do with me being lazy or not wanting to go to school or nothing like that. My mother... she was sick with cancer. And at the time the economy bust happened and we lost our home. We moved in with my grandmother, all the way two towns away. I had no car, so no transportation for school. And then we finally we moved back to Antioch and my brother lives with us now and it felt more like a home. I was able to get a job and I was able to help my mother out with bills. And now I can take the bus to school. I started going to Live Oak. Finally I could focus on school and do the work. I start at a good time where I can make it to school. I don't go there because I'm a thug. I am not a thug. I came there because I went through things in my life, and I needed to get my credits and graduate and make my mother proud and make myself proud and live up to myself.

And I am able to do that there at Live Oak. And I am able to be there with a group of other people who want the same thing. Finally I can focus on school, without so much heaviness on my shoulders. And feel that I am succeeding. I feel that all my teachers believe in me. I look around at my school and I see others doing the same. Just trying to get their credits and succeed. And I see all of the teachers who believe in us. Nothing can keep me back. I'm not a thug. I'm not lazy. I want change for the community. And I go to continuation school. - Josie



http://vimeo.com/familiesthrive/continuationschool

Get to Know Us. Inclusion is the Name of the Game

I think media, I think that media and the society and parents all have to do with the outtake of what people think of homosexuality and gays and lesbians as if its a problem.

Personally, my opinion, I don't think nothing is wrong with being gay, or being whatever it is, like, its your opinion, its how you feel.

So there's a boy, a couple boys at my school. There are two boys that I am personally really close with. I mean they are gay.

And boys at my school, because they are gay, they feel like 'Oh I'm not going to talk to him.' And they always say stuff. Boys are - Ok of course are not gay, so they feel because I am not gay, they have to "" all the time, and just be so defensive all the time, and be you know 'Oh I am not gay.' And they feel like, 'Oh I'm not going to talk to him because he is gay, he better not talk to me or I am going to do this.' When its like nothing like that. What's he going to do, try to kiss you? No, he's not. He's a person, like he knows his boundaries.

One of my friends that was not gay, felt like he shouldn't talk to him, because he is gay. But he got to know him and he realized that he's a cool person, he's just like me and you. Like, there is nothing wrong with him. So he felt "" about this situation, because he never gave him the time of the day. He just assumed because he was gay, he was going to try to talk to him. That's not the case. It makes no sense to me. People feel like with me - as a person, if I see a pretty girl, I will say 'She's pretty'.

I am not gay as a person, but I am not insecure about how I feel. But if I was gay, why does it matter? If that's my sexuality, then that's my sexuality. - Am'Unique

http://vimeo.com/familiesthrive/inclusion

Theme IV - Abuse in Relationships and Resilience

Together We Can

KARENA
What if he wasn't there that night?
SUGE
What if they appreciated me?
MICOLE
What if we were still close?
JOSHUA
What if I never smoked?
SYDNEY
What if there wasn't abuse in relationships?
SUGE
What if they knew how I felt?
JOSHUA
What if I wasn't incarcerated?
SYDNEY
What if my dad was still here?
MICOLE
What if I wasn't as strong as I am today?
KARENA
What if there were no gangs?
JOSHUA
What if there were no drugs?
CHORUS
Set!
JOSHUA
Maybe I would have kept my motivation for football…What if?
CHORUS
Set! What if?
SUGE
What if we all got along?
CHORUS
HA!

SUGE

It's seems like family also has their back turned against me…What if?

KARENA

What if violence wasn't the answer?

SOUND – GUNS Chorus shoots MICOLE.

Joshua makes the drug transaction with Suge.

KARENA

…I trusted him.

JOSHUA

(arm around Karena's shoulder) How you doing?

(Sydney helps Micole off of the floor.)

SYDNEY

What if there were someone there to help? How could abuse go on for so long? It's hard for me to connect with men. What now?

MICOLE

What about my dad. He used to be my superman….Time passes. Things change.

CHORUS makes a clock. CHORUS taps out heartbeats.

I didn't know him anymore.

CHORUS – Set!

JOSHUA

Hike! Poverty got me in jail. I fumbled and lost possession of my freedom. But fortunately was I flipped the script and change the game. Instead of acting up and getting in trouble in jail. When I was informed that my grades would be put on my report card when I got out. The work was easy. I scored a touchdown with a 3.5 grade point average.

CHOUS

Touchdown! (High 5 Joshua)

SUGE

(To be written)

I feel like they don't care.

CHORUS

We care.

SUGE

I feel like they don't appreciate me.

CHORUS

We appreciate you.

SUGE

I feel unloved.

CHORUS

We love you, Suge.

SUGE

..to be told you are a mistake…

CHORUS

Group affirmation. Group hug.

MICOLE

Time passes. People change. Things change.…second half of her story.

CHORUS – So does the clock.

MICOLE

(breaks from the wall)…I did it all without him.

Micole bows. SOUND - APPLAUSE. She slaps high 5's with each of them.

JOSHUA

(arm around Karena's shoulder) How you doing?

KARENA

(looks at Joshua for 3 seconds, then slips away from him.)

…. January 5th, 2011 I got the news my boyfriend had been shot and killed due to gang violence….

(stages of death, anger, disbelief, grieving)

…I got back in the groove of things. You can't be in one picture for too long.

CHORUS AND KARENA FORM A PICTURE WHERE EVERYBODY HAS THEIR ARMS AROUND EACH OTHER'S SHOULDERS.

SOUND – CLICK OF A CAMERA

SYDNEY

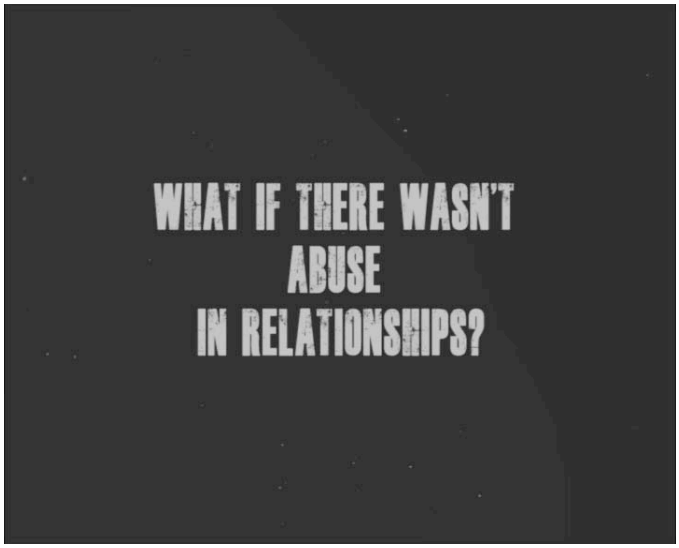
Here I am 15 years old. And my dad is not here. He never was. When I needed a father figure or needed help my knight in shining armor never came to rescue me. If I think about it, my mom is my knight in shining armor. When I thing about it my mom is extraordinary. Not only did she raise me and my 2 sisters, she raised my 3 cousins also. But let's talk about statistics. Apparently I'm supposed to be pregnant, a drop out, respectful and have no morals.

CHORUS turns profile and makes a pregnant shape. Then throws it off.

I'm actually in school. I have a 3.5 grade point average. I have goals and morals. I plan on going to school and majoring in pre law and criminal justice. I've actually been blessed with a godfather. His name is Jason Black. He's always there when I need him. I made it. If you were in my shoes could you?

CHORUS

Together we can.



Sydney's Story - www.vimeo.com/familiesthrive/sydney

Conclusion

These youth stories provide us an understanding into their lived experiences and move us toward responsive action. Their voices can inform us about what responsive action might look like that holds their humanity, value, and potential in the center of our action.

You are invited to participate in the ongoing story development, affirming and acknowledging these young people's lives and their paths as powerful social change agents in their communities at www.choppinitup.org.

In the next section, I will share what emerged for me as important learning in my work with the youth. Over the next couple of chapters I will share a movement to a relational orientation, a way of seeing our identities, personal agency, and collaborative and coordinated action for positive social change.

CHAPTER EIGHT: RELATIONAL ORIENTATION

"Relationships shape us"

Relationships are all there is. Everything in the universe only exists because it is in relationship to everything else. Nothing exists in isolation. We have to stop pretending we are individuals that can go it alone.- Margaret Wheatley

This concluding section reflects on what I learned from Choppin' it Up and shifts our orientation to the "relational space-in-between". Here I will focus on the possibilities for how we can work to (re)author positive identities and move into generative social action. In this chapter, I will talk about the relational space-in-between that represents what we create together through our thoughts, what we say, and what we do. It is the place where relational interactions reside, are shaped, and developed.

This chapter reviews concepts of relational reflexivity and the processes of interaction that we focused on our emerged from our work in Choppin' it Up that the youth and I found important to enrich our relationships. Through these processes we transformed the relational space-in-between, creating striking moments in which we saw things anew and were made different.

Our relationship lives in the space between us. It doesn't live in me or in you or even in the dialogue between the two of us. That space is sacred space (Buber, 1958).

Mary Catherine Bateson in the foreword to Steps to an Ecology of Mind by Gregory Bateson (1999) wrote, "We remain less skilled at thinking about interactions than we are at thinking about entities, things." While there may be increasing dialogue about relationships, prioritizing individuals and things rather than the collective or relational space-in-between still exists today in many of our societies.

This chapter is an attentive decision to focus on practices and interactions in the relational space. With attentiveness, we can move beyond an argument of "individual versus relationship" to open possibilities in our conversations. We can transform conversations to shift from talking in non-relational terms to relational terms, from an either/or discussion, to a discussion about what is useful. In this movement to emphasizing relational process, we can change how we talk about relationships. Rather than objectifying relationships as a binary distinction to individuals - where McNamee and Gergen remind us there is a risk of freezing the conversation - we can be mindful of the dualism that way of talking might create and open our thinking to more generative language (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, pp. 29-30).

A colleague, Vicky Lugo, shared with me that in her research with youth who are ex-combatants in Colombia they are choosing not to focus on changes in individuals but rather on changes in how the youth and other people relate to each other. This emphasis provided a useful shift for me in my thinking. This is a choice we get to make.

> **The introduction of "we" is more than a word play. It is to fashion what we are to each other (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 22).**

I see utility in shifting from an "I" to a "we" orientation in social systems that have a highly individual orientation. For example, in our justice system, how might we explore possibilities by looking at relational and collective responsibility? When we look at youth who have "chosen" gangbanging, what might a "we" or social ecological view provide as alternative responses? One of my favorite modern day heroes is Father Gregory Boyle from Homeboy Industries. He sees each "I" with great care, compassion and orients a "we" relational and social-ecological response to the challenges in these kids' lives. Keeping these examples in mind, when we focus on the relational space-in-between with youth, we can look at the elements that lead to a strengthened relational space, a space from which to co-create positive possibilities.

> **If individual action emerges from a social source, then it is through social processes that transformation may be achieved. And this transformation is the essence of human development (Gergen, 2009, Foreward).**

Choppin' it Up holds relationships as central and embraces the generative power and potential of human beings to construct a powerful image of an alternative future that inspires, motivates, and mobilizes people to engage in constructive and positive action. Through strengthening our relationships with youth in communities we can begin to shift our thinking from a deficit view to a strengths-based view of youth as we listen to and create meaning with them, from their perspective.

By creating a new, supportive space for active dialogue and strengthening the quality of our relationships with youth, we can begin to gain a better understanding of youths' lived experiences in their relationships, homes, schools and community and examine what is taken for granted about youth, the challenges they face, how they cope and what they need to support resilience. In doing so we are able to transform our understanding of the various and unique paths youth make to a powerful identity, meaning, health and well-being, and see the strengths and the often hidden powerful resilience youth express in response to challenges and adversity. With this shift we can be more relationally reflexive and examine alternative identities and ways of being in relationships with youth.

Relational reflexivity

A good place to start exploring social processes is talking about relational reflexivity or responsiveness. When we are in reflexive process, we are in an ongoing inquiry about the implications of our actions (McNamee, 2012) We may find it useful to pause to ensure that we are finding ways forward to shared understanding, meaning or action, for ourselves and for others. Dian Hosking discusses a "particular construction of reflexivity, that is one that reflects a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge" (Hosking & Pluut, 2010, p. 59). With this in mind, what would self and relational reflexivity look like as we focus on the relational space-in-between and what we are making together in our partnerships and relationships with youth?

> **A man will be imprisoned in a room with a door that's unlocked and opens inwards; as long as it does not occur to him to pull rather than to push it (Wittgenstein, Wright, & Nyman, 1980, p. 42).**

I was struck by how much this metaphor speaks to reflexivity as a quality of being able to be self and relationally reflexive–being reflective of ourselves, how we are in relationship with others, and what we are becoming.

> ***So, the thing that motivates me is I write my goals down on a piece of paper. It's like a conviction for myself. I know I need to do this. Let me get on it. It motivates me because I know if I don't take the necessary steps, I'm not going to just wind end up there right away. We have to take these baby steps first. So, I know that if I take these baby steps first, I'm going to reach that goal. That's my motivation. That's what keeps me going because I'm able to focus on the–on the big prize. The big prize is being able to support my mom so she doesn't have to work, you know. Being able to pay for my brothers to go to college, the college that they like. I want them to have a strong foundation, something to follow so that they don't drift afar how I did. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

Relational reflexivity strengthens our inquiry into ways of being that enrich forms of relational life. Let us focus on what we found useful in Choppin' it Up to strengthen the quality of our relational processes. A relational and constructionist approach would call us to examine how relational reflexivity contributes to an "ongoing construction of local cultural, historical, and language-based processes of interaction" with youth (Hosking and Pluut 2010, p. 63). There were several processes of interaction that we attentively focused on or that emerged from our work in Choppin' it Up that the youth and I found important to enrich our relationships.

Love

I often thought of research as discovering something new–a new idea, something fresh or unusual, some type of change or innovation. Harlene Anderson (2007, p. 34) shares that "a search for understanding is not to seek the undiscovered but rather to look at the familiar with new scrutiny, with new eyes and ears, to see and hear it differently, to understand it differently, to articulate it differently." My experience in Choppin' it Up was a remembrance of something that feels a part of our collective beings, brought forth by our relationships with each other, something we listened to not only with our eyes and ears, but also with our hearts. What I experienced in my work with the youth was love. There were aha moments of understanding and love, golden moments of insight that reawaken a treasure within.

These moments changed me and have persisted in a way that I find difficult to express in words. In the search for new understanding, advancing theories in research, my transformational experience was a new understanding of something that feels ancient and timeless. The vision I have is not of discovering new things, but of coming home to our interconnectedness through the insights from our stories and experiences.

Thus, though he begins by seeing something utterly new, he really arrives at a new understanding of something ancient (Baba, 2000).

How do we "grow love" and a sense of our interconnectedness in our homes, classrooms, schools, and communities? At an event with the Choppin' it Up youth, Don Gill, the Superintendent of the Antioch Unified School District, shared his concern that many people might walk into the room we were in, take one look at the kids, and make judgments that dismiss them. What do we lose when that happens? We lose the richness of relationship. We lose the opportunity to support these kids to be all that they can be. And we lose what these kids can contribute to the classroom, school, and community.

The first step towards a new kind of relationship, a relationship of love, is to put our judgments aside. When we put our judgments of each other aside, we create space for different understandings. We create an opportunity to see each other in new ways. We sometimes even see ourselves in new ways that we may not have been aware of - our greatness and capacity that has been hidden, under layers and piles of judgment, blame, evaluation, criticism. When we put aside our judgments, we release ourselves and others into new possibilities and ways of being in relationships.

When we hold on to our judgments, we cage people and ourselves into a way of being, a way of being seen. It is helpful to think about what is gained by holding onto our judgments in order to find pathways to alternatives. Maybe we gain a sense of control in our lives when we hold on to our judgments. When a teacher walks into a classroom and makes judgments about a group of kids, we can reflect on what is gained and what is lost. There is an opportunity to learn more

about what those judgments are based on and how we can support shifts that open up possibilities.

Sometimes what is happening in the relational space-in-between blocks our ability to have the kind of relationships we want with youth. When this happens, we can bring our focus back to the powerful ways by which we create meaning together that open future possibilities in our relationships with youth. Sometimes, we find we create meaning in relationship to our past experience instead of what is right in front of us. We might carry images or assumptions into our everyday relationships with youth. Social construction principles help us to stay present to the space that is right in front of us and also acknowledge what we carry with us into the relational space. Here we can identify what we can let go of that is not useful, is not serving our relationships, or constructing what we want in the space-in-between. We can also ask ourselves:

- What is the cost of letting or not letting go of what is not useful? What fears or constraints hold us back?
- What instead do we want to bring into this space? What do we want to create?

At the same time that we examine shifting how we view youth and a space-in-between that supports creating meaning and a positive future together, it is important that we do this in a way that does not "demonize: or make anyone wrong. We can also acknowledge the factors and costs that go into changing our way of being in relationship with youth.

The time we spent in Choppin' it Up developing trust and respect for each other allowed a level of sharing that, while it happened very quickly, allowed us to get to deeper insights, new possibilities, and strengthened commitments. These deeper insights were accessible with space and time, to feel and explore the connections and meaning contained within them. This environment allowed us to get out of our thinking minds and into our hearts, and to share stories that created those aha/insight shifts in our understanding of each other (and ourselves). These insights along with our imagining together led to deeper knowing, 'aha' moments, strengthening our connections to each other, letting us know we are not alone. In this space we were invited to imagine new possibilities and were emboldened to know that we can reach new places and powerful social change together.

- How much time in our work do we spend in conversations that allow for deeper insights or understandings to occur?
- What do we gain by spending more time in these types of conversations?
- How can groups of people invest the what it takes in terms of time and process to create these types of conversations?
- By spending more time in these types of conversations, how much more do we co-create together - infinity and beyond?

Realizing Appreciative Inquiry is a process that gets us closer to working from a heart space than traditional strategic planning, I still find people together in this process without strong sense of the behaviors and norms that demonstrate what participants define as trust and respect. There is often limited time allocated in the process to co-explore what we need to have relationships and conversations that are more generative that allow us to share sometimes deeply personal and often powerful stories. My experience has been that our work tends to stay more on the surface than what is possible. What if we were to adapt the Appreciative Inquiry process and other collective processes in a way that engages us to work at a deeper level? I propose that it might lead to clearer insights, intentions, and stronger commitments moving forward.

Courage

Going back to the voices of youth, I am remembering Jordan's advice to adults about the importance of courage.

> ***Don't judge us, keep an open mind, and be courageous. When I say courageous, I mean facing your fears. Or doing something when no one agrees with you. A lot of teachers are disengaged with the students. I believe one of the reasons is because they're afraid. They're in a comfortable space and don't want to leave that space. Focusing on only their teaching is easy for them. Now when you engage with a student and start to build a relationship, you might know what their problems are and you feel the need to be involved. This is a big step for some teachers and principals. This is why they rather stay in that space of comfort. But it's getting us nowhere. So we need courageous teachers and principals that are going to help us all the way through no matter what. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

What does courage like this look like in the context of the space-in-between, in relationship with each other? It takes courage to see another, their whole person, and to allow ourselves to be seen. Jordan reminds us that when we go into that space it is important to recognize our fears and to create safety together to allow ourselves to truly see and be seen.

Stories are a powerful way that Choppin' it Up youth allowed themselves to be seen. But we must go back a couple of steps and look at what allowed the youth to share their stories, especially those stories that we hold deeply within us and we might not even know exist. The following are the conditions the youth shared that allowed this to happen and built a safe space to share. Maybe they also took a chance and leapt into the space-in-between because it was important for them to be seen and to see each other.

> ***I remember when we shared our own opinions about abuse, unhealthy relationships and resilience. I felt shy at first but once***

I heard what other people thought I felt comfortable enough to share what I want and once you feel comfortable you can tell the group what you want and they will either agree or disagree and that's a form of showing respect. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Trust and Respect

Trust and respect were two elements that youth in Choppin' it Up said were critical to share their stories. They felt they needed to demonstrate trust and respect to each other to build safety. Harlene Anderson (2005) shares that social construction is relational–from the beginning–that we exist and we have identity in our contact and language with others where there is mutuality or respect for each other, and we are in a collaborative relationship. From this orientation, respect, trust, safety, and fear are not entities–they are not "things that exist" or "qualities that people have"–but rather they can be thought of as "processes that communities uniquely construct" (McNamee, 2012). Within this orientation we can then ask how different communities construct what counts as respect, trust, safety, or fear. We can then consider what it would look like in a classroom, school, family or community if we brought these elements in and what impact it would have. By having a recipe for defining, if you know what it is, you can also help people to change it or let go of what is not working (Gottman, 2011). If trust is a process, what does it look like? Saliha Bava wonders if trust is a process and not a state, what does it look like? When we say trust is critical or broken, then how does it flow? Is it a straight line or a wave? Trust is a popular concept and every group or community needs to have a shared understanding of it. Within these groups or communities we can ask: What is our shared understanding? How should we build it? What are we seeking to trust-the person(s), process, and/or the ideas? We can invite each other to share what we seek, when we seek trust (Bava, 2011-2012).

For the youth, trust and respect were social constructs within a relational process that began with establishing and following the agreements they developed.

In the beginning of Choppin' it Up we made a list to explain what we want from each other. The most important ones were trust and respect. Over time we showed those two aspects when we shared with one another and we started gaining trust for one another. - Choppin' it Up Youth

When the youth listed trust and respect as important and talked about what those elements looked like to them, they developed shared agreements to demonstrate those ways of being in relationship with each other. They held each other accountable to those agreements and also revisited them if they felt they were not being demonstrated in the group. Importantly, they held this process–because it is what they needed to be in relationship with each other in this space.

> ***This brought us close to each other and more of a family based group. It can be possible if everyone committed time to get to know each other and perhaps showing even more trust and being 100% comfortable so that we may expand our horizon toward other activities. We show the trust we have by being comfortable and expecting what we want out of each other to gain trust. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

I see how these processes grow out of being in relationship, over time–how it is in performing what we see as trust or respect that it grows or forms in our relationships. There are major implications for understanding how trust develops. Trust is found in stronger, healthier, and more just communities. Some say it is foundational to making human communities work (Gottman, 2011). I also see the implication for how we talk about these relational processes in restorative practices. If we see trust and safety as a process, and maybe a curved line that flows as a thread through our relationships, we can also see where there are times the line or thread gets blocked, cut off, or zig-zagged and what the obstacles or processes are that impact the flow.

> ***To me, a lot of it has to do with energy. Once I get a feel of everyone's energy, I become comfortable. This opens the door for me to create a positive environment for everyone. We can be ourselves and start building trust with each other. We put aside all stereotypes and are able to accept one another for who we are. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

Within this context, we wouldn't situate these processes or elements within one person or the other–but in the space-in -between–the space that flows and exists between us. Then we can find how to reroute, how to adjust the flow, how to remove the obstacles. This way of representing relational processes provides a visual image for alternative ways to construct relationships that look and feel like trust, respect, safety, and love to us. What then does it mean when we say someone is trustworthy, respectful, loving or safe? Maybe it is that in the relational field in-between they have demonstrated things that look and feel like what we have defined as trustworthy, respectful, loving, or safe. In this way of thinking, someone is not one way or the other, but acting or performing in ways we have constructed as being of value to us in relationship.

While this may seem like a simplification, it could be powerful for liberating oneself and others from labels and limits to our identities and possibilities for our relationships with each other. Instead, we can focus on ways we are acting or performing in our relationships, with implications for how we can shift the performance to be more in synch with constructing a relationship we would prefer.

Listening as an Act of Love

Listening carefully with great respect to someone as they tell their stories is an act of love and creates a space in which transformation can occur (Waldegrave & Tamasese, 2012). At times, people share their deepest experiences and sometimes great pain in these stories. Charles Waldengrave from the Family Centre in New Zealand talks about this as a great honor and sacred encounter.

> **Listening is an act of co-narrating, as a listener responds and interacts with both the narrator, they play a role in the shaping of the story (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000).**

In Choppin' it Up, we explored this idea throughout our workshops. When we practiced active listening, youth were acutely aware of the impact of not being listened to. After experiencing several conversations in which she had not been listened to, one of the youth exclaimed that she was not going to try to share a story again, it was too painful to not be heard. When youth were actively listening, you could see the connections happening, and the stories building. There was no shortage of constructive energy in the room.

We also built upon the concept of listening in a different form when the youth performed each others' insight stories. This process allowed a different kind of spontaneous responsiveness to each other, that moved us to new ways of being with and relating to each other (Shotter, 2011)–creating a sacred space in which people felt deeply listened to and understood. There was a participatory understanding where each person felt seen.

Youth experienced the power of being able to share their stories with others, of being listened to. To continue this gift and to give back, they applied for a grant to do an intergenerational project. Exploring their ideas for the project, the youth invited elder advisors to give them feedback on what they felt was important as a way for them to contribute to and give back to their community. After listening intently to their advisors, they developed a story-listening project in which youth would listen to and capture memories of community elders about the best of Antioch - in good times and challenging times - to build a positive image for the future based upon the best of the past.

The core of the intergenerational project is in the telling and listening to stories as an important part of honoring the best of the past and building a positive vision for the future. The youth felt it was critical to listen to and gain the wisdom of their community elders from the stories they share about the past to learn how to create positive change for the future. Their hopes are that from the interviews they can learn more about the lives of community elders, stories about the history of Antioch, and visions for how the elders would like to leave Antioch for future generations. Elders shared that being able to listen to another person's story and contribute to their well-being is an act of love. In this act of listening, memories are carried on and people have a chance to be heard that builds a sense of belonging.

In this effort, youth voice is not only being strengthened and elevated, but they are also learning and developing their role to elevate other voices through the gift of listening, in this case to the elders in their community.

Conclusion - Transformation in the space-in-between

Social poetics refers to a method of inquiry that deals with first time creations. In these moments, we are called to imagine something not previously imagined and are moved to notice and to be responsive to events occurring between us that are arresting, striking, or moving (Katz & Shotter 1996; Shotter & Katz, 1999).

> **These are the moments that matter, that make a difference in our lives. (Shotter, 2011)**

Sharing and listening to each other's stories presented many striking moments. Joe Lambert (2002, p. 86) from The Center for Digital Storytelling says the magic of striking moments is simple, but that we just don't have many safe places to be heard in this way, where we deeply listen to each other.

> ***Her experience and her story has changed me, it has inspired me. Right now I am a junior at Deer Valley High, but one day I want to have a college degree and be a midwife. This is really important to me. It is my dream. I am Latina. A strong, committed young Mexican woman. I AM Change. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

There have been many transformational moments in our work together, where we were made different, our view shifted, and we saw things anew. Many times, I was and continue to be changed by what the youth say or do, when we create new forms of life, and new ways of seeing or acting together in our relationships with one another.

As we began our work, the youth quickly taught me that how they saw themselves and how others saw them was important to their developing sense of identity. In the next chapter, we have an opportunity to ask ourselves and each other, "When we talk about our identities, what is limiting and what is useful?" A social constructionist stance invites a conversation about identity that questions the usefulness in particular ways of thinking and talking. We are less concerned in this line of inquiry about finding what the "truth" is and more concerned with how different ways of talking support different conversations, solutions, or actions (Pearce, 2009).

CHAPTER NINE: IDENTITY

"I found myself that day"

With the Choppin' it Up youth voices as our guide, in this chapter I will present the concept of identity in the context of constructing positive possibilities in our 'selves', in our relationships with each other, and in creating better worlds. When we look at our work with youth, there are implications for how we view identity that situates our beingness, who we are and who we are capable of being and becoming, within our selves or within our interactions and relationships with each other. Within this view, we are continually forming and performing "I" (Anderson, H., & Gehart, D. R., 2007, p. 17). We might consider not whether one way of thinking about identity is right or wrong, but rather what is useful to incorporate in our work.

This chapter reviews how Choppin' it Up provided a dialogic and relational space for youth to explore and develop narratives of their lived experiences, who they are and what they are capable of. In this process, they teach us to examine our beliefs and assumptions about them and to listen for existing but sometimes unheard or ignored narratives that highlight their strengths, hopes, and dreams. This chapter concludes with a promise that new ways of thinking about and being in relationship with youth leads to new options for action.

Identity

To begin, we might look at the following implications and opportunities in how we talk about identities.

- The implications of seeing youth as having certain identities, certain ways of being.
- The implications of seeing our identities as shaped within ourselves or through our social worlds.
- The opportunities that are present when we explore alternative identities in the language that we use, conversations we have, in the stories that we tell each other, and the way we are in relationship with each other.
- How inquiry about identity might lead to personal and collective agency or constructive social action.

When we look at the continuum of thinking from accounts of individualism to more relational realms and social accounts of self, we have an opportunity to think about what is useful when we talk about identity. The data from the dialogues illuminate an interesting interplay between individualism and relationships. As the youth reflect on what inner knowledge, strength, self-responsibility, determination, and personal choice means to them, they are also exploring the role of relationships in shaping this. On one hand they might say: "I can't count on others and relationships, so I have to do it on my own" or "I have to have my own inner strength and determination."

That day, I realized I didn't need her, or anyone else to be who I wanted to be. - Choppin' it Up Youth

On the other hand they might say: "Relationships with my family shape who I am" or "How people talk or think about me impacts who I am". This is an important stage of life in which youth begin to develop more independence and sense of "who I am" and at the same time also realize the importance and impact of the social relational world.

What is identity? Is it my view of me? Or is it another person's view of me? In Invitation to Social Construction Ken Gergen writes: "We have an identity for practical purposes. To be sure, we do create reliable worlds in this way" (Gergen, 2009, p. 45).

> ***One day after school my friend and I decided to walk home. As we reached the corner of the school, we realized that our campus resource officer was following us. He looked us straight in the eye and flashed the middle finger at us. Angered by what he just did, I decided to keep my cool and continue walking. Minutes later I realized he continued following me and he did so the whole way home. I started to question why he would possibly follow me, then it came to me. I am a young latin male, I was wearing a solid black tee and some dickies. I am guessing he assumed I was a gang member. But that's not the case. Why couldn't he give the chance to know me, rather than judge me? Regardless of what my appearance was like, I don't feel like he had the right to do that. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

Some see identity as controlled by those with power to generate descriptions and explanations that define who we are (Gergen, 2009, p. 48). If our identity is defined by others at all levels (individual to societal), the way others talk about us and the way we are represented, then we are unable to fully control how our identity is shaped or represented (Gergen, 2009, p. 51). These taken-for-granted realities are powerful and shape culture, policies and practices and may result in worlds that can be confining (Gergen, 2009, p. 51).

> ***I knew I needed to change my life, inside and out. How I saw myself, and how others saw me. I began to learn acceptance, to accept the fact that I have no control over the way people view me, but it was a challenge I had to overcome. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

In many cases, we may also participate in defining others implicitly in our talk and positioning without intending to do so.

> **Everyday conversations are far from trivial and represent an important arena where identities are fashioned and relations played out (Burr, 2003. p. 115).**

But a view of identity would be incomplete if we stopped here. We would run the risk of saying our lives are determined by others and that we have no sense of personal agency, no control to determine or influence our lives. In addition, we would not have the individual or collective power to transform discourses or impact social change to any degree. While the ability to self-define can be powerful in countering deficit definitions and discourses, much has also been written about the limitations of an individualist view, that I am separate from you, that takes us not into relationship, but may contribute to increasing isolation and disconnection (McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Gergen, 2011)

" …it is the stories that we learn to tell to frame our experiences, to explain us to ourselves and others, that are the central features of human life, The stories we tell about our lives 'serve as vehicles for rending selves intelligible" (Gergen & Gergen, 1998, p. 17); they give order, coherence, and meaning to our experiences, and structure our relationships with others. (Sampson, 2008, p. 123)

If we substitute the word identity for truth in a quote by Bakhtin we get: "Our identities, who we are and who we want to be, are not to be found inside of us in a fixed sense, but rather born between us as we collectively search for who we are, in the process of our dialogic interaction" (Bakhtin, 1984). A relational way of thinking about identity provides powerful opportunities for how we might re-author our identities and support others to re-author their own. John Shotter suggests that rather than seeing ourselves and others presenting identities as who we truly are or who another person truly is, that it is useful to think in terms of different possible identities we could be expressing, different roles and relationships that might be possible. Within this orientation, we call each other into positions in an ongoing relational process (McNamee, 2012).

Borrowing from Edward Sampson, the constructions that are placed on groups of people as "others" often influence how systems respond to them - what-is-said-about-me can become what-is-done (Sampson, 2008, 27). These constructions impact people's lives and how the dominant society might see and respond to them. How people respond to constructions of otherness continues to shape their identities and sense of personal agency. Edward Sampson claims that "the voices of diversity and difference have never been completely stilled. We hear them raised loudly today, staking their own claims[…] Today they challenge the politics of equality-as-sameness that has been the Western heritage calling for an equality based on differences" (Sampson, 2008, p. 81).

Society is going to label me, tell me where I am going to get, but I will continue forward. I will come out of the labels of society. I accept difference, but only if it stands for equality. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Burr states that Davies and Harré reserve a place for individuality in this discourse in that one's history and experiences influence the extent to which we are able to or want to identify ourselves with certain identity claims or positions within our interactions (Burr, 2003, p. 114).

> **An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction [..] as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Who one is [….] is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories within which we make sense of our own and others' lives (Burr, 2003, p. 114; Davis and Harré, 1999, p. 35).**

Possibilities begin to emerge when we perform into and accept or reject social positioning and identity claims that others call us into (Gergen, 2009). Viewing identity as a performance helps us to share our accounts of "who I am". These accounts can be embedded within a sociocultural context–the context of personal experiences, relationships with others, and the culture, values and social norms that are reflected and shaped in the language we use, and the stories we tell. These performances may also be different depending on who we are with at the time.

Foucauldian discourse analysis is often concerned with deconstructing and identifying the effects of certain discourses on the way people are presented and the way our social lives are constructed (Burr, 2003, p. 18). Identifying problematic stories in a particular discourse also helps separate our view of a person as a problem. By doing so, possibilities are created for people to oppose problematic discourses and construct alternative stories (Freedman & Combs, 1996). In these stories, they may also present alternative identity claims and challenge the right of the other to define who we are.

If our identity is always fluidly being (re)constructed or as Shotter says "making and being made", if we are always a work in progress, then there are endless possibilities to define and redefine who we are and are capable of being (Gergen, 2009, p. 69). We can choose to view identity as constraining and imprisoning or we can choose to see it as fluid and open for continual (re)construction (Shotter, 1997; Gergen, 2009, p. 69) through our experiences, conversations and self-reflections (Gergen, 2009, pp. 69-70).

In Choppin' it Up, youth experienced opportunities to redefine how others might see them and sometimes how they saw themselves.

> ***You saw in me what I always wanted someone to see, something I didn't even know existed. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

The youth have the ongoing support of adult allies, who believe in their chosen identities and who are willing to invest in the critical experiences and relationships that are important for continual construction of the powerful identities that the youth are shaping and enacting in their daily lives and social action.

Positive Image >> Positive Action

Choppin' it Up provided a dialogic relational space for youth to explore their purpose, effectiveness, beliefs about effectiveness (self-efficacy beliefs) and develop new constructive identities and skills to create better worlds.

> ***My mom's crying. Here oldest son is being handcuffed. We looked at each other and then I am led away. I was locked up for three days and then 5 months of house arrest wearing an ankle monitor. In those first 3 days I knew I needed to change my life, inside and out, How I saw myself, and how others saw me. I began to learn acceptance, to accept the fact that I have no control over the way people view me, but it was a challenge I had to overcome. Some thought I was nothing more than a troublemaker. I even heard from someone in a school meeting that I was being labeled as a terrorist. I couldn't believe it. I wasn't a terrorist.***
>
> ***This is when my spiritual life began. Slowly over time, I learned commitment, acceptance, and separation. Separation from my friends who weren't making the choices I was now committed to making. I stayed committed to my schoolwork in order to graduate on time. Credits were a big problem. I was almost 130 credits behind. But I did it! I am equality empowerment and peace. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

Appreciative Inquiry provides a framework for this affirmative capacity of positive image in which to explore who we are and who we want to be, as individuals, organizations, or systems (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Yaeger, & Whitney, eds., 2001).

- Images of our potential and the potential of others are shaped through the language we use and the stories we tell each other.
- Stories give life to our strengths from which to envision the future.
- These images and stories play a key factor in social action.
- We get to choose which images and stories will propel us towards a better world.

Much research supports an affirmative capacity in our relationships with others, that when we tune into the positive aspects of another human being, it propels creative action in the construction of reality (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Yaeger, & Whitney, eds., 2001). In addition, it can help to inquire into the strengths, skills, and abilities in ways that enable people to put them into action through imaging the future with their skills, knowledges and abilities as a foundation (Denbourough, 2008, p. 195) However, what if images of our selves are saturated with stories of deficit, disorder, and delinquency? What if there are unstated cultural assumptions and discourses that affect how others see us, and sometimes even how we see ourselves?

I am fed up with the media affecting me on a daily basis. I wear a black hoody and people see me as a hoodlum, a troublemaker. I enter the store and all eyes are on me. But I bet those people don't know that I average a 3.86 GPA in high school. And I also bet you that those people don't know that my intentions aren't to destroy the community, but to restore it. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Gervase Bushe wrote that the most critical part of appreciative process is a change in consciousness, beginning with an act of belief, often in the face of accumulated evidence to the contrary (Bushe as cited in Cooperrider, Sorensen, Yaeger, & Whitney, eds., 2001).

We see what our imaginative horizon allows us to see. And because "seeing is believing," our acts often take on a whole new tone and character depending on the strength, vitality, and force of a given image (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Yaeger, & Whitney, eds., 2001).

The authors of Appreciative Inquiry: An Emerging Direction for Organization Development (2001), share studies that when teachers hold extremely positive images of their students they tend to provide those students with (1) increased emotional support in comparison to others; (2) clearer, more immediate, and more positive feedback around effect and performance; and (3) better opportunities to perform and learn more challenging materials.

Beliefs and assumptions about teaching, whether in a school or in any other context, are a direct reflection of the beliefs and assumptions the teacher holds about the learner (Bruner, 1996, pp. 46-47).

When we talk about co-constructing new, more generative realities with youth, it takes a shift in order for us to re-imagine new, possible relational responses in order to provide adequate support, and to also communicate a belief in youth competence and wisdom. If we believe that

they are not capable to actively co-construct new realities with adults, we create certain ways of being in relationship and relational responses.

Unearthing affirmative narratives

An affirmative capacity is not about changing youth or changing communities. It is about unearthing stories that are already circulating, but are often ignored and transforming narratives to highlight young peoples' strengths, hopes and dreams (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 15).

The stories of our lives are our attempts to attribute meaning to our lived experiences, meaning that shapes our lives. There are stories that mark our lives, including those we never thought significant, that may play a part in contradicting the negative conclusions that others (and sometimes we, ourselves) believe about our identity (White, 2011). The stories the youth shared provided a foundation for alternative identities and positive possibilities and become a gateway through other discourses, providing rich opportunities for (re)shaping their identities and lives.

What we focus on, the questions we ask, and how we orient ourselves to the issues or opportunities matter. When we ask youth about experiences in their lives, we build awareness of how these experiences impact them. Asking questions about how abuse in relationships affect youth, and hearing and being able to share their lived experiences can be powerful. Learning about the real obstacles that many youth face in their lives makes space for these images and stories, holding storytelling as a potential place for connection and healing.

The healing gesture meant to heal this suffering is not intended to explain it away or fill in the abyss but simply to affirm that they are not alone, that we are all siblings in the same night of truth (Caputo, 1993. p. 38).

Philippe Belien, one of the organizers for the 2012 World Appreciative Inquiry Conference, believes that listening to someone's story of struggle and sorrow and sharing tears is very much Appreciative Inquiry (Strutzenberger, 2012). He suggests that the conditions and impact of Appreciative Inquiry can increase the level of collective awareness of these experiences and create new insights, which can lead to new outsights. We found in Choppin' it Up that sharing this awareness, as well as positive emotions, is essential to generate the new, in whatever way, thus showing the relational nature of Appreciative Inquiry. This change of consciousness and growing awareness can come from a relational responsiveness to someone's lived experience. In fact, not creating a space for telling one's story may further marginalize their experience. We can ask - "how does abuse impact our relationships?" and we thus create a certain understanding, narrative, or story. But if we stop there, we risk building a single story, a certain narrative or story taken to be the truth. If we ask different questions, we create different conversations. The questions we ask can be thought of as performative: "they can evoke, construct, and invite positions and experiences from which generative dialogues can emerge" (Strong, 2004, p. 217; Gerhart, Tarragona, and Bava 2007, p. 373). If we were to ask youth: "How are people in your

school or community kind and supportive of each other?" we would get different responses and start building new, possible narratives. Connecting insights from our lived experiences to what is important to us creates an opportunity to build an orientation towards what is generative.

What we are finding ideal is balancing our understanding of young people's lived experiences in order to build raise awareness about what is hurtful and what is important to them and then building an orientation towards what is positive–eliciting and lifting up stories of courage, kindness and caring in our conversations. Doing this might mean that we recognize what is harmful and normalize being able to talk about harmful behaviors. From here we can build important safety and supports. Then we can also lift up and celebrate strengths, helping to build a narrative of what already exists in many relationships–narratives of strength, courage, compassion, and caring. We get to thoughtfully choose how we do this, how much time we spend on both of these orientations to build a certain reality or narrative. The key is to create a transformational space, in order to move from one's telling to positive action.

I would also like to distinguish between positive images we may hold for youth and making judgments of what is expected. Michael Ungar cautions us to be open to understanding the world from the youth's point of view, to stay in curiosity, and to be open to hearing what a youth may share of their pathway to a powerful identity. When we affirm one identity over another, then youth may begin to believe that we will accept them as only one type of person (Ungar, 2001). He gives an example of a teenage girl he is working with who is navigating her way with choices that are proving troublesome to her family and her school. When she offers a glimpse at a positive identity alternative, Ungar pauses and reflects on the choices he has for responding. He can respond with applause, affirming the positive identity, or he can remain curious and let her tell him more about this alternative identity choice. He chooses to remain curious. "The reason is simple. When I get excited about one identity or another, then the teen knows that I will accept her as only one type of person" (Ungar, 2006, p. 41).

Whenever we declare what is the case or what is good, we use words that privilege certain existents while thrusting the absent and the contrary to the margins (Gergen, McNamee, Barrett 2001, p. 1).

Ungar offers the following strategies when listening to an adolescent's "truth" (Ungar, 2006, p. 40):

1. Take the time to listen.
2. Keep a positive attitude toward the youth, even if the youth's behavior is a problem.
3. Try to understand the world from the youth's point of view.
4. Be curious rather than full of awe and wonder at the stories you may hear.

Journal Entry - Awe. Michael Ungar says to stay in the curiosity and keep trying to understand youth's lives from their perspective. For him, awe communicates privileging one way of being over the other and a sense of surprise for what youth are capable of, From this perspective, why would I be in awe - are my expectations too low? I don't want the kids to say " Why is my competence so surprising, what did you expect?" But yet I am in awe. Every time I work with these kids I am in awe. How do I balance this in the celebration of the other? What other words might I also use? Delight, wonder, hope.

So what are the alternatives? On one hand, there is a strong case that communicating positive images and expectations is not only helpful, but also imperative in building positive futures. On the other hand, affirming positive images can sometimes be harmful, holding judgment of what we deem as positive and blocking our understanding of another person's navigation towards health and a positive sense of identity.

What I am proposing is an appreciation of the gifts, strengths, talents, and contributions of young people from a foundational belief in their positive potential that also acknowledges their possibly unique paths towards health and well-being. Appreciation of this complexity is about saying, "I see you". We render each other and ourselves visible through appreciation. I remember how I felt when I watched Jacqueline Novogratz in her Ted Talk -*Inspiring a Life of Immersion* when she said:

> I have heard it said that the most dangerous animal on the planet is the adolescent male. And so in a gathering where we are focused on women, while it is so critical that we invest in our girls and even the playing field and find ways of to honor them, we have to remember that girls and women are most isolated, violated, victimized and made most invisible in those very societies where our men and our boys feel disempowered, unable to provide. And when they sit on those street corners and all they can think of in the future is no job, no education, no possibility, well then it is easy to understand how the greatest source of status can come from a uniform and a gun. Sometimes very small investments can release enormous infinite potential that exists in all of us (Novogratz, 2011).

Novogratz goes on to talk about the power of moral imagination - the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes and lead from that perspective. She shares what she hears from adolescent boys in her work: "We used to feel like nobodies, but now we feel like somebodies." In

response, she believes that we have it wrong when we think income is the link. She says "What we really yearn for as human beings is to be visible".

Living a Life of Immersion -
http://www.ted.com/talks/jacqueline_novogratz_inspiring_a_life_of_immersion.html

Listening to Jacqueline Novogratz struck me and made me think of when we orient ourselves this way, how it might influence our work with youth, young men and women, to acknowledge the complex context of their lives and to support them to be visible, honored, and celebrated. When we shine a light on the lives of other human beings, we also raise a call for addressing the social injustice and inequities they face.

The question then becomes how we build our capacity to render each other visible through appreciation, to show appreciation for what we see in one another. Each day that we worked together, the kids chose to have a check in and a closing that one of them led. I asked one day if I could do the closing. I asked them if they would be willing to tell each other what they appreciated about each other. They came up with a method that worked for them, passing out index cards on which they wrote their names. They asked me to redistribute the cards randomly. They then wrote what they appreciated about the other person on the flip side of the card. One person started by reading their appreciation to the person whose card they had received. That person then read their appreciation to the person they received and so on. It was an exercise in rendering each other visible and appreciating the strengths and qualities that impacted each other in positive ways.

> My boy Nick- I appreciate the joy, laughter and sense of humor you bring to Choppin' it Up.
>
> Javier - I love your drive, ambition and #realtalk!
>
> Rosie - I appreciate your courage, bravery, strength and commitment.
>
> Crystal - I think you are a very strong girl and by you telling us about yourself and where you come from, I think you can help others.
>
> Gerardo - I appreciate how you bring respect of others. You are a good listener and speak well of women. Showing up. I am sure you are making your mother very proud.

Mari - when you show up you are ready to work and really helps out your group. You are really sweet.

Sam - you are honest and always have a great ability to open up. It inspires me to open up more and more. You're quiet and respectful.

Rodney - when you feel 10 out of 10 constantly it has an effect on me.

Sydney - I really appreciate your enthusiasm. It make's me smile when you smile. Your smile is pretty. P.S. I love your eyelashes.

Micole - you have a great sense of personality and for some reason you are able to make me smile.

Suge - I really appreciate your good sense of humor. You can really brighten someone's day.

Victor - you stand out and are different from others. Karma.

Jacob - I appreciate how you're always friendly, humorous and positive. You are brave.

Josie - I appreciate your open mind, ability to speak up, your strength and personality.

Jordan - you are always positive!

Joshua - I really appreciate when you are not afraid to say how you feel.

Karena - I like how you are always going to be there for someone even if they hurt you in the past.

Damon - You are a cool kick-back, funny dude. I love you as a friend.

Mary - you have a very nice personality and you are outgoing.

As a group let's send an appreciation to Dominique, Misael, Am'unique

So there once was a time in my life, I felt lost. Like I didn't know who I was or why I was here. I felt like my life had no meaning or no purpose. I would have thoughts like, if I died who would miss me? I guess I had these thoughts because I was never really good at anything, so I could never really find my passion. Sometimes it would get so bad as to where I would sit in a dark room and wonder who I was. I felt so empty and alone. I would hate the nights when I felt like that. So I started searching for my thing. The thing I was good at, no-one could tell me I wasn't. And then I stumbled across art. Ever since that fateful day I chose to make my own purpose, my own path and my own identify. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Conclusion

Embracing complexity is one of the most valuable tools we can use in working with youth. Embracing our humanity, in all of our complexity, would lead to a celebration of our whole person, an understanding of our lived experiences, hopes and dreams, and an openness to co-construct who we are in our relationships with each other without judgment. Beyond simply accepting "what is–is," embracing complexity means understanding and celebrating the wholeness of others and ourselves. Embracing the lived experiences, hopes, and dreams that make us who we are opens the door to imagination and creativity we can use to co-construct who we are to each other.

Constructing their self-definition of strength helped to situate what is possible for personal agency and positive action. We found that when we operate in our lives with a sense of what is important to us, we can draw upon a sense of purpose and meaning from our lived experiences to inspire our actions and behavior.

When the young people in Choppin' it Up constructed a sense of self "as thinking and feeling agents of their own action" (Gergen, 2009, p. 82), it led to a view of personal agency and power. This ability helped them to define their uniqueness and what makes them different or who they are and what they believe in. It also supported a move into new options for action to create positive social change. Ken Gergen argues that the most important contribution of social science is to provide new ways to think about social processes, structures, and institutions that lead to new options for action (Gergen, 1978).

CHAPTER TEN: AGENCY

"I am here to restore the community"

In this chapter, I will present a sense of agency–or the ability to take action or have choices in one's life–the youth developed where we moved into action in a way that built collaboration and coordination to create positive social change. I will present what we learned about agency and generative action as a process or way we are able to claim agentive resources in and through relationships that may lead to new options for action.

McNamee and Gergen offer a question as we head into this chapter: "What happens to our lives when we embrace a view of agency and self within relationship, with relationship at the center?" (McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Gergen, 2011, p. 82). In this chapter, we shape our description of agency within a relational context as we look at how accounts of agency are constructed relationally and move us into action. Harlene Anderson (2001) refers to agency as the transformation of our language and narratives into action. We will also look at how we recognize, give accounts for, and determine value of our actions within a relational and cultural context (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 79). David Denborough (2008, p. 195) asks himself in his work, "Are the people I am working with experiencing an increased sense of agency? Are they becoming more knowledgeable about their own skills, knowledges, abilities, that can be put into use in addressing the difficulties that they (and others) are facing? Are they experiencing putting these into action and seeing the results in their own lives?"

The Choppin' it Up youth and I often talk about being and becoming social change agents. Becoming social change agents has been a process in our making–a way of being in relationships we have developed over time and in context to the change we wanted to see in the world. This chapter presents how we engaged together around common purpose, reflecting on the choices that we got to make in every moment about how we are seen by others, and how we interact with situations and opportunities in our lives, that led to our becoming social change agents together. If we think about agency from this perspective, as a choice we get to make in each moment, then we bring this concept into an interactional space, the space that lies in our internal conversations and conversations with each other that lead to certain actions.

In listening to the voices of these teens, we hear stories of youth as powerful social change agents in our communities. We are also hearing what they need from the adults in their lives to support them in this role.

Youth as social change agents

Engaging youth as social change agents holds promise for creating resilient and thriving communities in which all ages work together to better meet the needs of all community members. Choppin' it Up presented how we might do that with an attentiveness to building our collective capacity for dialogue, storytelling, and social action.

A resilient community recognizes the interconnectedness of all its citizens and understands the well-being of children and youth is connected to the well-being of other age groups–and vice versa (Benard, 2004, p. 104).

The Choppin' it Up youth have shown us the importance and possibilities of all "people, families, schools, and community members and organizations working in partnership with each other and amplifying each others' strengths to ensure that young people, old people, and those in between receive the critical support and opportunities that promote healthy development throughout the lifespan" (Benard, 2004, p. 105). The approach we designed in our work together demonstrates how we can strengthen relationships and build social capital where youth are critical contributors to improve their communities, not only for themselves but also for everyone (Benard, 2004). In fact, youth can serve as facilitators to bring people together in their communities, where boundaries dissolve and more voices are included.

What can we learn from Choppin' it Up to build resilience in our communities? What is our call to action? My colleague Vicky Lugo and I presented a workshop at the *Enriching Collaborative Practices Across Cultural Borders* conference in Merída, Mexico. At the end of our workshop, there was a pause for reflection. Akiko, a graduate student from Instituto Kanankil, spoke up urgently, but gently. "Now that I know this information, I feel I have a responsibility to bring this into our work with youth."

Engage youth and build new narratives

There is a growing link between youth who have experienced significant adversity and their powerful role as social change agents. The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) recently posted a research grant to examine factors that may actively promote youth resilience with a focus on civic engagement. Studies suggest youth from disadvantaged circumstances are less likely to participate in volunteer activities, to demonstrate positive attitudes toward their ability to make a difference, and exhibit lower levels of trust. However, when they are engaged in volunteer activities, they demonstrate commitment and higher overall levels of civic engagement (Spring, Dietz, & Grimm, Jr., 2007). This suggests that volunteer opportunities may provide an entry point to increased civic participation and positive youth development. Studies have shown that youth who are civically engaged greatly benefit from their participation and demonstrate a more positive civic attitude with a positive belief that they can significantly contribute to their community and build neighborhood efficacy and trust.

> Given the association between neighborhood collective efficacy and trust in social organizations with rates of violence, these are promising findings. NIJ is interested in supporting research to explore this link between civic engagement among youth exposed to violence and its potential impact on promoting adaptive outcomes ("Research and evaluation on children exposed to violence," March 8, 2012).

Moving into action

Ken Gergen wrote: "All that we take to be real, true, valuable, or good finds its origin in coordinated action. Only in coordinated action does meaning spring to life" (Gergen, 2009, p. 31-33). Collaboration is an act of coordination. As youth moved into collaborative action, they began creating together and "generating multiple life forms" (Bava, 2011-2012). In each moment with youth, we have the opportunity to ask ourselves the question, what are we creating? What meaning and practices are we creating? When thinking about these forms of relationship, we found it helpful to construct principles as a group that guide our collaborative practice and help us navigate the complexities that may emerge.

Sometimes a specific framework for collaboration is useful. The Youth Intervention Network in Antioch adopted the Dialogue for Peaceful Change as an organizing framework and practical methodology for their work together as a collaborative that provides a form of understanding so that people can understand the place and nature of conflict and its role and function in ordinary life and a practical methodology that allows us to reduce the amount of violent conflict that people find in their life.

Dialogue for Peaceful Change Training - http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fzvtnW_z67M

The Emerging Leaders training the youth engaged in after Choppin' it Up also provided another framework for social action. At one point in our social action work, when we had multiple events and activities happening over a short period of time, the youth reflected that they were experiencing breakdowns in communication with the adult partners. Vernon and Jean, adult trainers in the Emerging Leaders program, shared with them a breakdown to breakthrough exercise, where we view breakdowns as opportunities to create something new. The youth brainstormed what might be happening in the breakdowns and what would be useful to create breakthroughs. In addition, they took much of the responsibility for supporting their breakthrough suggestions and requested commitment from their adult partners.

Transforming communication in our social action work:

1. Decrease number of communication channels (Facebook, texting, email). Use one form of communication (email suggested).
2. Increase lead-time to complete paperwork to attend events and prepare for workshop, event, conferences.
3. Communicate events' agenda and timing/logistics as soon as possible so participants can decide which event to attend and specific roles. Increase lead time of having/knowing timeline and pick-up schedule for events.
4. Increase organization and logistics planning and communication for overnight events.
5. Decrease multiple events taking place in the the same weekend.
6. Have a regularly meeting schedule. Schedule regular conference calls with Kristin.
7. Prepare agenda and minutes for conference calls and meetings. Possibly have a monthly report/update (make a template) with all pertinent event logistics and updates for upcoming events, workshops, meetings, etc.
8. Clearly define, agree upon, and document accountability and roles. Increase clarity of expectations and roles before event(s). Establish roles for teams and meetings (team leader, facilitator, note take, follow-up items/next steps, and accountability).

Teen dating abuse - example of a youth/adult partnership

Choppin' it Up youth are leading the development of a countywide youth/adult partnership raising awareness about teen dating abuse, preventing relationship abuse, and promoting healthy relationships.

Part of the problem is the example that we see on the media every day about what relationships should look like. People don't know what a healthy relationship is or not. We need to talk about what a healthy relationship is and what abuse looks like. Jordan

We need to also let people who are in an abusive relationship know how to get help, and how to connect to support. Mary

It is also important to know what to do if we know someone, a friend, who is in a relationship that we are worried about. What can we do to support them? Karena

The youth are bringing their important voice and valuable skills to the following activities to address teen dating abuse:

Speaking at public policy functions, including a policy briefing co-hosted with CA Senator Mark DeSaulnier and Assemblywoman Susan Bonilla.

Participating in a statewide advocacy summit on teen dating abuse. Meeting with legislators to urge them to support legislation to address teen dating abuse.

Developing and leading workshops with middle school youth to explore what a healthy relationship is, what teen dating violence and relationship abuse looks like, and how to get help or provide support for a friend.

Training service providers and agencies on what adults can do to effectively intervene and prevent teen dating abuse.

Participating in training on strengths-based approaches in working with youth.

Invest in an ongoing process

Community change is incremental and takes time.

> **Change of this magnitude needs to be incremental to be sustainable [...] rather than a big push that fades with time (Waldegrave, 2009).**

Charles Waldegrave reminds us that with movement towards radical changes is a risk of a simultaneous dismissal of current efforts and contributions of many. He says that the way forward is to build upon what is in place and what works and at the same time encourage flexibility and change at a sustainable pace. This presents important implications in how we fund, plan for, and sustain systems change work. A useful way to look at shifting how we are in relationships with each other to build resilient, thriving communities is as an ongoing process rather than a specific time-bound project.

> ***It (community change, violence/abuse) has to be changed from the inside, you know, and people expect a major change so quickly. You can't change something rapidly. It has to slowly evolve. Like, if you personally try to change something, you know, you keep doing it with your group of friends, and then they're going to see a difference, and they might do it with their family. It's slowly got to change, slowly try to make a difference in your community. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

In addition, when working with youth and community members, the need for flexibility is amplified. Youth often have many things competing for their time and energy–their families, friends, schoolwork and extracurricular activities. Choppin' it Up youth have often missed school days to be involved in their training and community activities where it is up to them to make sure they keep up with their schoolwork as part of their leadership development. When planning community events, it is important to take youth's schedules and unique challenges such as transportation into mind. Adding the layer of the parent and school permission process calls for increased advanced planning and communication. All of these elements remind us that collaborative action is a process that requires ongoing commitment and investment.

Building community agency and capacity

Ken Barter proposes four key principles (Seita, 2000) in building community capacity to promote children's health and well-being: a) connectedness - promoting close, positive relationships; b) dignity- courtesy, respect, and safety; c) continuity- continuous belonging to a group, family or community; and d) opportunity-capitalizing on one's strengths and forming a personal vision (Ungar, ed., 2005, p. 353).

Every single person has capabilities, abilities and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capabilities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given. If they are, the person will be valued, feel powerful and well connected to the people around them. And the community around the person will be more powerful because of the contribution the person is making (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 13).

Building community agency and capacity is most powerful when it engages all ages and cultures. A more intentional integration of efforts to build youth leadership and intergenerational relationships, creating opportunities for interaction across ages, throughout the community is an approach that shows significant promise to build community capacity. In this respect, community capacity building is about generative intergenerational relationships that demonstrate caring, respect, acceptance, and personal and social power. An intergenerational dialogue that "creates opportunities to challenge thinking, develop relationships, revisit assumptions and beliefs, and consider new approaches" is critical to address important issues in our communities (Ungar, ed., 2005, p. 352). Not only will this benefit youth, it will benefit the whole community, all generations.

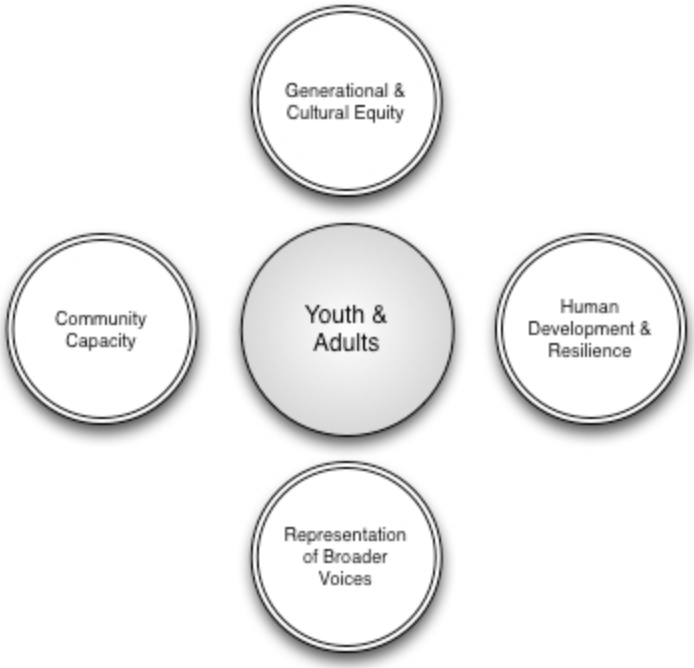


Figure: Youth/Adult Partnerships

As efforts work to increase representation of broader voices, who might be engaged?

- High school youth
- Younger children
- Older adults
- Parents
- Grandparents
- Community professionals

Choppin' it Up youth have been working to envision what generations might do together to address abuse in relationships and promote healthy relationships. An intergenerational approach, engaging high school youth and older adults to build healthy relationships, brings violence prevention not only to the classroom but also to the broader community and creates opportunities to build interaction, relationships, and connections across all ages, including children, youth, parents, grandparents, and older adults.

- High school freshman often have health classes that might provide a good connection for them to learn about healthy relationships and be buddy's in elementary and middle school classes with the fourth graders, maybe even trained to teach curriculum and lead programming.
- High school seniors often have service learning graduation requirements, or classes that focus on their interests for college. Youth who are interested in learning more about early childhood development, teaching, political science of arts/media are good candidates to learn curriculum, programming and how to be a youth ally.
- Older adults in our communities are an excellent resource to engage in violence prevention. They could serve as support for classes, co-teach, and design other opportunities to engage kids and youth in activities that build connection and empathy in our relationships. Senior centers are an excellent resource to connect with older adults who can bring strengths to this task.
- There could be an adapted 'train the trainer' for youth and older adults, thinking about the roles that they can play in supporting efforts around violence prevention and healthy relationships in the classroom and in the community.
- Parent education could be built into any programming and efforts to engage children and youth to help transition the lessons to the home environment. Grandparents can be involved to provide additional support.
- Youth, older adults, parents, grandparents can all learn how to advocate and take a leadership role to create environments and opportunities in our communities that build healthy relationships and prevent violence.
- Relationships that develop from this intergenerational interaction will serve as healthy relationships incubators, people will naturally start responding in ways that aim to meet each others needs.
- Add your own ideas

_____

_____

Intentional intergenerational opportunities have shown great benefits for all ages supporting resilience and thriving including (Henkin, n.d.):

- Increased understanding of needs and strengths across the lifespan
- New and expanded collaborations and opportunities across age groups
- Increased opportunities to contribute and participate
- Increased connection and reduced isolation
- Increased sense of well-being
- Increased sense of collective responsibility and shared fate

A community that applies this intergenerational lens in all they do builds tremendous capacity to address issues across the lifespan, engaging and connecting strengths in the community across all of the age groups. The Choppin' it Up youth are beginning to look at issues and opportunities to meet the needs of all ages. This type of shift builds a more consistent lifespan approach, reducing policy and programmatic silos and leveraging strengths and building social capital.

Resources to help in this planning include:

- http://communitiesforallages.org/
- www.gu.org

Intergenerational community building

A key element of intergenerational community building is the role of youth/adult partnerships. Developing youth and adult advocates that know how to think across a lifespan in community planning is key to ensuring all voices are heard, in a way that respects and supports all of the generations. Intergenerational programming takes this one step further, to not only ensure all voices are involved and that there are resources and offerings for all generations, but that there are opportunities for the generations to interact in a positive way.

I learned when we get adults to understand the place youth come from, and see things from different perspectives, it can be really fun to work with them to make changes in our community. I learned that I can be on that level with adults and that they bring fun, wisdom and knowledge when we learn from each other at a deeper level. I didn't understand this before. I never thought that would be possible. Now I know that anything is possible. - Choppin' it Up Youth

This takes planning from a lifespan or multigenerational approach to an intergenerational approach. Intergenerational civic engagement, bringing generations together around social issues that impact communities, helps to broaden voices, bringing more perspectives into social agendas and dialogue. This might look like an intergenerational council, in which youth and adults serve together to ensure that there is an intergenerational lens and priority placed in policy and programmatic decision-making. This approach also engages the strengths of all the generations as active community contributors.

> *Communities for All Ages* is a national initiative that helps communities address critical issues from a multi-generational perspective and promote the well-being of all age groups. The approach is focused on creating vibrant, healthy places for growing up and growing older. Communities for All Ages is a life span approach to community building that can used by communities to: a) address critical issues from a multi-generational, cross-sector perspective; b) improve the well-being of people at every life stage; and c) change community norms to reflect a sense of shared fate and collective responsibility for the well-being of all residents. Communities bring together residents of all ages, local institutions/organizations, policy makers, funders, and media to build on common concerns (e.g. safety, transportation, access to services) and create positive community change.

Youth can be involved at many levels in active partnerships with adults. Below is a checklist to determine how youth are engaged at different levels of youth-adult partnerships, some possibly more effective than others (*Authentic youth engagement: A guide for municipal leaders*, 2010)

- ☐ Young people and adults share decision making and action
- ☐ Young people lead and initiate action
- ☐ Adult initiated, shared decision with youth
- ☐ Young people are consulted and informed
- ☐ Young people are assigned and informed
- ☐ Young people are tokenized
- ☐ Young people are decoration
- ☐ Young people are manipulated

Research in both youth and adult human development shows that when people participate in community, they gain a sense of mastery and purpose. In addition, they are able to further develop important problem solving and communication skills. Choppin' it Up has shown us that effective partnerships are relationally responsive and reflect mutual respect and equality in power and participation. We are continuing to strengthen youth-adult partnerships by participating in ongoing opportunities to engage in collaborative social action. We are bringing in the patterns of interaction and ways of being in relationship that the Choppin' it Up youth found to be most useful in their work together, to the youth-adult partnerships that are developing. Adults that have participated in learning and social action with the Choppin' it Up youth are finding new places and ways of speaking that are opening a way forward to radically different possibilities. These different possibilities are growing out of strengthened relationships where youth and adults are seeing each other in new ways. A colleague Michelle McQuaid shared a quote from *My Stroke of Insight* (Taylor, 2008) where the author explains how after she lost her ability to speak she longed to communicate: "Whatever my age, whatever my credentials, reach for me. Respect me. I am in here. Come find me." Maybe the first step to creating good intergenerational relationships is to reach for each other with respect–to find each other.

What if we were to think that each human being might be deep inside chanting – "Reach for me. Find me. I am here. Find my greatness.' When I listen for this chant, I imagine a buzzing that illuminates our interconnectedness in the beehive of humanity. This great power to be seen, heard and to discover and care for each other, is to be alive in our fullest, with connection at our core.

> Discovering our connectedness through dialogue and collaboration creates the buzz of humanity, illuminating infinite positive possibilities. Reach for me in conversation. Find my greatness through collaboration. Connect me to the hive of humanity. Hear the world hum as one. – Kristin Bodiford and Michelle McQuaid

One young man shared that through his relationships in Choppin' it Up, others saw in him what he always wanted people to see, but he didn't even know existed, that they were a mirror for his greatness. I have found this element of wanting to be seen, be heard and be discovered is ageless. In my work around creating livable communities for all ages, I hold stories like the following central. In this story, a woman in her eighties wrote to me:

> I live in a gated senior community with all the amenities one could dream of, workshops, handicrafts, exercise, etc., you name it we have it. And yet I am longing, longing, to walk to the corner coffee shop, to hear the sound of children playing, dogs barking. I want to eat at the corner cafe, see young people in love, walk to the library, catch the BART into the city, watch mothers with their children in the park, young families, teenies in the latest, wildest outfit. Yes, I'm lucky to have what I do and I never forget that. But, I am excluded from the mainstream of life.
>
> Please consider in your conversations, that there are many of us who do not want to be maintained. We want to belong, not only to each other, with whom we may have only one common denominator, age, but to society. We want to be "just like every one else." Think about building communities that are whole. We need each other, we can learn to care about each other, support the young and the old, give what we have the energy to do, not what society has assigned to. Instead of a multi million-dollar resort where every need is met and everything is planned for the generic aging American, think up something daring, something challenging, something creative (A. Leitch, Personal communication, February 21, 2008).

As we strengthen our ability to come together across ages and cultures around issues that matter to us we often find realities that challenge us. To collaborate and to be in dialogue takes practice and intentionality. As we hold a shared purpose at the center of our work, we create forms of relationship that support our practice. In our relationships with each other a resilient community takes shape. The resource is our conversations with each other. We can begin with conversation–one conversation at a time. We must take the first step, and begin it now.

Whatever you can do, or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now." W. H. Murray in The Scottish Himalaya Expedition Attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (Murray, 1951).

The youth have made a strong commitment to positive social action and invite us to join them. Let us join them making a difference in their community and in our world.

I am not here to destroy the community, but to restore it.... It is time for us to move into action. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Conclusion

The youth discovered powerful possibilities for creative action together and within themselves. Through the narratives they developed and action they took, they painted a vision for us. The youth *created* something to inspire us and something to build upon.

George Sampson (2008, p. 139) states, "...our lives must be a shared story, never entirely ours alone." How we create this shared story with youth carries many possibilities. And as the youth have shown us in this project, when we create a shared story with love, courage, and compassion, we can also experience great transformation.

The work continues. There holds a promise of tremendous potential if youth are able to share and link their stories with youth from other communities around the world. David Denborough from the Dulwich Centre in Australia talk about the power of linking stories between communities as a narrative approach to working with the skills and knowledge of communities. In this approach, at least two communities are invited to become an outsider witness to the stories of the other (Denborough, 2008, P. 195). This form of community engagement is characterized by a criss-crossing exchange of stories and messages. These are stories and messages that contain hard-won knowledge about ways of responding to tough times (Denborough et al., 2006, p. 20).

Youth in Antioch, California and youth in Manizales, Colombia began exchanging their stories and sharing responses by acknowledging each others' stories and experiences. What might it look like if these youth were to reach out and connect with more youth around the world, to share their stories, their dreams, and their hard-won knowledge and skills? What type of social change might be possible when youth lead dialogues for positive change?

The journey forward illuminates the possibility to contribute to a collective narrative about how youth respond to tough times to develop a sense of shared purpose that promotes resilience and creates positive change in communities.

EPILOGUE: CONTINUING THE JOURNEY

"It is time for us to move into action"

> **There is a hope, however timid, on the street corners, a hope in each and every one of us.... I do not understand human existence, and the struggle needed to improve it apart from hope and dream (Freire, 1994, p. 2).**

In this chapter, I will share my reflections on 1) what is important to support and extend work like Choppin' it Up, 2) what further research might be useful, and 3) what I would do differently next time.

Continuing our work

Growing and building an ongoing conversation is important to the Choppin' it Up youth to create the change they want to see in the world. They continue to generate meaning through collaborative action and we look for any invitation for continuing dialogue. In addition, sustaining and growing their ongoing leadership development and youth leadership roles and opportunities is a critical part of their commitment to social action. They have begun expanding conversations throughout the county as part of teen dating abuse prevention, the state of California through participation in important policy events, and globally in workshops and training. In addition, we all look for avenues to tell our story. Creating and sharing stories was a critical element of our project. We can look at how processes like Story Harvesting and Definitional Ceremonies can be incorporated into our ongoing work. The youth and I cowrote a chapter for a book on Appreciative Inquiry in Schools. Their videos were also included in the AI Practitioner first video journal in April 2012.

The youth received a grant to build on their intergenerational efforts through Generations United. The youth developed a plan for storytelling that they will implement in 2012/2013. In this project, they realize that creativity and storytelling can be used as a tool to help envision and tell the story of positive change in their community.

The youth have taken on an important role as the Youth Directors Council for the Antioch Police Activities League to develop the organization into a constructive force to support youth in the community. They would like to integrate the peer mediation skills they have developed into formal peer mediation programs.

Building a solid foundation

It is important to build a solid foundation in the community to support youth development initiatives and provide ongoing support for youth. The strong collaborative of stakeholders in Antioch was key in both engaging the youth, and also engaging adult and organizational partners to support the youth of Choppin' it Up. The important partnerships with the Antioch Unified School District, The Williams Group, Families Thrive, and the Antioch Police Activities League

was already developed as part of the Youth Intervention Network. In addition, the adults involved had all been trained on the Dialogue for Peaceful Change methodology, including myself, Iris Archuleta from YIN, Superintendent Don Gill from Antioch Unified School District, Principals Louie Rocha and John Jimno and Scott Bergerhouse, Vernon Williams from The Williams Group, Chief Allan Cantando from the Antioch Police Department, Ron Bennett from the Antioch Police Activities League, and several of the elder advisors including Pastor Paul Taylor, City Council Member Mary Rocha, and School Board Member Joy Motts. This collaborative of stakeholders supported the youth from the very beginning and continue to be a source of strong and nurturing support for the youth's ongoing development and recognition as leaders in the community. Their goal of creating a community that functions like a village, to prevent young people from being marginalized or falling through the cracks, has extended an important role of voice and community leadership to the youth of Choppin' it Up. They have in effect, included youth in building a sustainable and systemic web of support for youth and other community members in Antioch, a clear example of a community initiative "of the people", "by the people", "for the people" (Barter, 2005, p. 352).

Integration of parents and caregivers

Given the critical importance of parent and caregiver relationships in child and adolescent development, an important next step in supporting the youth of Choppin' it Up would be to integrate parents more into the training that community members and youth are participating in. Integration of family, school, and community creates coordination and synergy and avoids lack of communication and conflict. It also continues to build capacity to support positive youth development, creating a shared language in the schools, community, and homes of the youth.

Choppin' it Up youth took that first step by inviting their families to the community event in May, 2011 to participate in a community dialogue, engaging their families' strengths and experiences in envisioning positive changes in their community. There are several things we could do to strengthen the engagement of families:

1. Build cultural responsiveness by ensuring a translator and translated materials are available at every event.
2. Build a communications strategy that includes parents/caregivers in updates and key information.
3. Extend training to parents and caregivers.
4. Create opportunities for family involvement in social action.

Several parents of Choppin' it Up youth have become involved in the teen dating abuse initiative, bringing their important voice to the conversation. We can work to integrate parents/caregivers with training on teen dating abuse, and strengthening their skills as effective advocates along with their children. Within these collaborative initiatives, parents/caregivers and youth can be valued as both equal partners and resources for the strengths needed to address the youths' and families' specific challenges.

Peer to peer support

Many times the topic of providing peer to peer support came up when we were talking about relationship abuse and other issues that teens face. Youth talked about the importance of having a space like they had in Choppin' it Up to talk about their lives and to develop a web of relationships and support in their schools. They spoke of the relief of knowing they were not alone in their experiences and challenges.

> ***If we had Choppin it Up more in our schools, many kids would not turn to drugs and other things to deal with their problems. They would realize they are not alone. - Choppin' it Up Youth***

Much research supports peer to peer support programs. Research around peer-peer support and norm shaping has shown great promise in early intervention and prevention of adolescent relationship violence, bullying, and suicide (Wyman et al., 2010). Researchers at University of Washington found peer communication and peer trust positively impacts youth exposed to domestic violence by decreasing risk and negative outcomes such as depression, running away from home, and high school dropout (Tajima, Herrenkohl, Moylan, & Derr, 2010) Herrenkohl also shares in *Violence in Context: Current Evidence on Risk, Protection, and Prevention* that when youth cannot access the support they require in their families, mentors, and social networks in the community are an important source of support. Factors such as neighborhood cohesion and opportunities for meaningful engagement with other adults and prosocial peers who can serve as mentors and sources of support can buffer the effects of family violence. (Herrenkohl, 2011, p. 100)

Sources of Strength (http://www.sourcesofstrength.org) is a model that was developed to address suicide prevention involving peer leaders to enhance protective factors in a school population. It emphasizes a wellness message of building multiple strengths, increasing youth-adult relationships and trust while also reducing isolation and addressing norms that promote codes of silence. In the study, they examined effectiveness of the program in enhancing protective factors among both peer leaders and the entire student population. They found that training improved norms regarding suicide, connectedness to adults, and school engagement. The largest gains were in schools that entered with the least adaptive norms. The research highlighted three findings (Wyman et al., 2010):

1. Adult training alone was unlikely to significantly increase detection and response to suicidal youth;
2. Suicidal peers were the least likely to seek adult help; and
3. Developmentally, adolescents seek help through their peer friendships.

Researchers shared that one of the most empowering aspects of Sources of Strength is the process of drawing out individual stories of strength developed by the youth themselves and spreading these messages through schools, communities, and friendship groups. Sources of Strength is an excellent example of building capacity through effective storytelling about

resiliency, hope, strength, and help told by youth themselves along with their adult allies. They have found this process translates across cultures, generations, and backgrounds.

When we talk about prosocial peer support we are distinguishing between peer support with friends who are making dangerous choices and peer support with friends who are making choices and goals that are generally considered as positive.

When I am involved with Choppin' it Up it keeps me on the right path, focused on my goals. - Victor, Choppin' it Up Youth

Choppin' it Up youth also talked about the need to separate from peers who were making choices that didn't align with their goals.

A few years later I decided to make a change and stop hanging out with them. I learned one thing you can always work on is yourself. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Slowly over time, I learned commitment, acceptance, and separation. Separation from my friends who weren't making the choices I was now committed to making. - Choppin' it Up Youth

Peer mediation - Tension and conflict in community context

There are opportunities to bring our learning into relational spaces in the context of conflict or tension, tensions between meanings and actions, between stories told, stories listened to, and social action that results from this relational interchange (Pearce & Pearce, 1998, pp. 7-8). Pearce and Pearce propose that resolution of tensions can be paralyzing, potentially freezing the conversation, particularly when we are stuck in a position of needing agreement. Sally Ann Roth from Public Conversations Project (1999, p. 3) asks: "How can we create a place where we can experience our connection with each other through our very differences? A place where neither of us gives up central beliefs, values, and commitments, but where the tension of our difference can provide a kind of meeting, so that our conversation about difference can generate a fresh culture?"

If as Pearce and Pearce propose that at times tensions can be irreducible or unsolvable, we can either try to resolve the tension, potentially stopping us in our tracks or we can find a way to go on together, being aware of the tension. Yet another way to go on together is to honor and privilege our relationships with each other in the context of conflict, tension, or disagreement. This commitment to relationship provides a way to go forward, creates an opening and space for others, and gives up holding on to a certain view. McNamee asks of us to consider this path forward with people, a clear attentive choice for privileging relationship and possibilities that may emerge from this relational orientation.

The Public Conversations Project (http://www.publicconversations.org) offers a useful framework for dialogue in the midst of sometimes historically entrenched conflict. Dialogue in this sense is not designed to resolve the conflict, but refers to "a conversation in which people who have different beliefs and perspectives seek to develop mutual understanding" (Herzig & Chasin, 2006, p. 3).

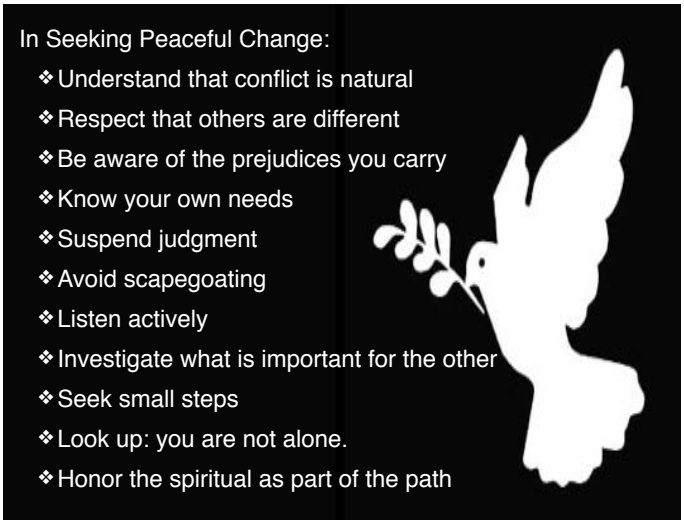
In this world of polarizing conflicts, we have glimpsed a new possibility: a way in which people can disagree frankly and passionately, become clearer in heart and mind about their activism, and, at the same time, contribute to a more civil and compassionate society (Herzig & Chasin, 2006, Dedication)

Dialogue for Peaceful Change offers an ecological view in the context of violence and conflict in our communities. At the foundation of the model is a belief that conflict is a normal part of life, that it either can be constructive and help us grow and learn or seriously hamper our relationships and development. DPC provides practical ways to manage all aspects of conflict before they intensify and cause potential harm. The theoretical framework offers a way to view conflict through a mediative dialogue process to help us navigate our way to co-constructing understanding, reconciliation, resolution, and ultimately transformation in our relationships, families, and communities.

As we look at how conflict develops within a system, we can navigate our way to more peaceful constructions. Within a growing narrative of conflict there also lies other potential narratives, that are alive, part of our lived experiences, or may be embedded in our hopes and aspirations. These alternative narratives provide a possible place to turn the tide of the conflict towards reconciliation. Unearthing, mining, generating these stories while also honoring the lived experience of the conflict at hand, helps provide alternative pathways forward.

For example, within expressions of youth violence, there also exists narratives and stories that contain the alternative expressions of power and the hopes and dreams of youth. By providing a safe space and process that is embedded in our co-constructions in a sustainable and ongoing way, we provide a place for youth to generate, express, and work within the community to co-construct alternatives that will better help them navigate their way to health. Building youth and community capacity to go on together in the midst of conflict would be an important area to continue to build upon.

With less opportunities for interchange, there is a tendency for accounts of the other to become simplified and to explain others' actions in a negative way, trending toward extremity (Gergen, McNamee & Barrett, 2001, p. 697).



Choppin' it Up youth were the first group of youth in the world to go through the Dialogue for Peaceful Change training to strengthen their ability to work through areas of conflict and differences and to receive the distinction as Dialogue for Peaceful Change certified peer mediators. This skill allows for multiple perspectives to be mutually transformative, being heard and hearing another, and finding opportunities for generative social action. They joined a network of 765 people from around the world.

The youth feel strongly that their skills could contribute to effective peer mediation programs in their schools. An important next step would be to develop official programs, possibly in partnership with volunteer adult trained DPC mediators from the community, and support ongoing peer mediation training.

Public Policy

Policy that recognizes the role of youth is critical to creating systems change. With a 26-10 vote on January 26, 2012, the California State Senate approved Senate Bill 803 to create the California Youth Leadership Project to support and promote youth civic engagement by awarding scholarships to youth ages 14-18.

> "California's youth have something to say and deserve to be heard," said Senator Mark DeSaulnier (D-Concord). "Underserved young people face many challenges. The Legislature needs to hear from them, especially on issues like poverty, bullying, addiction, and education. This legislation will provide much needed funding to help give these youth a voice in their government." Senator Mark DeSaulnier (D-Concord, CA) (California State Senate Majority Caucus, 2012).

Youth also play an important role in influencing policy. When Choppin' it Up youth met with staff of Senator DeSaulnier and Assemblymember Bonilla they remarked how powerful the voice of youth can be, especially collective youth voice in influencing public policy. One staff remarked that when she listened to the Choppin' it Up youth as they shared what they believed in and stood for, it made her remember why she does the work she does.

Training and education for teachers and youth serving professionals

Building upon what we have learned in Choppin' it Up, youth can serve as trainers with their adult partners on how to build courage and compassion in our schools, youth serving agencies and organizations, and our communities. Jordan Sizelove, Youth Leader in Choppin' it Up,

shares three things he thinks teachers and other people who support and work with youth can learn from their experience in Choppin' it Up:

1. Don't judge
2. Keep an open mind, and
3. Be courageous.

If teachers were able to see me for who I am, things would be a lot different. Sometimes, they don't know our struggles and don't take the time to talk to us. They may judge us right away if we do something wrong because we're having a bad day, and kick us out instead of talking to us to see what's the matter. - Choppin' it Up Youth

The State of Washington, Family Policy Council is focusing on the impact of Adverse Child Experiences (ACES) and building community capacity to reduce ACES and problems associated with ACES (http://www.fpc.wa.gov/). As part of this statewide focus, the State of Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction is focusing on how education professionals and community members can support students impacted by trauma.

When the heart speaks, listen. Then respond compassionately and consistently. - Mona M. Johnson

Mona M. Johnson, M.A., CPP, CDP, one of the authors of *The Heart of Learning and Teaching, Compassion, Resiliency, and Academic Success*, shares her spark for writing this book with her co-authors (p. xvii).

> During the early part of my life I grew up in a home deeply impacted by alcoholism and domestic violence. I saw many things firsthand that a child should never witness, including the death of a parent. At the time there was little research on the impact of stress and trauma on children or what to do about it. Today I know that even though every educator in the school I attended knew what was happening in my life–because at its worst my family events were reported in the local newspaper–no one knew what to say or how to respond to me. As a result, my way of coping was to keep everything inside, feeling isolated and alone in my pain. The good news is that after studying addiction, violence, stress, trauma and resiliency in college and beyond, I have learned there is much we can do to support youth living in these circumstances. Today I believe it is no longer OK for adults to remain silent when they witness student trauma related behaviors and it is my mission to help educators (and other helping professionals) understand this in any and every way possible. Mona Johnson,

The authors feel the collective efforts of family, school, and community are necessary, with the student at the center, to help overcome trauma, demonstrate resilience, and succeed physically, emotionally, socially, and academically in the school setting. The authors offer the following objectives in their efforts to help those who work with, live with, and support children and youth including policy makers, school and community leaders, educators, school employees, community partners, parents and family members, to respond to trauma in the lives of children and youth in a caring and compassionate way. (p. xviii-xix).

1. To exemplify practical and applicable compassionate approaches to education that may be of benefit to all members of the school community.
2. To provide "compassionate" lenses through which members of our educational communities may better understand events and consequent behaviors that interfere with the attainment of educational goals.
3. To foster resilience and create supportive learning environments for students through a cadre of school and community-based resources that are identified and families are informed about.
4. To strengthen the voice of students and parents in creating that environment and actively recruiting community partners – both public and private – who can play essential roles in actualizing this reality.
5. To provide tools and resources to members of school communities wishing to revise policies, procedures, curriculum, and instruction that will enhance compassionate learning environments.

Offering alternatives

Michael Ungar talks about providing substitutions rather than attempting to suppress behavior. What he is proposing is that communities offer alternatives and behaviors that bring sources of resilience for youth to take on new patterns and ways of feeling proud of themselves, rather than suppressing what can be seen as dangerous or delinquent behavior. He suggests communities offer alternatives that are 'dangerous' from the perspective of youth, Such alternatives would provide challenges that youth need to grow up well–like skateboard parks or other self-displayed edgy activities (Ungar, 2012).

A Google search with the words, 'youth, Antioch CA', pulls up a myriad of supportive, positive alternatives for youth:

> Antioch youth football, soccer, baseball, wrestling, cheer, Antioch Community Park, Reach Project of the Antioch Police Department, Beat the Streets, empowering young adults with adequate resources in stimulating self improvement, church youth offerings, Antioch Youth Sports Complex, Youth Jobs, Youth Intervention Network, tutoring, bowling, Antioch Chamber Youth of the Year, skate park, water park.

Other resources for positive youth involvement include the youth school board advisory and the Antioch Police Activities League - Youth Directors Council. A community's investment in its youth can often be seen in the services, programs, and facilities it offers as alternatives to youth. These opportunities provide a valuable role for youth leadership. If we were to tune into the voices of youth we could ask them what they see as available, what they find valuable, and what they want in their community.

This often requires difficult decisions about where to invest resources. In periods of economic stress, youth programming can be challenging to prioritize. Innovative approaches to community investment and development involve all ages in helping to determine how to invest limited resources that will support residents along the life span. Investing in things like parks, community centers, walkable streets, and intergenerational programming can offer something for everyone and bring the generations together, rather than pit generations against each other.

I like to think of community building as bridge building–with strengthened relationships as the bridge. This research has focused on how we build bridges in processes and practice and how researchers and social change efforts can help facilitate building bridges and connect what matters to people and the communities they live in.

In addition, we are attempting to build bridges between research and generative and useful practices, processes, to on-the-ground social change work. We often talk about it as the social architecture that builds bridges between people, across generations and cultures, to create better worlds. We focus on how to build bridges to more voices, bringing more people and voices into the conversations. In particular, we focus on helping to build bridges and to privilege, strengthen, and elevate voices that may be marginalized to social change work.

John Schotter talks about social conditions conducive to people having a voice in the development of participatory democracies and civil societies (*John Shotter's website*, n.d.). With this in mind we can continue to explore what the social conditions are that support youth to have a voice to participate and influence organizational, systems and community change. In creating room for youth voices, it is also important that we do it in a way that doesn't negate others (Gergen, 2001).

Further Research

The methodology and principles utilized in this research could be developed to provide important professional development for people who work with youth. In a review of trends and gaps in positive youth development research published between 2010-2011 only 5% of manuscripts covered professional development, focusing on the needs and issues related to youth development staff, program leaders, and volunteers (Barcelona & Quinn, 2011, p. 31). I often am asked, how much of the magic that happened in Choppin it Up was because of facilitation skills or process expertise? A useful next step in this research would be to develop and test professional development training to support and strengthen our work in co-constructing and working with youth in our schools and communities.

Given the importance of relationships that developed in our work together, further discussions and exploration of the role of peer relationships and adult-youth relationships would be a useful next step. Approximately 14% of studies reviewed on youth development over the last decade focused on peer relationships including peer support, friendships, peer-to-peer mentoring, or other forms of peer relationships (Barcelona & Quinn, 2011, p. 33). Given the emerging research on the role of peer-to-peer support in building upon youth strengths, promoting protective factors, shifting norms, and reducing at-risk behavior, we are incorporating this into dialogues about how to prevent teen dating abuse and build healthy relationships.

In addition, in our work with Choppin it Up youth as leaders in a countywide initiative to prevent teen dating violence and abuse, we began exploring what it takes to develop positive youth-adult partnerships. Despite the importance of non-parental adult role models and mentoring in the lives of youth, only 10% of the articles published addressed this topic directly (Barcelona & Quinn, 2011, p. 33). It appeared that most of the published studies in this area focused on formal mentoring programs.

Further research could expand the voices to include: teachers, administration, community leadership, and parents. Choppin' it Up youth began this effort by developing an interview guide and interviewing Superintendent Don Gill to get his perspective on changes he has seen in the youth, how he has been impacted by the project, and the possibilities he sees as a result of their participation. As the youth continue their work in the community, engaging their allied partners voices in continuing to learn together would be important.

What I would do differently

There are several things that I might do differently next time.

In our work around trauma and relationship abuse, we sometimes create single stories in order to develop powerful messages to increase awareness. This resulted from the project framing around childhood exposure to domestic violence. I wonder what would have emerged without this framing?

So many things happened throughout our work together where we were moved in the moment. I would make sure that all sessions were recorded to ensure that we captured these moments for ongoing meaning making. I also would have incorporated filming and documenting our story more intentionally from the beginning, integrating this storytelling tool into our process. There were many levels of story to tell. Filming each day as a documentary of our process would have helped to capture many of these stories. In addition, it would have been useful to have youth reflect on a daily basis about the process we were engaged in.

The shift to a more relational orientation happened during later stages of the project. I wonder how the project would have been different had we begun a focus on what we were creating together in our relationships together earlier in the project. I am curious about how we would integrate language of individual resources and strengths to more of a relational orientation. I would be interested in looking at elements and actions that were constructed in our

relational space, like trust, safety, collaboration. I would like to track the principles, tools, and practices that help to make dialogue and collaboration easier, helping us to find the way to each other and to the discoveries that unfold in relationship. It would have been useful to have the kids reflect on these principles as they developed–what they found useful and what they thought helped in the construction of these elements in the relational space. For example, we could have tracked how the following developed and what it looked like. Our learning from this could be translated into environments like schools e.g., "What if a class begun the year by creating a common framework and shared values?" I find the following elements useful to promote effective collaboration.

> Common framework and shared values – A common framework that includes shared values helps to shape how we work together, such as being strengths-based, holding what brings us together at the center of our work, including all voices in the work.
>
> Qualities that support collaboration – Trust means different things to different people. Talking about what trust, transparency, and respect look like in our collaborative and dialogic work is important to bring to the table and construct as a group.
>
> Commitment to relationship – Often when we are immersed in our collaborative work, we skimp on investing in how we communicate, including how often, about what, and in supporting people's contributions to the conversation. It takes energy and commitment to develop relationships that not only make our work together more effective, but also help to create and support sustainable change over time. Our deepest transformation can happen through strengthening our relationships.
>
> Convening – Collaborative work happens in a space, supporting people to come together–whether physical or online. A blended approach–meeting in person and supporting ongoing dialogue and work online is helpful.
>
> Rhythm of work and leaving – Coming together in collaboration and being in dialogue with each other is like a dance that needs a rhythm, pulse or beat. This rhythm holds the group together in the work and allows it to flow, change direction, speed up, or slow down. The leaving can be done when this pulse is slowing, and the purpose is fading. Leaving doesn't reinforce a separateness, but rather acknowledges a new purpose or direction while honoring our continued connection in a new form.
>
> Celebration – Collaboration and dialogue can be hard work. Celebration honors our investment of time and resources and acknowledges our achievements and learning as a group.

It would also be useful to have the kids reflect with their one language what the principles of dialogue and collaboration mean to them. For example, when we say "Invite Alternative

Perspectives", what does that mean to them in their own words? How does it show up in their lives and conversations with others? What value does it bring to them?

Principles of collaborative inquiry could have been integrated sooner and more consistently throughout the project. For example, we could have had youth contribute to the design of dialogue questions and give input to the methods of analysis. At one point, we asked them who else might need to be part of their dialogue. We might have wanted to build upon this to have ongoing dialogues within the community. We had a local advisory that included YIN, AUSD, and Families Thrive that we could have engaged to help construct questions that mattered to them as well. We could have also asked youth to design questions they want people to ask them or share what they think we need to know more about their lives and experiences. Or we could have asked the community e.g., teachers, YIN mediators, administration, police, etc., "What do you want to learn more about youth lives and experiences? What do you want to ask the youth?" There is always opportunity to think about steps to involve more voices and develop more locally informed dialogic questions and analytical methods.

For ongoing data analysis and meaning making, the youth could invite their parents, a friend, a principal, the superintendent, a teacher, a mentor, a grandparent, a sibling etc., to reflect back to them how they have seen that the person (interviewer) has changed, how they (interviewee) have been changed in relationship with them, etc. From these stories, we would possibly get a richer description of how the youth and people in their lives have changed as a result of this process.

It would have been helpful to do some facilitator training on how to hold a space where youth voice was privileged and where we were actively co-constructing with youth. The importance of preparing adults in how to actively co-construct with youth and shift how we are in relationship with youth became evident as the youth continued their work with adults. Developing a training for adult facilitators/allies would have been useful and could be an important next step.

I would want to explore how to support people to enter or leave the space that we created in Choppin' it Up. Several times the youth would bring friends or we would have visitors and it had various impacts on the group. In addition, some people participated and some did not. If trust was something we constructed in our work together, I am curious about the ongoing or (re)making with new participants.

The kids shared with me that having their peers and family are important audiences for them. So in capturing this audience for co-creation, it might be useful to have something written for youth and families. Maybe the youth could create a handout with key messages and learning that they would want to share.

As we work to increase the capacity of youth, it is also important to prepare the system to respond to new possibilities. For example, one young women was approached by several other young women at school who threatened to fight her. She went to her Vice Principal and requested mediation. While district and school staff had been through the same mediation training as this young woman, they had not set up a system to respond to conflicts as they arose.

The Vice Principal told the young woman that there was nothing they could do and to go back to class. When the other young women jumped her, she fought back and was suspended. A useful approach to do this is a reflection-in-action view of community capacity building. *In Alternative Approaches to Promoting the Health and Well-being of Children*, Ken Barter shares a view of community capacity building that is about caring, respect, acceptance, and personal and social power.

> **Instead of a knowing-in-action approach, community capacity building is a reflection-in-action approach. Reflection-in-action is a process of dialogue, analysis and consciousness-raising that creates opportunities to challenge thinking, develop relationships, revisit assumptions and beliefs, and consider new approaches to service delivery (Barter, 2005, pp. 343).**

I would have liked to incorporate an ongoing reflection of how all participants and our relationships had been changed throughout the process. Through this process we could develop stories and responses to each other in our writing and include poetry, photos, and dialogues to represent our relational work. The Most Significant Change Methodology (MSC) is a story-based methodology that involves as many stakeholders in a change process as possible and asks them to share stories that capture what they think are the most significant changes that have resulted from a project or an intervention. It was developed by Rick Davies and Jessica Dart. It has been used around the world as a methodology that is both participatory and captures both the hard data and the hard to capture data about changes at the intangible level–in peoples' hearts and minds, and in our relationships with each other. People participate at all stages of the evaluation process –in developing and telling the stories, in analyzing the collective stories to draw out patterns, common themes, and divergences; and in sharing the overall results. In this way people actually define their own indicators of what works, and use their own stories, experiences, and knowledge to share and analyze these stories (Davies & Dart, April, 2005).

As we move into community change as a result of Choppin' it Up it gives me pause in how to continue to tell the story. At what point does the story change? This was vivid to me when the youth invited elder advisors to join them in planning for their intergenerational work. They chose to start the meeting with everyone sharing how they have been stereotyped. While it was useful to have each generation share this with each other, I was wondering at what point the youth wanted to leave that particular story or stories of significant adversity and transformation behind? It is an empowering process for us to share our stories. At the same time, I wonder at what point is it more useful for us to begin to tell new stories? While this is something I am curious about, when we have opportunities to share stories at events, I leave this to the youth to determine.

I would have also liked to incorporate more storytelling techniques about the relational changes we experienced in our work. In particular, Barnett and Kimberly Pearce, in *Transcendent Storytelling* (1998) talk about storytelling in a systemic practice of therapy. In addition, they discuss how constructionist storytelling is generative and has the potential to "change reality and create new things" (p. 22) I would reorient it to community and social change and ask:

- What possibilities emerge as we co-construct new stories in communities?
- How do we co-construct better worlds by co-constructing new stories?
- How are our social worlds made more complex, rich and productive through co-constructing new stories?
- How do we co-construct stories about what it means to live a life and be in relation to each other?'

Barnett and Kimberly propose we consider what story or pattern exists in a particular situation or way of being or thinking. And then to ask: "What is the new story we want to tell?" And: "Who should tell it?"

This process for thinking opens up positive possibilities in ways of talking about shifting from competition to collaboration, scarcity to abundance, and isolation to connection–myriads of possibilities that may create more rich and productive social worlds. For example, if there exists an antagonistic relationship or story between a service system and the citizens it was designed to serve, how might we together form a new story that better serves society? How do we find within our existing ways of being in relation to each other–seeds of possibilities, stories of collaboration? What is that new story? How do we construct it? Who should tell it?

Conclusion

My intention in writing this dissertation is not to present this as "the right way" or say, "if you do this, this will happen", but rather as an exploration of *how* we can work with and for youth that leads to positive possibilities. My experience has taught me that when we pay attention to how we are orienting ourselves in relationship to each other, magic can happen. I would love to hear how any of this struck you. If you decide to play with the ideas, I would love to hear about your experience, what you find useful, and what you learn and create in the process.

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