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A Ten-Year-Old's Use of Creative Content to Construct an Alternative Future for Herself

Lelia Rosalind Green, Kylie Justine Stevenson

Abstract

The Project

The *Hand Up* Linkage project focuses on the family as a communication context through which to explore the dynamics of intergenerational welfare dependency. In particular, it explores ways that creative life-course interventions might allow children in welfare dependent families to construct alternative realities for themselves and alternative views of their future. Formed through an alliance between a key Western Australian social welfare not-for-profit organisation, St Vincent de Paul WA (SVPWA) and also, in the context of volunteers, 'Vinnies', and Edith Cowan University, the project aims to address the organisation's vision to provide "a hand up" (St Vincent 1) rather than 'a hand out', so that people can move forward with their lives without becoming dependent upon welfare.

Prior to the start of the research, SVPWA already had a whole of family focus in its outreach to poverty-impacted families including offering homework clubs and school holiday children's camps run by their youth services division. Selected families supported by SVPWA have been invited to participate in an in-depth interview for the project (Seidman), partly so that researchers can help identify "turning points" (King et al.) that might disrupt the communication of welfare dependency and inform more generalised intervention strategies; but also in order to explore the response to creative interventions within the children's daily lives, including investigation of how strategies the child (and family) employed might help them to imagine alternative realities and futures for themselves. This paper closely examines the way that one 10 year old child from a non-English-speaking background family has employed alternative ways of viewing her life, through the camp program provided by the Linkage Partner St Vincent de Paul WA, and through reading novels such as *Harry Potter* and the Lemony Snicket *Unfortunate Incidents* series. Such activities help fuel hope for a different future which, in Snyder's view has "two main components: the ability to plan pathways to desired goals despite obstacles, and agency or motivation to use those pathways" (Carr 96).

The Family

Kani is a 10 year old girl living in a migrant sole parent family. The parents had moved to Australia from Bangladesh on student visas when Kani was 5 years old, however due to domestic violence the mother had recently separated from her husband, first into a women's refuge then into private rental accommodation. The mother is in protracted negotiations with the Department of Immigration for permanent residency, which she had to recommence due to her separation. There are also family court negotiations for child custody and which restrict her leaving Australia. She receives no government benefits and minimal child support, works fulltime and pays full childcare fees for Kani's 3 year old brother Adil and full primary school fees for Kani at a local religious school, given that Kani had experienced bullying and social aggression in previous schools. Kani was referred to SVPWA by the women's refuge and she began attending SVPWA Kids' Camps thereafter. (NB: Whilst the relevant specifics of this description are accurate, non-relevant material has been added or changed to protect the child's and family's identity.)

Creative Life-Course Interventions

The creative engagement that Kani experienced in the *Hand Up* project is constructed as one component in a larger model of creativity which includes "intrapersonal insights and interpretations, which often live only within the person who created them," (Kaufman and Beghetto 4). Such an approach also acknowledges Csikszentmihalyi's work on the concept of "flow", whereby optimal experiences can result from positive absorption in a creative activity. Relevant Australian research such as the YouthWorx project has identified participatory engagement in creativity as one means of engaging with young people at risk (Hopkins; Podkalicka). The creative interventions in the *Hand Up* project take two forms; one is the predesigned and participatory creative activities delivered as part of the SVPWA Kids' Camp program. The second is a personalised intervention, identified by way of an in-depth interview with the child and parent, and is wholly dependent on the interests expressed by the child, the ability for the family to engage in that activity, and the budget restraints of the project.

Reading as an Alternative Reality

A key creative intervention embedded in the *Hand Up* Linkage project is determined by the interests expressed by the child during their in-depth interview. Also taken into account is the ability for the family to engage in that activity. For example, Kani's mother works fulltime at a location which is an hour by public transport from home and does not have a car or driver's license, so the choice of creative opportunity was restricted to a home-based activity or a weekend activity accessible by public transport. A further restriction is the limited budget available for this intervention in the project, along with an imperative that such interventions should be equitable between families and within families, and be of benefit to all the children in addition to the interviewed child. Fortunately, transport was not an issue because Kani expressed her interest very emphatically as books and reading.

When asked what she liked doing most in life, Kani replied: "Reading. I like reading like big books, like really thick books and stuff. I have like 30 in my room. Like those really big books. And I'm starting to read Harry Potter now. Okay, the books that I like reading is Harry Potter, the entire set Roald Dahl books and the Baudelaire Orphans by Lemony Snicket. I like reading David Walliams. I like Little Women" (Kani). Her excitement in listing these books further animated the interview and was immediately emphasised because Kani took the interviewer (second author) and her mother into her room to demonstrate the truth of her statement. When asked again at the close of the interview "what's a favourite thing that makes you feel good inside?" Kani's answer was "Family and reading".

The energy and enthusiasm with which Kani talked about her reading and books made these the obvious choice as her creative intervention. However, participation in book-related courses or after-school activities was restricted by Kani's mother's transportation limitations. Taking into account how the financial constraints of her sole parent family impacted upon their capacity to buy books, and the joy that Kani clearly experienced from having books of her own, it was decided that a book voucher would be provided for her at a local bookstore easily accessible by bus. The research team negotiated with the bookstore to try to ensure that Kani could choose a book a month until the funds were expended so that the intervention would last most of the coming six months.

What Kani was expressing in her love of books was partly related to the raw material they provide that help her to imagine the alternative reality of the fictional worlds she loved reading about. Kani's passionate engagement in these alternative realities reflects theories of narrative immersion in one's chosen medium: "One key element of an enjoyable media experience is that it takes individuals away from their mundane reality and into a story world. We call the process of becoming fully engaged in a story *transportation into a narrative world*" (Green et al. 311–12). Kani said: "Reading is everything, yeah. Like getting more books and like those kind of things and making me read more... 'cause I really love reading, it's like watching a movie. Do you know ... have you watched Harry Potter? ... the book is nothing like the movie, nothing, they've missed so many parts so the book is more enjoyable than the movie. That's why I like reading more. 'Cause like I have my own adventures in my head." This process of imagining her own adventures in her head echoes Green and Brock's explanation of the process of being transported into alternative realities through reading as a result of "an integrative melding of attention, imagery, and feelings" (701).

Constructing Alternative Realities for Herself and an Alternative Possible Future

Like many 10 year olds, Kani has a challenging time at school, exacerbated by the many school moves brought about by changes in her family circumstances. Even though she is in a school which supports her family's faith, her experience is one of being made to feel an outsider: "all the boys and the girls in our class are like friends, they're like ... it's a group. But I'm not in their group. I have my friends in other classes and they're [my classmates are] not happy with it, that's why they tease me and stuff. And like whenever I play with my friends they're like ... yeah". The interviewer asked her what she liked about her special friends. "They're fun. Creative like, enjoyable, yeah, those kind of things ...they have lots of cool ideas like plans and stuff like that." As Hawkins et al. argue, the capacity to develop and maintain good relationships with peers (and parents) is a key factor in helping children be resilient. It is likely that Kani also shares her creativity, ideas and plans with her friendship group as part of her shared contribution to its existence.

A domestication of technology framework (Silverstone et al.) can be useful as part of the explanation for Kani's use of imaginative experience in building her social

relationships. Silverstone et al. argue that technology is domesticated via four interlocking activities: 'appropriation' (where it embraced, purchased, taken into the household), 'objectification' (where a physical space is found for it), 'incorporation' (the spaces through which it is inserted into the everyday activities of the household or users) and 'conversion' (whereby the experience and fact of the technology use – or lack of use – becomes material through which family members express themselves and their priorities to the social world beyond the home). Arguably, Kani 'converts' her engagement with books and associated imaginative experiences into social currency through which she builds relationships with the like-minded children with whom she makes friends. At the same time, those children feed into her ideas of what constitutes a creative approach to life and help energise her plans for the future.

Kani's views of her future (at the age of 10) are influenced by the traditional occupations favoured by high achieving students, and by the fact that her parents are themselves educational high achievers, entering Australia on student visas. "I want to be a doctor ... my cousin wants to be a doctor too. Mum said lawyer but we want to be a doctors anywhere. We want to be a ...me and my cousin want to be doctors like ...we like being doctors and like helping people." Noting the pressures on the household of the possible fees and costs of high school, Kani adds "I need to work even harder so I get a scholarship. 'Cause like my mum can't pay for like four terms, you know how much money that will be? Yeah."

Kani's follow-on statement, partly to justify why she wants "a big house", adds some poignancy to her reference to a cousin (one of many), who still lives in Bangladesh and whom Kani hasn't seen since 2011. "Like I want to live with my mum and like yeah and like I live with my cousin too because like I have a cousin ... she's a girl, yeah? And like yeah, she's in Bangladesh, I haven't seen her for very long time so yeah." In the absence of her extended family overseas, Kani adds her pets to those with whom she shares her family life: "And my mum and my uncle and then our cat Dobby. I named it [for Harry Potter's house elf] ...and the goldfish. The goldfish are Twinkle, Glitter, Glow and Bobby."

Kani's mum notes the importance of an opportunity to dream a future into existence: "maybe she's too young or she hasn't really kind of made up her mind as yet as to what she wants to do in life but just going out and just you know doing stuff and just giving them the opportunity". The SVPDWA Kids' Camp is an important part of this "they [the refuge] kind of told us like 'there's this child camp': ... I was like yeah, sure, why not?"

Providing Alternative Spaces at the SVPDWA Kids' Camp

The SVPDWA Kids' Camps themselves constitute a creative intervention in offering visions of alternative realities to their young participants. Their benefit is delivered via anticipation, as well as the reality of the camp experience. As Kani said "I forget all about the things that's just past, like all the hard things, you know like I go through and stuff and it just makes me forget it and it makes me like think about camp, things we're going to do at camp". The Kids' Camps take place three times a year and are open to children aged between 8 and 13, with follow-on Teen Camps for older age groups. Once a child is part of the program she or he can continue to participate in successive camps while they are in the target age group. Consisting of a four day activity-based experience in a natural setting, conducted by Vinnies Youth and staffed by key SVPDWA employees and Youth volunteers, the camps offer children a varied schedule of activities in a safe and supported environment, with at least one volunteer for every two child participants.

The camps are specifically made available to children from disadvantaged families and are provided virtually free to participants. (A nominal \$10 enrolment fee is applied per child). Kani was initially reticent about attending her first camp. She explained: "I was shy, scared because I sleep with my mum so it's different sleeping without Mum. I know it's kind of embarrassing 'cause, sleeping with my mum like, but I just get scared at night". Kani went on to explain how the camp facilitators were able to allay her fears "I knew I was safe. And I had people I could talk to so yeah ...like the leader". As one Vinnies Youth volunteer explains, the potential of offering children like Kani time out from the pressures of everyday life is demonstrated when "towards the end of every camp we always see that progression of, they came out of their shell ... So I think it's really just a journey for everyone and it's understandable if they did feel stuck. It's about what we can do to help them progress forward" (VY1). Kani was empowered to envision an alternative idea of herself at camp, one which was unexpectedly intuited by the research interviewer. When the interviewer closed the interview by expressing that it had been lovely to talk to Kani as she was "such a bundle of energy", Kani grinned and replied "Do you know the warm fuzzies, yeah? [When positive thoughts about others are exchanged at the SVPDWA Kids' Camp]. The bundle ... all the leaders say I'm a bundle of happiness".

The Kids' Camp provided Kani with a fun and positive alternative reality to the one she experienced as a child handling the considerable challenges experienced by social isolation, domestic violence and parental separation, including the loss of her home, diminished connection to her overseas extended family, legal custody issues, and several school changes. Taking the role of cultural intermediary, by offering the possibility of alternative realities via their camp, SVPDWA offered Kani a chance that supported her work on creating a range of enticing possible futures for herself. This was in contrast to some commercial holiday camp experiences which might more centrally use their "cultural authority as shapers of taste and ... new consumerist dispositions" (Nixon and Du Gay 497). Even so, Kani's interview made clear that her experience with the SVPDWA Kids' Camps were only part of the ways in which she was crafting a range of possible visions for her adult life, adding to this her love of books and reading, her fun, creative friends, and her vision for a successful future which would reunite her with her distant cousin and offer security to her mother.

Conclusion

Understandably, Kani at 10 lacks the critical insight required to interpret how her imaginative and creative life provides the raw materials from which she crafts her visions for the future. Further, the interviewer is careful not to introduce words like 'creative' into her work with the participant families, so that when Kani used it to talk about her friends she did so drawing upon her own store of descriptions and not as a result of having recently been reminded of creativity as a desirable attribute. The interview with this young person indicates, however, how greatly she values the imaginative and cultural inputs into her life and how she converts them in ways which help ensure access to further such creative currency. Apart from referencing her reading in the naming of her cat, Kani's vision for herself reflects both the conventional idea of success ("a doctor") and a very specific idea of her future living as an adult in house large enough to include her mum and her cousin.

Kani's love of reading, her pleasure in books, her choice of friends and her aspirations to scholarly excellence all offer her ways to escape the restricted options available to families who seek support from organisations such as SVPDWA. At the same time the Kids' Camps themselves, like Kani's books, provide an escape from the difficulties of the present. Kani's appropriation of the cultural raw materials that she draws into her life, and her conversion of these inputs into a creative, social currency, offers her an opportunity to anticipate a better future, and some tools she can use to help bring it into existence.

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