

## Re-Entry Conversations: A Restorative Narrative Practice for Student Reintegration

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### Abstract

When a student returns to school after a suspension, he or she often returns to class as if nothing has happened. The hope is that the student will have learned from the experience and will make required behavioral changes but this is largely left up to chance. Re-entry conversations are an attempt to make learning from a particular experience less haphazard. This article maps out a template for such a conversation. It is intended to be facilitated by school counselors. The article includes a story to illustrate this approach in action. The conversation illustrated is marked by an attempt to inquire into the the hopes of the student rather than to pathologize him or require his compliance with the school's hopes for him.

### Key Words

Suspension; stand-down; expulsion; exclusion; restorative practice; re-entry conversations; narrative.

### Recommended Citation

Winslade, J. and Williams, M. (2017). Re-Entry Conversations: A Restorative Narrative Practice for Student Reintegration. *Narrative and Conflict: Explorations in Theory and Practice*, 6(1), p. 22-42 Retrieved from <http://journals.gmu.edu/NandC/issue/view/202>

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## Introduction

Our aim here is to map out a template for a class of conversations that we believe is often overlooked in schools. It is not unusual for students who have crossed a disciplinary boundary to be excluded from classes or from school altogether for several days. In different jurisdictions this sanction is known by different names. Often it is called a suspension. When a student returns to school after such an exclusion, we believe that something is needed to mark the return, preferably in a way that makes it less likely that the problems that led to the exclusion will return. The aim of this article is to explore what this something might be.

Since the story to be used as an illustration below takes place in a New Zealand publicly-funded secondary school it is important to clarify the terms used in this context. Here the lowest level of exclusion from school is called a “stand-down” for a specified number of days and there is no question that a student will return to the school at the end of the standdown period. The next level of exclusion is called a “suspension”, is legally specified as a maximum of five days and it involves the making of a decision by the school Board of Trustees about whether the student will return to school. If not, the suspension will become indefinite and be called an “exclusion” (if the student is under sixteen) or an “expulsion” (if the student is over the age of sixteen).

Reasons for a stand-down or suspension are specified in the New Zealand Education Amendment Act and were last modified in 2006. The Act reads as follows:

*Section 14: Principal May Stand-down or Suspend Students*

- (1) The principal of a State school may stand-down or suspend a student if satisfied on reasonable grounds that—
  - (a) the student’s gross misconduct or continual disobedience is a harmful or dangerous example to other students at the school; or
  - (b) because of the student’s behaviour, it is likely that the student, or other students at the school, will be seriously harmed if the student is not stood-down or suspended.
- (2) A stand-down may be for 1 or more specified periods, and—
  - (a) the period or periods may not exceed 5 school days in any one term;
  - (b) a student may be stood-down more than once in the same year but for not more than 10 school days in total in that year;
  - (c) in calculating the period of a stand-down, the day on which the student was stood-down, and any day on which the student would not have had to attend school in any event, must not be counted;
  - (d) the principal may lift the stand-down at any time before it is due to expire.

(3) If a student has been stood-down or suspended, the following provisions apply in relation to the student's attendance at the school:

(a) the principal may require the student to attend the school if the principal reasonably considers the student's attendance is appropriate for the purposes of section 17A:

(b) the principal must allow the student to attend the school if the student's parents request that the student be permitted to attend the school and the principal considers the request is reasonable:

(c) otherwise the student does not have to, and is not permitted to, attend the school while stood-down or suspended.

(New Zealand Education Amendment Act, 2006)

The concern that underlies this article is that neither the Act that governs stand-downs and suspensions, nor the common practice that accompanies such actions, specifies what should happen at the end of the period of exclusion from school. Often students simply return to school, as if nothing has happened. No concern appears to be concentrated on what the student has learned from the experience. In these circumstances, learning appears to be left up to chance. We are not sure how often this happens, because we could not find previous articles that addressed the same situation, although we suspect that some schools at least do provide opportunities for re-entry conversations.

For an analogous situation, on the topic of re-entry to school after juvenile detention, an article by Lauri Goldkind (2011) aimed at school social workers suggested that, "There is a dearth of literature describing what if any interactions and interventions school social workers have with reentering young people." We suspect the same might apply to school counselors.

We believe it is possible to do better than a haphazard process in these situations and here we want to suggest a systematic approach that might maximize the possibility that a student returns to class with a different mindset. To this end, the concentration on a conversation aimed at the production of difference needs to be paramount. What is meant is a conversation which concentrates on learning from and generating different thinking from the student, rather than squeezing the student into a conversation dominated by the conditions laid down by the school.

Such a conversation will be demonstrated below but, before outlining it, let us say that it was originally envisaged as relevant to a student returning to school after suspension. However, it might also be adapted for other situations. For instance, it may be used when a student is re-entering school after juvenile detention, after a restorative conference (Winslade & Williams, 2012), or after involvement with a youth court

(Winslade, 2016). It may also be adapted for other situations not envisaged as yet.

The process illustrated here uses the skills of a school counselor. It is based on a narrative conception of these skills and concentrates on the asking of questions that produce a shift toward a different narrative, one that produces a different version of personhood and is shaped toward the “concern for the self” (Foucault, 1986). It is thus intended as an example of a conversation that produces a “technology of the self” (Foucault, 1988). It is not, however, a recipe to be followed slavishly. The aim is to generate conversations that introduce difference and invite fresh thinking so that the same old problems are interrupted. Creative practitioners will no doubt add to this model in their practice. This is still an exploratory document at this stage. The questions below represent lines of inquiry that may or may not be productive.

### **Aims of a Re-Entry Conversation**

The first aim of a re-entry conversation is to generate conscientization (Freire, 1970) about how the students’ own actions are part of a larger picture and to inquire whether the student would prefer something different. The larger picture should include a focus on the lines of force (Deleuze, 1988) that run through a situation and influence the actions of students and teachers. To this end externalizing language is used (White, 1989; Winslade & Monk, 2007; Winslade & Williams, 2012).

Another aim is to avoid blaming and shaming the student, while allowing space for the expression of what Braithwaite (1989) calls “reintegrative shame”, rather than punitive shame. The conversation should not degenerate into a compliance interview in which the school board’s specifications dominate the agenda and the student’s failings are constructed as deficits to be overcome. Instead, the student is conceived as having moral agency and as the source of her or his own thoughts of difference. Anything less than this is unlikely to produce significant change.

A further aim of a re-entry conversation is to express genuine curiosity about the student’s thinking. Such curiosity entails the communication of radical respect for what the student has to say. It also entails a willingness to learn from the student and to hear what the student says as an important contribution to an understanding of the situation.

Furthermore, such a conversation may be the first time that a student has been in contact with a counselor and, although this conversation does not fit with a narrow definition of “counseling”, we see it a legitimate function of a counselor’s practice (Winslade & Monk, 2007). Rather than taking sides with the actions of the Board of Trustees, or advocating for the rights of the student, the counselor presents him/herself as someone who is “on the side of” peaceful and harmonious relationships and is seeking to

co-author, with the teachers and with the student, a new basis for relationship with others. When done well, these conversations can open up further opportunities for counseling later on.

The final aim of a re-entry conversation is to open up new pathways of becoming for the student, and eventually for the school, in relation to this student. Such pathways are found by asking questions that require fresh thinking to generate responses. These questions are often met with a sense of surprise and with new connections between a student's preferences and his or her underlying values. The concept of becoming (Deleuze, 1994) represents a continuous process of variation, creativity and growth. Recognizing difference does not so much mean searching for what remains the same in a student's actions or words, as it does searching for indicators of change. It is built on a profound belief that such difference will always be able to be found and that it can serve as an entry point to a new narrative.

What follows are a series of groups of questions, followed by an extract from a conversation with a high school student. This conversation was conducted by the second author in his practice as a school counselor. It was written down as faithfully as it could be remembered soon after the conversation took place. These questions are not prescriptions so much as possible lines of inquiry. The headings represent classes of questions. In any one interview it would be unlikely that all the questions in this class would be used. Selection of what is most appropriate is better. One such selection is illustrated in the accompanying conversation. It is a reconstruction from memory of a re-entry conversation with one student, called here Joseph.

The questions also need to be accompanied by careful listening. Such listening can be called double listening (White, 2007) to the extent that it enables the listener to hear both the problematic narrative and the narrative that departs from openings to something different. It is also important, however, to recognize that each of these questions can be weaponized, and if asked in the wrong tone can hurt someone. Care needs to be taken so that this does not happen and that the tone used conveys respect and curiosity.

### **"Wonderfulness" Questions**

The first class of questions derives from what David Marsten, David Epston and Laurie Markham (2016) call "wonderfulness questions". These are questions which aim to bypass the pathologizing questions that are so well defended against by most young people. Rather than starting with the assumption that there is something wrong with the young person, they start with the assumption that there is something worthy of respect about this person and that this might be the most productive basis of getting acquainted. Since most students will be expecting a beginning focus on a problem narrative, starting a conversation on this

basis can appear refreshingly different, even disarming. Here are some examples of generic questions along these lines:

1. What would you guess I (or the principal, or a teacher, or another counselor) respect most about you?
2. What do you stand for? Believe in? Care about? What are you known for? How did what happened when you were suspended express that?
3. What do your friends like about you?
4. What would your parents say is most wonderful about you that we might be blind to, if we only paid attention to the problem that got you suspended?
5. What would your teachers say they like most about you that we might be blind to, if we only paid attention to the problem that got you suspended?

Now let us turn our attention to a story that entails the use of these kinds of questions. Joseph was referred by the Board of Trustees following a suspension for involvement in use of marijuana at school and he and his family appeared before the Student Disciplinary Committee. As a result of deliberations between the Student Disciplinary Committee and the family, certain conditions were imposed on his return to class including written letters of apology to his teachers, conducting research into the effects of cannabis on learning, and sharing his findings with his peers at a school assembly.

These “conditions” are intended to help the student address the harm that has been done to others by his actions; discussion of these conditions is not the intention of this article, which instead attempts to address Joseph’s responses to the committee’s decisions and to pave the way for a successful reintegration into his classes. Re-entry conversations are required by the Board of Trustees in this school in every instance of a student returning to class after any disciplinary action by the Board of Trustees in recognition of the need to address the meaning the student is making of the re-entry conditions. The school counselor followed the questions developed to “generate fresh thinking about old problems” or at least problems that have resulted in action by the Board of Trustees.

Joseph is a fourteen-year-old boy from a very difficult home background. His father was in jail for a charge of armed robbery and grievous bodily harm and his mother was in temporary housing, following an eviction from her previously rented accommodation. Joseph’s brother came and went and sometimes stayed with family members. His brother was a senior student at school and had himself been before the Board of Trustees for being under the influence of alcohol while at school.

The Board of Trustees met with Joseph and members of his extended family at the suspension hearing and the family explained the circumstances in which Joseph was living. This information did not



reduce the seriousness of his offense but did mitigate it and helped the Board of Trustees to understand the environment that Joseph was living in.

The school counselor began with questions that invited Joseph to consider himself in a different way to what might be expected of him. These questions were informed by Marsten, Epston and Markham's (2016) "wonderfulness conversations" and were intended to avoid starting the conversation with any assumption of pathology. Before exploring these questions, Joseph wanted to make it clear that he was innocent of the main charge against him and that he could not understand how his friends could have informed on him. So, it was to be a re-entry conversation unlike others where there was a full admission of guilt. Nevertheless, Joseph still needed to negotiate his relationship with teachers and peers.

The conversation was not intended to investigate the justice or injustice of any offense. That task had already happened. Moreover it would be inappropriate for a school counselor's role to be involved in such investigation. It might be objected that the conversation does not observe due process enough, because it does not stop to explore Joseph's protestation of innocence. However, due process had been observed well before Joseph was suspended. Moreover, Joseph himself lets his protest go and acknowledges that he has brought weed to school before, even if this situation was one in which he was set up.

"What would you think that people in charge of the school might respect about you?" the counselor began.

"Huh?" He looked blank and confused, so the counselor rephrased his question.

"What's important to you that people might not know about you, if they only saw you as the kid who bought drugs to school?"

"Well I did not bring drugs to school, I told you that, but I'm an honest guy, and I am well-mannered and polite, unless people get me angry. I care about my education and my family."

"How did the suspension for drugs then reflect that?" inquired the counselor.

"Well, the suspension and the drugs had nothing to do with those things," Joseph protested. Then he added, "I care about school and my mum knows that. She raised us well, she raised us to respect others and to treat others well."

"What do your friends like about you?" continued the counselor.

“You’ll have to ask them that, but they would probs [probably] say that I’m straight up,” Joseph said with a hint of pride.

“What does it mean when a kid says that he is ‘straight up’?” The counselor was curious.

“It means that I say it like it is,” asserted Joseph. “If someone asks me for an opinion, I tell them what I think. If I don’t like someone or something, I tell them to their face. They would probably say that I’ve got a heart.”

The counselor persisted, “What would your family say about you that we might not see, if we only saw this trouble?”

“I look after my mum in a pretty bad situation. I’m the one who does things for her, like pays the bills and get the food. I keep my room tidy and clean the house. She trusts me.”

Already a story of difference from what the school had expected was emerging.

### **Questions About the Problem Story**

After establishing relationship, if it does not exist from previous interactions, it is possible to start addressing the issues that have led to the suspension. The questions that follow recognize that people are seldom sole actors in any situation, despite the fact that, by the time they are teenagers, they are held legally and morally responsible as individuals for particular moral choices. Here, however, a relational perspective, rather than an individualistic one, is taken. It is assumed too that there is a process that has taken place and that the offending action is part of a series of events (Deleuze, 1990). Hence the questions ask about this series, that is, the process of recruitment into the problem story. The possibility of another impulse towards a different kind of action is left open too. This is represented as the implicit possibility of not being recruited, of exercising better judgment, of not being tricked.

The aim of prising apart these openings is about more than allowing the saving of face. They signal the possible existence of a narrative that in future might be embraced. This possibility is more important than a requirement to take responsibility for the problem (which has actually already been dealt with). Here are some examples of problem story questions:

1. What happened that led you to get suspended?
2. How did you get recruited into that?
3. Was it intentional or against your better judgment?
4. Did you participate willingly or were you tricked into it?
5. What was it like being suspended?



6. Looking ahead to meeting your classmates and teachers again, how will you respond if they are not supportive of your return?
7. How will you respond if anything about this goes up on social media?

Let us now return to our story. Having inquired a little into who Joseph was, the counselor judged that it was time to ask about the problem that had landed them in this situation. The purpose in this type of conversation is not to go looking for the truth or to go over the deliberations of the committee hearing, but to provide a space for the student to explain his response to their decisions.

The counselor began, "Let's talk a little bit about what happened that got you suspended so that I can understand it a bit better. What did happen on that day?"

Joseph replied, "They got caught smoking weed in the toilet by the dean and they told him that they got it from me. They dumped me in it."

"Did you admit to the deputy principal that you brought it to school?"

"Yes I did, but I didn't bring it really. I was just confused, because I didn't think I had a choice."

The counselor expressed sympathy for the young man's story, but did not think it was necessary to get into a debate about the details of that event, so he persisted with the next steps in a re-entry conversation.

"Whatever happened last week, you are here now because of some trouble and the Board of Trustees' disciplinary committee has asked us both to have a talk before you go back to class. They have asked for this to happen so that the school can be a safe place for everyone, including for you, and so that when something goes wrong, things are put right so that everyone can get on with their teaching and learning."

Joseph was listening thoughtfully.

The counselor continued, "I'm keen to see how you have been influenced by trouble in general and how trouble works in your life and how you might better manage it. Could we do that then?"

Joseph nodded.

“If you had been guilty of what you admitted to, how did you get started into it? Do you recognize when this kind of trouble is coming?”

“Sometimes, it depends on what it is,” said Joseph.

“If it is getting invited to smoke weed at school, or bring it to school, or use it at school, how does it do that?”

“It’s what boys do,” said Joseph. “It’s ‘mates’.”

“Is it against your better judgment or are you tempted to join up with trouble? Do you want to be part of trouble’s plan for your life?” asked the counselor.

“No, I don’t want to get into trouble. It disappoints my mum and my family and I’m a role model for her. She has a lot of hope for me and my dad does too.”

### Questions About the Effects of the Suspension

The next class of questions correspond to the narrative therapy practice of mapping the effects of a problem (White, 2007; Winslade & Williams, 2012). Here the suspension itself and the trajectory of becoming what it represents is treated as the problem. The aim of these questions is to externalize (ibid.) the reason for the suspension and to continue to widen the gap between the person and the problem that led to the suspension.

The hope of doing so is that in this gap might be found some as yet implicit desire to become different from what a sole focus on the problem issue might predict. This focus can even be personified and have desires and responses, separate from the person to whom they are usually attributed. Masculinity is mentioned in one of the questions because of our conviction that for many boys (the majority of those suspended are male) the performance of a masculine identity (such as seeking to create an impression as the “big man”) is integral to acts of defiance of school authority. Therefore, anything different might require a shift in such an identity performance. Here are some examples of this class of questions.

1. What did your family say? [If family members are present they can themselves be asked directly.]
2. What effect did the [*suspension*] have on you? On your family? On teachers? On your friends?
3. Did the [*action that got you suspended*] enjoy seeing you take the punishment? Did it enjoy seeing your family shamed? Did it care or not care about you or your family?
4. Are you being played by the problem story? Or by others? Or by a story of (for example) masculinity or something else? How?

5. What is likely to happen if this [*situation that led to the suspension*] tries to trick you into doing what it wants again?

Now let us return to our story.

The counselor opened this section of the conversation with Joseph by asking, "What did your family say when they found out that you were suspended?"

"When I got suspended they were all on my side," Joseph replied.

"They were all pretty upset and were mad at the school, but my uncle was not totally. He could see that the school has a point."

"What point was that?" the counselor asked.

"I'm not always good but I am trying," said Joseph. "I'm disappointed at my friends for snitching on me and I've realized that I've trusted someone that was not trustworthy."

The counselor then asked an externalizing question.

"Do you think that what you were accused of, that is bringing weed to school, enjoyed seeing you come before the Board of Trustees and getting your family involved? Do you think that trouble cared about you and what you said you stand for or about your family?"

"No, I do not think that weed cares about education and learning. It comes in the way of my family as well and has caused a lot of problems. People have been badly hurt because of it and I don't want my mum to see that. I had to do some research into the effects of weed on learning and I found out that it doesn't help people to concentrate."

"Do you think that at times you might be played by the buzz that weed promises?" the counselor asks.

"You could say that. I get tempted to get stoned when I don't really want to do my school work but it's pretty hard to say no to mates."

Now the counselor asks the student to sit in judgment of the problem story.

"Is that fair what weed is asking of you? To give up your schoolwork and plans for your future in return for a buzz that might sidetrack you from your hopes and from your mum's hopes?"

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” Joseph responded thoughtfully. “It just sneaks up on me and I don’t realize it until it’s too late.”

“What do you think will happen if trouble shows up again and you don’t see it coming?” asks the counselor.

“Well, I don’t think it will happen again, because of what has happened in my family and I’m not going to go anywhere near drugs at school, even if someone asks me. Next time, they said I will be expelled and that would be bad for me and my brother.”

### Meaning-Making Questions

The next class of questions invites students to deepen the meaning of what they have so far espoused as intentions. They are based on the assumption that these intentions are sincere and seek to build on them. Some of these questions invite students to think beyond their personal situation and to take up a political position (for example about the pipeline-to-prison or the racial disproportionality of who gets suspended). The idea here is that a desire for change might be connected to a bigger cause, not just to an individual desire.

1. What if anything have you learned from the experience?
2. What kind of life does [*the suspension*] have planned for you? Is that the kind of life you want for yourself?
3. Have you heard of the pipeline-to-prison? Does it concern you that this path is laid out for some people? Do you personally want to go that way?
4. Do you know anything about the disproportionality of who gets suspended? What do you think of that? How do you want to contribute to/not contribute to those statistics?
5. As a result of being suspended do you think you have grown up a little, grown down a little, or stayed the same?

Returning to our story, we find the counselor asking some of these questions of Joseph.

“What have you learned from all this Joseph?”

Joseph certainly has things to say here.

“I’ve learned that I need to be a bit more cautious, to be more clever. I need to be more alert to danger. I’ve also learned not to trust people. Those guys were my friends and they dumped me in it. I thought I could trust them, but no. I can forget, but not forgive. I’m going to forget about what happened, but not forgive

them. I would never do that to a mate. I am glad I'm back, because it helped me to see that I need to focus on my work."

The counselor capitalizes on Joseph's determination by asking a future-oriented question.

"If you can't resist these invitations that trouble of any kind offers you, where do you think you'll end up?"

"Either dead, or in prison, or trapped in some way. I don't want that and neither does my family. We are from a proud family that hopes for better things for their kids. I'm gonna make my family proud and help my mum with her life."

"As a result of this trouble, do you think that you've grown up a little or grown down, or stayed the same?" the counselor asks, still seeking difference.

"I think I've learned about people, who you can trust and who you can't. It's opened my eyes to a lot of things, especially my future."

"Why do you think that you've seen these things Joseph, when lots of other kids don't seem to?"

The why question the counselor asks seeks to further cement in Joseph's previous answer.

"I don't know, I guess it goes back to my mum and my koro [grandfather]. He always thought I could do well at school. He was not in gangs, he didn't drink and he was a humble guy. Before he died, he told me that I could really go places, if I kept my eyes opened. He talked to me lots."

Joseph has presented an opening here, that could be followed up by a counselor. It is the opening to a re-remembering conversation (Hedtke & Winslade, 2004; 2017) that might re-invigorate the voice of his grandfather as it operates inside him.

### **Addressing the Problem**

While previous emphases establish the context for a restorative thrust in re-entry conversations, this group of questions capitalize on the establishment of such a context. The questions here lead towards the idea of setting things right and specifying the steps required to do so. The emphasis in such questions is relational, rather than just individual. They focus on the obligations a person might feel after a problematic event and they give a student the maximum opportunity to attend to the effects of their actions on others. It needs to be stressed, however, that actions to set things right must be voluntary, if they are to have credibility. They

should not be forced and practitioners should bear in mind that presenting any of these questions with a tone of disapproval or threat will undermine their value. Some example questions include:

1. What will it be like going back to class?
2. How long might it take to live this problem down? Do you want to do that?
3. Would you like to make things any different? In what way? How might you do that?
4. Do you have enough courage to make any changes?
5. Is there anyone you need to make amends to, to set things right?
6. What would be needed to set things right? What would you need to say or do? What might you need from others?
7. What might be a goal you might set for yourself after this experience? Is that achievable? What are the steps you would have to take?

Now let us return to the story we are using to illustrate these questions in action.

“Going back to class, Joseph,” the counselor asked, “what will it be like?”

“Well, I really want to have it out with the guys who narked on me. I want to give them a hiding,” Joseph said honestly.

The counselor used externalizing language to create a gap between Joseph and the problematic story in the question.

“And if you did that Joseph, what do you think the problem that got you here in there first place would think?”

Joseph was thoughtful in response.

“I’m not going to do it, because I know that it will make things worse and I will get expelled next time, they told me that.”

“How long do you think it will take you to live this problem down?” the counselor persisted. “Do you even want to do that?”

“I want to get my grades up. I’m not going to worry about socializing, I’m just going to do my work. I’m going to go to class on time. Get my attendance better and ignore what I really should do, smash the guys who lied about me.”

Double listening hears the two stories in this utterance, each exerting a pull on Joseph’s loyalty. At this moment he is choosing the counter-story.



“Do you have the courage to do that?” the counselor asked, seeking to maximize his commitment to the counter-story.

“Yes, with my brother’s help I can. I need to control my anger better, that’s a big problem for me and always has been. I’ve been in so many fights and I never back down.”

Joseph demonstrates reflexive awareness here, the counselor notices.

“How might you do things differently than what you might have done before?” the counselor asked, looking for details.

“I’ve got to ignore their looks, I’ve got to stay away from Facebook, I’ve got to focus on my work,” Joseph says determinedly.

“Is there anyone you need to put things right with?” the counselor asks.

“I’ve apologized to the teachers who gave up time to deal with this, because the Board of Trustees told me to write letters to them. I’ve given them to the principal. I’m going to talk to the assembly about what I’ve found out about how weed affects my learning and I want to tell my friends that it’s dumb to do it at school.”

“What goals might you set for yourself after this experience Joseph? What steps would you take? Could we make a plan and if we did that, would it be ok for me to share it with your teachers? You could have a copy that you could show your family as evidence that you mean business.”

Joseph and the counselor come up with the following plan:

1. Attend all classes
2. Go to class on time
3. Do all my work without arguing
4. Improve my goals by 10%
5. Avoid responding to invitations to fight or get involved in things I know are wrong
6. Set my mind to improving my life.

### **Recruiting Support**

The next section seeks to expand the counter-story so that it does not rely on one person’s internal thoughts, but is firmly grounded in a network of relationships. To this end, a team of supporters is sought out. The assumption is that a support team can bolster a student at difficult moments when he or she is liable to slip back into the problem story. The

support team can be made up of family members, friends or teachers. Here are some questions that can be asked to access this support team:

1. Who do you take after as you try to put this whole problem behind you?
2. Who would you need to be on your team to support you?
3. If you think about those people, what would they say they most respect about you that would convince them that you could make a change? Do you mind if I ask them?
4. Is there anything you need from anyone else, or from the school, in order to feel safe?

Returning to our illustrative story, let us show how these questions might be used in practice.

“Who do you think could be on a support team that we could set up to help you achieve your plans?” the counselor asked.

“I can do all this myself, I want to do it myself. I don’t need a support team to help me. I can do this,” Joseph replied staunchly.

“Who might already be a support team for you without them realizing they were on a team?” the counselor persisted.

This time Joseph came through with an answer.

“My mum, my brother, my uncle, my teachers, well not all of them, but my English teacher and, oh yes, my math teacher. They help me with my work.”

“When you think about those people, what would they say they most respect about you that would convince them that you can make a change?” the counselor inquired again.

“They would say that I could do it, if I made up my mind,” said Joseph.

“Would you mind if I ask them and share your plan with them? I could invite them onto your support team and my guess is that they would be delighted to be asked.”

The counselor is careful to ask Joseph’s permission, rather than doing so behind Joseph’s back.

“Yeah, that’s ok, you can ask them,” Joseph responds.

“Is there anything that you need from the school to feel safe?” the counselor asks more specifically.

“I’m feeling so angry at these so-called mates for dumping me in the shit that they aren’t safe from me,” Joseph smiles. “Just joking! But I’m not gonna do anything. I’m gonna be the better person and not retaliate. I’m gonna leave it alone.”

“That’s a big call Joseph,” the counselor remarks. “What makes you think that you can hold back, when you haven’t always been able to do that?”

“This time I care about my future,” Joseph is very clear. “My mum is coming out of a bad patch and I don’t want her to worry. I’ve changed and I want my family to trust me again. I don’t want to go back to how I used to be.”

### **Reflection on the Experience**

Finally, it is time to wrap up the conversation. We believe this is a useful time to ask some reflexive questions about what has gone before.

1. How has this conversation been?
2. What might be important that I don’t yet understand?
3. Is there anything important other people do not recognize about you?

For the last time, we return to our story to show how this conversation might take place in practice.

“How has this talk been for you, Joseph?” the counselor asks.

“It’s been good. I’ve got a lot off my chest. I feel like I’m ready now. I don’t care about their opinions of me. I don’t care about what they think.”

Joseph’s response is encouraging.

“What might be important that I don’t yet understand?” the counselor checks.

“Nothing. I’ve said everything I want to say. I just want to get on with things. I’m sorry. I want another chance.”

Joseph sounds ready for re-entry now.

The counselor wants to check anyway. “Can I check up with you at the end of the day so see how things have gone? Can I also check with your teachers to see what they might have noticed after you come back?”

“Ok. I’ll call in on the way to the bus.”

“Can I let your teachers know of your plans for your future and what you have learned?”

Again, the counselor asks for permission.

“That’s fine, Sir.”

“And just before you go, is there anything important that other people do not recognize about you?”

“Not really. I’m a pretty straight up guy. I’m not violent and I just want to do my work and be left alone, that’s all.”

The counselor sent this email to his teachers after Joseph had left.

*Dear [teacher],*

*I have met with Joseph prior to his return to class as required by the Board of Trustees following his suspension.*

*We discussed the details of the suspension and he wants to put it all behind him and concentrate on getting back into learning.*

*He acknowledges that he hasn’t been interested in learning at times and that he has been caught up in trouble, but he is inviting you to notice his attempts at changing. He is not asking for special favors, but would like you to recognize those attempts in some quiet ways. This will encourage him to keep on trying. He is going to try to improve his grades by 10% and would like you to know this.*

*He is sorry for any trouble and he would like you to pass on to me any concerns or feedback you might have about him, so that he can learn from it.*

*I will see him regularly for the next few weeks and he thanks you for your support.*

*Regards,  
[Signature]*

## Discussion

Michael White (2007) spoke about how thin conclusions about a person’s identity could easily lead into “conversational culdesacs” (p. 143). He added, “...It is important that these culdesacs be circumvented and that thoroughfares be opened to the social and relational history of the significant developments of people’s lives” (ibid.). It seems to us that schools’ conclusions about who students are can easily lead into such culdesacs, if they only focus on the student’s character deficits. In anyone’s life such deficits can always be found and their importance magnified out of proportion.

The kind of re-entry conversation we are seeking has the potential, by contrast, to circumvent such culdesacs and to open a thoroughfare along which a student's consciousness of the significant developments of their lives might traverse a journey of becoming, if given the chance. What Joseph said in the accompanying story certainly looks like this. It is deliberately focused on magnifying the counter-story of who Joseph might become, rather than on the narrow "reality" of who he has been. He could easily find himself trapped in a culdesac, which is not entirely of his own making, if nothing were to change.

A focus on magnifying Joseph's hopes and dreams for his own life is justified if it actualizes this counter-story. As yet, however, the story of re-entry conversations is only supported by a small cadre of anecdotes. It nevertheless has to start somewhere. Our hope is that, as more schools and more practitioners take up the practice of re-entry conversations, the shape of these conversations will grow and more powerful justificatory narratives will be forthcoming.

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