

# YOUTH-LED DIALOGUES FOR POSITIVE CHANGE

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## Abstract

Youth in Antioch, California and youth in Manizales, Colombia have begun 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?

In this article, I will share my work on strengthening youth voice and participation in the co-construction of environments in their homes, school, and community to support resilience and pathways to health and well-being. I will tell a story of a community's commitment to creating positive change by coming together to address the issue of increasing violence.

When adults listened to youth voices, we heard that they wanted the support of adults to make changes in their community and that they needed adults to see them differently in order to develop more effective partnerships. Youth played an important role in making sense of their lived experiences, understanding how interpersonal violence impacts them, and sharing what they need from each other, the adults in their lives, and their broader community as they envisioned possibilities that might lead to more positive and generative relationships. While keeping these youth voices central, adults and youth continue to work together to explore and challenge norms that lead to violence in relationships, homes, schools, and communities. As a result of the project, youth and adults began building intergenerational partnerships to weave new narratives and to explore the possibilities that can result from youth-led positive community change. Through this project we discovered the transformative potential of youth as powerful social agents of positive change in their communities.

The project, called "Choppin' It Up", meaning talking it out, was implemented as part of a U.S. federal demonstration project in California called Families Thrive in partnership with the Youth Intervention Network, and the Antioch Unified School District. We worked with group of diverse high school students who had been exposed to interpersonal violence or other significant adversity in their lives and were considered to be 'at-risk' or troubled.

This work was developed within a social construction orientation beginning with looking at how assumptions, judgments, and stereotypes can impact and interfere with our relationships and the possibilities and alternatives that we construct in our conversations with each other. The things we take for granted and the assumptions we make often block us from understanding each other, what we experience, and ways we find to get along in life. When we work to build a better understanding of each other, we can create a space for new possibilities.

In addition, the stories we tell and the frequency with which we tell them influence and reinforce the ways in which we construct our relationships with each other. We have an opportunity to weave new narratives and co-construct alternatives by increasing our understanding of each other, generating new ways of being in relationships, and imagining positive possibilities for our lives and communities. We can build partnerships and engage in ongoing conversations to tell new stories that reach beyond ‘problem-solving’ to identify and co-construct possibilities and alternatives that support resilience and thriving. Through strengthening our relationships with youth in communities, we can begin to transform our understanding of the various and unique paths youth take to create powerful identities, meaning, health and well-being. We can better see the strengths and the often hidden powerful resilience youth express in response to challenges and adversity.

This article will present the principles of social construction within which the project was developed. I will describe the process of working with youth and discuss ways in which this approach can be used to elevate their voices, change perceptions about youth who might be identified as at-risk or dangerous, and bring about positive social change in our schools, neighborhoods, and communities.

I want to encourage the ongoing expansion of voices in this work. Quotes from the youth in the project are sprinkled throughout this article along with other voices who have informed my thinking about how we can construct more generative relationships to propel social change. You are invited to enter into a conversation about relationships and the use of language to construct better worlds together (Hosking & Pluut, 2010). (*enter directions on how to go to [www.choppinitup.org](http://www.choppinitup.org) or [www.fortalezasjovenes.org](http://www.fortalezasjovenes.org)*)

**Key words:** Youth, stories, experiences, social change, participation.

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

## Introduction

This project holds relationships as central. It embraces the generative power and potential of human beings to construct a powerful image of an alternative future through the conversations we have and stories we tell that inspire, motivate, and mobilize people to engage in constructive and positive action. 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; (c) building conversational possibilities, and; d) engaging together in positive action and construction of better worlds. From a relational orientation, we can examine ways to build new, more generative realities when we are open to questioning taken for granted ‘truths’ and to examining alternatives. We can explore more generative ways of working with youth who are labeled “at-risk” or “troubled”, and develop their capacity for resilience in the face of adversity as well as their potential for creating positive social change. Our conversations and the stories we tell lie at the heart of these new possibilities. As youth develop their role as social change agents, we see new ways of understanding, seeing, and talking about each other, and learn how shared meaning carries different responses. Understanding, knowledge, and social action go together (Gergen, 2009). The bottom line is - we have a choice. We get to choose how we enter into our work with and for youth.

### Privileging a relational orientation and strengthening our relationships with each other

A relational orientation provides an important context for (re)constructing our ‘selves’ and who we are to each other.

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

When we think of relationships, we often think of two separate ‘beings’ somehow connected to each other through relationships. The unit of focus is on the coming together of the separate beings. In *Relational Responsibility*, Sheila McNamee and Ken Gergen make a distinction between “selves” and “persons”. They view “selves” as a construction of our relations, and “persons” as individual bodies (McNamee & Gergen, 1999, p. 22). This view situates our “selves” in a relational context and sees the impact of relations on the construction of identity.

In contrast, some think of individual identity as a fixed attribute or foundational part of one's core being. We talk about discovering who I 'really am' as if there is a given and discoverable core self. This view of self implies that if we peeled away the layers, like an onion, we might discover our true self, who we are, deep inside under those layers. This Cartesian way of thinking about identity is inspired by Descartes' famous phrase, "I think, therefore I am" (Descartes, 1912). Through one's ability to think as a mind-independent being, we shape who we are, independent of our relationships.

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. (Frie & Coburn, 2011).

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 can shape culture, policies and practices in ways that can be confining (Gergen, 2009, p. 51). This is particularly important when the constructions that are placed on youth influence how systems respond to them - "what-is-said-about-me can become what-is-done" (Sampson, 2008).

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).

In many cases, we may participate in defining others implicitly in our talk and positioning without intending to do so. Burr reminds us that everyday conversations are far from trivial and represent an important arena where identities are fashioned and relations played out (Burr, 2003). Understanding this, we can work to 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.

Viewing ourselves and others as self-contained individuals encourages a separation of "I and 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 own interests", or needing to know "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). The idea of a self-contained individual may also result in viewing problematic behaviors as self-originating and situated within the individual youth, 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.

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).

### *Shifting our orientation*

Moving towards a relational view of identity we can explore who we are and who we want to be as 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 *together* re-author problematic identities. Within this view, we are continually forming and performing “I” (Anderson, H., & Gehart, D. R., 2007, p. 17). 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. Here we can see how we call each other into ‘positions’ in an ongoing relational process (McNamee, 2011).

These different ways of viewing the concept of identity can be useful in our work with youth. Think about how the following implications might impact how we view youth, the stories we tell about youth, and how we engage youth in our work and communities.

- The implications of seeing youth as having certain identities, certain ways of being.
- The implications of seeing our identities as shaped within ourselves.
- The possibilities of seeing our identities as created 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 view our ‘selves’ to be more situated in the social context, we open possibilities in how our ‘selves’ are constructed and to our ability to construct positive alternatives. What if we were to broaden this thinking even further, with relationship as our principal focus?

“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. Rosie, Choppin’ it Up Youth

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. Relationships then form the backbone of our construction of reality.

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).

With a focus on relationships we can strengthen how we relate to each other and explore the alternative responses and responsibilities in the relational space we are creating. 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).

This way of thinking has inspired my learning journey about how to support transformative social processes in our relationships, neighborhoods, and communities. It is my dream that developing deeper understanding and connections with each other will result in compassionate action that is spontaneous and moves us from thinking about ‘those people’, or ‘those children’ to a collective responsibility for ‘our children and our people’.

In this important move from fragmentation to interconnection, social construction provides relational 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 (Waldegrave & Tamasese, 2012)

An important part of building empathy as a relational process is creating new social norms and behaviors that orient us to our relational responsibility towards each other. Conditions of spontaneous compassion and action can be created through relationships when people naturally care about each other and do what they can to help each other to thrive throughout the lifespan. When we work to deepen our understanding of each other, and have striking moments when we see things anew and shift our views, we almost can not help but move towards social action (Katz & Shotter, 1999). 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). Through our relationships, compassionate action becomes spontaneous - like the left hand stopping the bleeding on the right.

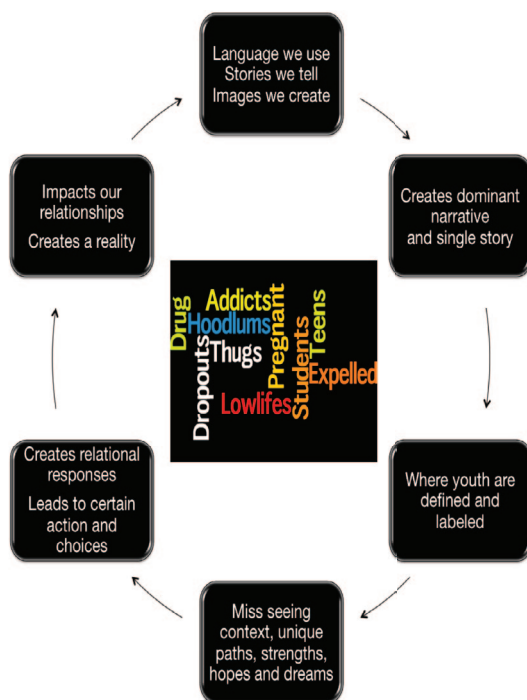
From this place of interconnection, we also find it is critical to address important social issues of marginalization, inequity, and injustice that people face in their lives (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). The notion of injustice is greatly underestimated and under-addressed in our conversations about youth and the hardships they face in their lives. These injustices include poverty, lack of housing, unemployment, violence, abuse, and racism (Waldegrave 2012). When we bring attentiveness to issues of social justice, it is imperative that we address critical needs and engage and build upon the voices and strengths of children, youth, and families within the communities they live in. By doing so, we can also turn to the sociocultural context of their lives. 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, 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).

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).

With this view, we can cultivate caring and relational responsibility in our families, neighborhoods, schools and communities. This is 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 (Putnam, 2000).

So where do we go from here? The orientation that relationships form the backbone of our construction of reality provides us an opportunity to explore problematic realities and to build new, more generative realities. The following image represents a journey within a relational orientation where 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 where we have choices about how we orient ourselves to youth and this work, and that change is always present and possible.





## Understanding the impact of our words, the language we use, and stories we tell

Our lives are filled with stories: some we tell, but most are told to us. Stories construct how we see and are seen. The stories we tell, who tells them, and how often they are told all work to create a dominant narrative for how we are seen, how we see others, and sometimes even how we see ourselves.

Stories have lineages, they have histories and futures, they carry culture, they bestow meaning, and they construct the world (Myerhoff, Kaminsky, & Weiss, 2007).

The language we use within various discourses constructs our realities. In addition, it poses certain definitional limitations on our identities, our worlds, and who we are to each other. 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). Taking a social constructionist stance challenges us to examine repetitive practices -- the stories we tell, the language we use, and the images that we create -- that are often represented as 'truth' and formed by taken-for-granted knowledge, assumptions, and stereotypes. Gergen reminds us that the idea of 'truth' is of enormous consequence within our communities where constructions of the real are embedded within ways of life that are value invested (Gergen 2009).

"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. 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?" Javier, Choppin' it Up Youth

Ways of life and social practices both form and are formed by historical, social, cultural, and local conventions (Stetsenko & Arievidtch, 2004). Social construction invites us to 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. Here we can see meanings as emerging in our dialogues. We then can explore alternative ways of talking and thinking that may be more generative (Burr, 2003).

First, we can begin by looking at how our questions and assumptions frame what we study and what we see and shape 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.

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), 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).

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).

Early child development studies provided a foundation for our thinking of adolescence as a period of “storm and stress”. Granville Stanley Hall, 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”. “Teenagers these days are so (fill in the blank \_\_\_\_\_)”. 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”.

In communities struggling with violence, gangs, and poor academic performance, community members often view youth and their behaviors as the problem. In this context, youth often are labeled as 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 who have been victims of violence and abuse are often seen as broken and needing to be fixed. This language begins to shape a dominant narrative or single story about youth. 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. 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.

“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 aunts, 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.” Jordan, Choppin’ it Up Youth

When referring to problems in this context, we have an opportunity to shift our view of an internalized problem, from a problem that a person ‘has’ or ‘is’. The practice of externalizing problems - where the person is not the problem and the problem is the problem - reduces the potential for shame and reinforcing a deficit view of an individual or a group of people and increases the potential for the problem can be addressed as a team (White 200; Freedman and Combs, 1996). Here the potential solutions are not personal and also address broader contextual and historical issues.

Our task is to unpack dominant problem-saturated narratives, deconstruct the negative identity conclusions associated with the stories, and together 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. We can 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).

The dominant cultural representation of youth provides no shortage of constructing youth in a deficit discourse (Best, 2007). 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).

Research and policy often are framed within this dominant narrative to solve the “problems” of adolescence. These problem-focused responses are influenced by traditional community development efforts where 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. If deficit-focused youth research, policy, and programming emanates 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.

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, 2011).

When we pathologize the behavior of youth who are struggling and labeled troubled or delinquent, we often respond with an individualized intervention or a systems response of disciplinary action and consequences. This approach leads to rigid programs and policies which create and reinforce certain expectations. Stories of adolescent development not only impact how we see youth but also how our systems are designed to support them. When we focus on interventions and prevention of high risk youth behavior, our response to youth’s troubling expressions often leads to punitive responses, further distancing ourselves from generative and constructive relationships with youth.

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).

When communities create a single story of youths’ lived experiences, they reduce complexity in developing responses to youth issues and in decision-making. Communities are then able to better channel administrative measures and simplify policy making. However, when making policy about youth, we may 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 an individual’s lived experience and the complexity of the way they navigate their lives. This alienation often decreases our moral attitude -- our spontaneous identification, genuine empathy, and moral responsiveness -- to 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).

“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?" - America

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 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 lives. We also miss possibilities for supporting this navigation in new and alternative ways based upon the strengths and hopes of that child or youth (Ungar, 2004). 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, 2004).

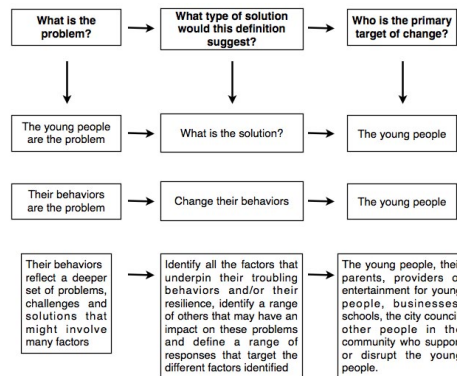
Whenever we declare what is the case or what is good, we use words that privilege certain existents while thrusting the absent and the contrary to the margins (Gergen, McNamee, Barrett 2001).

Ungar offers the following strategies when listening to an adolescents 'truth' (Ungar, 2006):

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.

"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." Jordan, Choppin' it Up Youth

As we search for ways to address youth issues, we find ourselves faced with different responses. 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.



Ungar & Liebenberg, eds., 2008)

In this model, we look for what is wrong and what is missing, while strengths and alternative healthy behaviors are often overlooked and unseen (De Jong & Berg, 2002). Attempts to navigate a way to health, power, or an alternate identity may remain hidden and not recognized as valuable. Often, these attempts are labeled or judged rather than being perceived as expressions of strength (Ungar, 2003). Rather we can view how youth navigate their way in life as clues to powerful subordinate storylines about alternative relational resources youth incorporate in response to trauma and adversity. These clues provide an alternative to problematic dominant narratives about young people that may be saturated with perceptions of deficit, disorder, and delinquency.

Sanders and Munford suggest that shifting to a broader understanding where youth behaviors may reflect a deeper set of problems and challenges and where solutions might involve many factors. 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). 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.

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 certain narratives and begin to look at alternatives. Reflecting on how cultural representations, media, research, policy and systems responses influence stories about youth may lead us to a better understanding of how narratives can be remade (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?” In turn, we can look at how these constructions may invite relational responses, choices, and actions that have consequences for our relationships. 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 their unique paths to a powerful identity, sense of meaning, and positive well-being (Ungar, 2005).

“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.” Josie, Choppin’ it Up Youth

From a new relational space, people are able to examine alternate 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. In addition, we are able to see the multitude of their strengths, dreams, and hopes for a more positive future in which we can imagine positive possibilities and build alternative futures together.

“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.” Gerardo, Choppin’ it Up Youth



## Building new conversational possibilities

Conversations offer opportunities to either continue to reinforce existing relational practices and understandings or to form new relational practices and understandings. In conversation, we have the opportunity to disrupt less useful or even harmful discourses, and engage in a new conversation. Within our conversations are stories that people may have heard many times. These discourses originate in human relationships (Winslade & Monk, 2000). 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 exist 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 patterns of relating, which are then reinforced by ongoing narrative. This process 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).

Conversations and the stories that we tell are also at the heart of new possibilities. 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.

In a collaborative inquiry, we examine whose voices are privileged, whose voices are left out, and the impact of power and voice on the ongoing discourse. We also then look for creative ways to disrupt this circular process through supporting a new discourse or dialogue with youth and including more voices in this process. The first step we can take to create alternate realities, ones that might prove more generative and useful with youth, is to deconstruct existing narratives beginning with identifying the dominant voices. 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. 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.

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).

Multi-vocality, or including more diverse voices, is a resource for creating more generative conversations. 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 flatten 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. These different voices can make policy-making and program development complex and challenging. At the same time, by introducing a multiplicity of voices, perspectives, stories, and identities, we create possibilities for generating new meaning and patterns of relating (McNamee, 2000).

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 of the process may result in methods, such as Restorative Justice or Conferencing (Winslade & Monk, 2008) that bring multiple voices together. These methods also maintain openness to the complexity of the individual and individual 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 (Ungar, 2004). This is a dilemma when at-risk and marginalized populations have minimal power in dominant social 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, 2005).

When we include more voices, in particular youth voices, we can begin to look at the language we use in dominant narratives. Before we discuss shifting our language, however, we must recognize that there may be a risk in simply reframing issues from a deficit discourse to a positive orientation, a tendency with strength-based practices. The decisions in this process that 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.

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. 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, we must keep the voices of youth at the center of our conversations and ask them, "What do youth feel is impacting their lives? What shifts would they say are critical in looking at the challenges and opportunities they face?"

Some positive youth development approaches have 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).

The crucial question... is not who the social agents are, but the extent to which they manage to constitute themselves (Gergen, 2009).

When we work from personal bias and experience and impose our own interpretation or definitions of others in research and policy development, we move away from trying to understand what someone was communicating and miss an opportunity to create shared meaning together throughout the process. We also 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. We have the opportunity 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?"

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). In our project, we created an environment where youth had an opportunity to explore in dialogue what it means to be in relationships, and to challenge existing norms that lead to violence among peers, in families, schools, communities, culture, and the media. These norms form as standards that influence people and provide a model for behavior. Alternative ‘ways of being’ in response to norms can serve to challenge problematic aspects of a dominant discourse or culture. Through active dialogue about norms, we can acknowledge and change them in order to prevent critical issues such as interpersonal violence (Fujie Parks, Cohen, & Kravitz-Wirtz, 2007).

Conversational possibilities with youth begin when we listen deeply and bear witness to their lives.

“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.” - Jordan

Dialogic and narrative practices provide a roadmap for re-authoring problem-saturated dominant stories in ways that lead to new stories and positive possibilities. This new way of interacting with teens helps to shift our thinking from a deficit view to a strengths-based view of youth. 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 can show in response to adversity.

Dialogue is a practice within which we can bring these voices together to explore new possible meaning, practices, and narratives. Dialogue offers opportunities to develop a greater understanding about the paths youth take to resilience, and the ways we can co-construct environments that nurture and support youth. Harlene Anderson (2007, p.34) speaks of dialogue as a form of conversation where “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.

When we are creating something, it is helpful to focus on how we are creating and how we are responsive to each as well as to focus on building our skills in the creative process. The metaphor of jazz improvisation has often been used to describe a method of creativity that helps propel social action. Michael White suggested that the craft of musicianship is foundational to improvisation, and that everyone must first learn how to play before they can improvise (White & Denborough, 2011). This has major implications for individual, organizational, and community change initiatives. First, we must learn together and develop our craft, in order to improvise and create something new. In our project, youth and adults spent significant time learning together and developing skills and collective leadership in order to enter into dialogue and social action.

One of the primary skills that we developed was 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. These processes supported dialogue as a powerful way for connecting in a relational space. They also supported 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 creating better worlds and positive futures together.

Over the course of a month, the youth worked together with their adult allies to explore the following principles of transformative dialogue and develop their skills.

- 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.

These principles of transformative dialogue provide another resource for the re-authoring process (McNamee, Gergen, & Barrett, 2001) where we can transform our descriptions of ourselves and others by sharing stories of strength, abilities, talents, and resources.

#### *Creating new stories*

There are many ways we found that the distance between adults and youth was increased by problem-saturated stories shaped by the assumptions and judgments we hold about youth. We found it helpful to understand the process for how we develop dominant stories in our communities in order to unravel the opportunities and ‘flip the script’ to form new narrative understandings. We then worked to create a new story that reinforces our interconnectedness and builds bridges to understanding and positive social action. When we imagine possibilities, we create new stories and realities that lead to new understandings and relational practices.

“I never knew that just one story could change a person’s life.”  
Crystal Choppin’ it Up Youth

Narrative practice provides a method for identifying events or stories that are identified as “aspects of life to which people have accorded value” (White 2011) 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 2011).

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. 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. Connecting insights from our lived experiences to what is important to us creates an opportunity to build an orientation towards what is generative. We get to thoughtfully choose how we do this and how much time we spend on these orientations to build a certain reality or narrative. The questions we ask can create different kinds of conversations.

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 and by questioning received truths.

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 (Stafford, 2010).

Phil Stafford 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 invitation 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.

We might ask ourselves, how do we risk generalizing the identities of youth? What broad strokes begin to describe youth in our communities? How might we begin new conversations and bring in more voices to develop a broader view and deeper understanding of youth?

What we focus on, the questions we ask, and how we orient ourselves to issues or opportunities matter. We get to choose what types of questions we ask that help us better understand youth and flip the script on potentially problematic views of youth. When we ask youth about experiences in their lives, we build awareness of how these experiences impact them. Asking questions about how abuse and violence 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; White & Denborough, 2011).

We found in our project that sharing our awareness of our struggles and sorrows, as well as our positive emotions, is essential to generate the new, in whatever way, thus showing the relational nature of inquiry and dialogue. 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. 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; Gerhart, Tarragona, and Bava 2007). If we were to ask youth: "How are people in your school or community kind and supportive of each other in the face of conflict and adversity?" we would get different responses and start building a new narrative. What we are finding useful 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 also talking about 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 measures 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 can 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.

Making a shift to affirmative ways of seeing creates a more generative space (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Yaeger, & Whitney, eds., 2001). Much research supports an affirmative capacity in our relationships with others; 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). I would like to distinguish between positive images we may hold for youth and making judgments of what is expected. If we can release judgment of what is positive, we are opening possibilities and resisting privileging our view of what is expected.

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). 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 (as cited in Cooperrider, Sorensen, Yaeger, & Whitney, eds., 2001). This change in consciousness and acts of belief are most important when images of others are saturated with stories of deficit, disorder, and delinquency. Often there are unstated cultural assumptions and discourses that affect how we see others, and sometimes even how they see themselves.

“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.” Javier (Choppin’ it Up Youth)

### *Appreciation*

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 lived experiences and possibly unique paths towards health and well-being.

“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.” Victor, Choppin’ it Up Youth

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”.

Adopting Novogratz’s orientation might influence our work with youth, young men and women, and help us to acknowledge the complex contexts of their lives and to support them in being 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.

Embracing our humanity, in all of our complexity, is one of the most valuable tools we can use to celebrate the whole person, including an understanding of lived experiences, hopes and dreams. This approach helps create openness with imagination and creativity to co-construct who we are in our relationships with each other without judgment.

#### *Stories about resilience*

As we engage in storytelling to help create a foundation for building constructive relationships with youth, we realize it does not just mean telling different or better stories. Rather, we learn we have an opportunity to weave new narratives together in our conversations. To begin this journey, we can look at what kinds of conversations are useful.

What if 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.

Barb Wingard of the Dulwich Centre writes about telling stories in ways that make us stronger (Wingard & Lester, 2001). She also writes about ways that we can listen differently too. She encourages us to listen for people’s abilities, knowledge, and skills. To do so is a gift. As people share their stories, they often discover their own healing abilities and their own capacity for resilience in response to suffering and hardship. When we listen carefully to people’s stories, we can acknowledge and recognize the significance of the problems they have faced and the challenges they have experienced as well as the agency and capability of the person in their responses (Denborough, 2008).

We’ve been knocked so many times that we often don’t think very well of ourselves. But we’re finding ways to acknowledge one another and to see the abilities that people have but may not know they have. Without putting people on pedestals, we are finding ways of acknowledging each others’ stories of survival (Wingard & Lester, 2001).

Listening carefully with great respect to someone as they tell their stories is an act of love and creates a space where transformation can occur (Waldegrave & Tamasese, 2012). At times, people may share their deepest experiences and greatest pain. 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 the teller, they play a role in the shaping of the story (Bavelas, Coates, & Johnson, 2000). In our project, we explored this idea throughout our workshops. When we practiced active listening, youth were acutely aware of the impact of not being 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 where people felt deeply listened to and understood. There was a participatory understanding where each person felt ‘seen’.

If only all those people who are silently crying could find ways to come together. I think they'd be quite amazed how much they have in common and how much they'd want to share somebody else's story (Wingard, 2001, xx).

John Shotter and Arlene Katz developed a method of inquiry called "social poetics" where moments are poetic when they deal 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).

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 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 (Lambert, 2002).

"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, Choppin' it Up Youth

We get to choose what stories we tell and how to look for hidden strengths and engage in dialogue to create new shared meaning and other possible narratives that lead to positive social action.

### **Engaging in positive action and construction of better worlds.**

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).

The project provided a dialogic relational space for youth to explore their purpose, their effectiveness, and their beliefs about their self-efficacy. Appreciative Inquiry is an important dialogic resource that allowed us to explore who we are and who we want to be, as individuals, organizations, or systems (Cooperrider, Sorensen, Yaeger, & Whitney, eds., 2001) in a way that moves us to positive action. The following principles informed how we incorporated

Appreciative Inquiry into our dialogic and narrative practices.

- 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.

In their dialogues, the youth initially were hesitant to talk about the life challenges they had faced and how they had met those challenges. There were lulls in the conversation. It appeared they needed to see what others were going to share in order to feel safe about revealing their own stories of challenges and adversity. Once people started sharing, however, there was more opening. The youth shared they needed to learn from their peers what was acceptable and safe to share, and they needed time to develop the level of trust necessary to venture into difficult areas of their lives

Sometimes, though, the lulls in conversation provided opportunities to direct the dialogue to places of greater energy. We saw the greatest energy when youth were able to connect their personal stories of strength to positive joint 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 also 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. It was as if a doorway to transformation was built by imaging positive possibilities and social change.

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).

When the young people in our project constructed a sense of self 'as thinking and feeling agents of their own action' (Gergen, 2009, p. 82), they developed a view of personal agency and power. This ability helped them to define their uniqueness, identity, and beliefs. Through this process youth developed new constructive identities and skills. It helped them move toward new options for actions to create positive social change.

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).

Constructing their self-definitions of strength helped to clarify possibilities for personal agency and positive action. We found that when we operate 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.

*“My mom’s crying. Her 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 (Choppin’ it UpYouth)*

When we shape our description of agency within a relational context, we look at how accounts of agency are constructed relationally and move us into action. We often talked 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. We became social change agents when we engaged together around a common purpose, reflecting on the choices that we made each moment about how we are seen by others, and how we interact with situations and opportunities in our lives. 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.

#### *Resilient communities*

Our project presented how we might bring people together and build our collective capacity for dialogue, storytelling, and social action. Engaging youth as social change agents holds promise for creating resilient and thriving communities where all ages work together to better meet the needs of all community members.

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).

The 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). 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 for everyone (Bernard, 2004). In fact, youth can serve as facilitators to bring people together in their communities, where boundaries dissolve and more voices are included.

Youth experienced the power of being able to share their stories with others, and of being heard. To continue this gift and to give back, the youth in this project 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 where youth would listen to and capture memories of community elders about the best of their community - 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 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. They 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 the interviews will help them learn more about the lives of community elders, the history of the community, and visions for how the elders would like to leave the community for future generations. Elders shared their feelings 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.

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, 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?” Youth also have the opportunity to ask how they can contribute to greater social issues. David Denborough and Cheryl White talk about the possibilities in collective narrative practice for people to make a meaningful contribution to the lives of others, which can lead to an increased sense of personal/collective agency (Denborough, 2008).

In response to the skills and knowledge the youth acquired, they developed a sense of collective agency to contribute to the lives of other youth impacted by relationship abuse. The youth are leading the development of a countywide youth/adult partnership to raise awareness about teen dating abuse, prevent relationship abuse, and promote 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

In addition, youth are experiencing the power of sharing and linking their stories with other communities. David Denborough and Cheryl White 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).

This form of community engagement is characterised 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. They are stories and messages that describe local initiatives and the knowledge, skills, values and dreams that are implicit in these. (Denborough et al., 2006, p. 20). To begin building a collective narrative about how youth respond to tough times in ways that promote resilience and create positive change in communities, youth in Antioch, California and youth in Manizales, Colombia have begun exchanging their stories and sharing responses by acknowledging each others’ stories and experiences.

The youth are also learning that community change is incremental and takes time.



“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 Dialogue

Charles Waldegrave reminds us “change of this magnitude needs to be incremental to be sustainable [...] rather than a big push that fades with time” (Waldegrave, 2009). He cautions us that with movement towards radical changes there 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 the work to build resilient, thriving communities is as an ongoing process rather than a specific time-bound project. To build the community agency and capacity that contributes to resilient, thriving communities, we must engage all ages and all cultures.

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).

A more intentional integration of efforts to build youth leadership and intergenerational relationships creates opportunities for interaction across ages, throughout the community. 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” (Ungar, ed., 2005, p. 352) is critical to address important issues in our communities. Not only will this benefit youth, it will benefit all generations.

“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.” Jordan, Youth Leader, The Williams Group

Our work has shown that effective partnerships are relationally responsive and reflect mutual respect and equality in power and participation. In our work, we are continuing to strengthen youth-adult partnerships by participating in ongoing opportunities to engage in collaborative social action. In developing these partnerships, we are incorporating patterns of interaction and ways of being in relationship identified by the youth as most useful in their work together. Adults who have participated in learning and social action with the youth are finding new ways of speaking and interacting that open up radically different possibilities. These different possibilities are growing out of strengthened relationships where youth and adults see each other in new ways.

The youth have made a strong commitment to positive social action, and invite adults to join them and make a difference in their community and in our world. The youth are paving the way for adult allies to understand the power of personal and collective agency, and to form intergenerational partnerships to affect positive social change.

“I am not here to destroy the community, but to restore it.... It is time for us to move into action.” Javier, Choppin’ it Up Youth

But we must be prepared. To collaborate and to be in dialogue takes practice and intentionality. As we strengthen our ability to come together across ages, cultures, and communities around issues that matter to us, we may find realities that challenge us. When 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. Our conversations with each other give us the resources to move ahead. We can begin with conversation - one conversation at a time.

We must take the first step, and begin it now.

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