

## THE ETHICS OF EXCITEMENT

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*Excitement, scrutinized in the therapeutic realm, can be seen as misguided and naïve, especially if it is of the spontaneous kind, producing an image of a dispossessed practitioner, lacking in experience and direction and prone to distraction by surface expressions, while neglecting the deeper concerns that are our core business. In contrast, a calculated expression of excitement, one that has pre-determined aims, has received a broad and favorable reception. Here, the practitioner is guided by well-established protocols and supported by entrenched discourses on childhood. In this circumstance, excitement is a tool used at pre-empted moments considered to be favorable to the dissemination of lessons worthy of reinforcement. We make the case here for the innumerable benefits of spontaneous excitement, a kind informed by particular ethics and brought about by young people's startling contributions in therapy to their lives and to family life. Our reflections extend from considerations of "therapeutic posture" and connect post-structural ideas of identity and practices of deconstruction with established Narrative practices, making way for the kinds of excitement that could never have been planned in advance. The particularities of excitement are considered for how they promote certain ethics of practice and potentially give rise to children's know-how and imagination.*

It was my (DE) first case presentation to my professional colleagues at a Child Psychiatric Clinic that I had joined after returning to New Zealand from studying overseas in 1978. I had painstakingly recorded interviews with two teenaged brothers in regard to their abatement of violence towards one another and took

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this to be quite an achievement on their parts. Their mother, who reared them on her own, was decidedly as enthusiastic as I was. Instead of the delight with which I presumed my colleagues would respond to this documented turn of events, I observed the two most senior of them looking askance and turning to one another, shaking their heads in apparent dismay. “Where had I gone wrong?” I wondered. I nervously awaited the end of the tape, anticipating their comments. No sooner had it concluded when the less senior member took leave to speak, but instead of addressing me, she turned rather formally to my most senior colleague. She sententiously opined: “It certainly looks like those boys have just got another father!” I interrupted the reply by feigning guilelessness: “How do you know that?” I asked. “Why do you think their mother didn’t tell me she was in a relationship? Or do you know something about this family that she doesn’t even know?” This caused both of them to condescendingly smirk and end the discussion with the reminder that it was “tea time.” From then on, any such enthusiasm of mine was tolerated as misbegotten, for which I assumed my relative youth and lack of theoretical sophistication were held responsible.

In 2002, I (LJ) had been meeting, as a young psychologist in my “intern” years, with a young person who was widely known for what appeared to be an inescapable attraction to trouble. In one particular conversation he reported a small yet promising turn of events. I emerged from the appointment with a bounce in my step—filled quite to the brim with bubbling joy at how this turnaround had caught his family and me by surprise. Immediately and without reserve I reported my amazement and wonder to my four senior colleagues. I spared no detail in highlighting the originality in this young person’s actions, and marveled at the evidence that he had, in this moment, done what no one thought possible. He had left us doubtful professionals behind. Perhaps not in a cloud of dust, but certainly more than a speck! I saw this as a newsworthy achievement, and there was no doubt I was excited. I left my colleagues in no doubt of this either. In response, my seniors began to pass smiles, not so much to me, but back and forth to each other. This turned to laughter as one declared: “I think we have a Big Kev on our hands.” For those of you out of reach of Australian television in the nineties—Big Kev was a locally famous personality, known for garish and flamboyant TV infomercials. His catch-cry was as inescapable as trouble had been for my young client. It was, of course, “I’m excited!!!”

I remember meeting their humor with private confusion. Was the kind of excitement I had put forward not easily discernable from Big Kev’s? Surely the revelation of excitement in a therapeutic realm could signify different ethics than those embodied by Big Kev in the selling of Super Strength Laundry Liquid.

### EXCITEMENT AND DISCOURSE

If we characterize “. . . western children as moral and social innocents with insufficient character and social guile to make their way in the world” (Wyness, Harrison,

& Buchanan, 2004, p. 85), then the use of civilizing measures can unequivocally be justified. Such a view would have us wait several years before consulting children about the problems they face; in fact, we wouldn't expect to consult them until they could provide evidence that they had transcended the limits of their current condition and were no longer children. We understand this characterization as being part of a broader discourse of childhood that leaves adults "in charge," favoring adult-managed means of direction, control, and reinforcement with the aim of supporting children's development. In this process we believe an opportunity can be lost, one that would support the consideration of young people's knowledges (White, 2000), values, and purposes, potentially leading to new initiatives and positioning them as real partners in tackling, or in the case of more "playful approaches" (Freeman, Epston, & Lobo-vits, 1997), tickling serious problems. It is not that the aims of adults are ill intended. On the contrary, adults, in our experience, almost always have the best interests of children in mind and at heart. However, when the prevailing discourse upholds a perception of children as "socially and morally incompetent" (Wyness et al., 2004) or "exclusively as an object of sentiment and not as an agent of production" (Zelizer, 1998), concerned parents and professionals can be compelled to zealously put their minds to work while resting young people's minds.

We are interested in shining a light on how this discourse shapes and influences the ways excitement is treated and endowed in the realm of therapy. Whether excitement is dispensed as a calculated expression of approval or a more spontaneous manifestation, it is more richly understood when considered in context. As a pre-determined response, it can be seen as part of a tool-kit, taken up at pre-selected moments. It is a mechanism of control, a strategy intended to produce and reproduce certain outcomes until they are sufficiently imbedded. Parents can be trained to show *enthusiasm* at key moments, a component of the five PRIDE skills aimed at fostering compliance in their children (Borrego, & Burrell, 2010). In line with certain discourses of childhood adults are obliged to consider it their task alone:

. . . there are children's rights to welfare that rest on adults providing care, education, and guidance. The emphasis here is on things being done to children by adults on the basis of children's best interests. [Adults are] assumed to be in a better position to secure the child's welfare than children themselves (Wyness et al., 2004, p. 88).

Excitement as one planned strategy, along with "conditioned reinforcers," such as gold stars and coupons (Wilder, Harris, Reagen, & Rasey, 2007; McGinnis, Houchins-Juárez, McDaniel, & Kennedy, 2010), pursue such ends.

In contrast, a spontaneous form of excitement, by definition, is a reaction to something unplanned and even unprecedented. Spontaneous excitement is achieved with the element of surprise and the flare of originality. It stands at a distance from what traditional discourses of childhood would expect, as it is incited by the child and therefore relies on an understanding of children in relationship to agency. It is this form of excitement that we are most interested in exploring. By doing so we are not setting up a dichotomous "for" and "against" debate concerning traditions

of pre-determined reward and reinforcement in therapies. Instead we are interested in deconstructing discourses connected with traditions of excitement in therapy, with an eye towards children's agency and know-how as central to the therapeutic encounter, and in anticipation of the excitement this can foster.

With this in mind we regard young hands as capable of marking the place where "artistic creation" may find its greatest opportunity. It is likely at the margins rather than at the center of conventional wisdom that invention finds its source and inspiration (Turner, 1995). Treating young people's contributions in this way is set at a great distance from any blind faith that could have us carelessly or recklessly endorsing apparent wisdom without rigorous care and investigation. We look to anthropological tradition, whereby the practitioner investigates in a spirit of appreciation and curiosity with an interest in local understandings. Even still, we are reminded that we never achieve "insider" status, ". . . we do not have direct access, but only that small part of it which our informants can lead us into understanding" (Geertz, 1973, p. 20). It is particular understandings, often neglected, that we pursue. We turn this commitment into action knowing that rigorous practice will be required as it is likely that those who seek to consult us will have experienced, to some degree, a diminished sense of their own relevance in the face of the Problem (White & Epston, 1990; Epston, 1998) and resulting from the socio-political discourses that prevail in their lives and their families' lives. (Informed by post-structural ideas of identity the capital 'P' challenges dominant understandings of problems as reflections of people's identities. The Problem becomes conceived of as a separate entity, and is identified as such—e.g., "Temper," "Fear," "Trouble," "IT," "The Dark Cloud," etc., making room for other renderings of identity and creating a space in which a person's relationship to the Problem can be revised).

Given that few historical or current contexts have been established for the recognition of young people's knowledge, they are, in many instances, understandably diminished and even unrecognized by young people themselves as well as all other concerned parties. As a result they may be overlooked and ignored, or if paid some heed, such knowledge may unwittingly be treated as disposable or at best met with a kind of wary enthusiasm. It is our experience that established Narrative Therapy practices support our resistance to such sedimented predispositions and reposition us to anticipate moments that may hint of even the merest trace expressions of know-how (Morson, 1994). This posture is found in a variegated curiosity, the kind that intends to safeguard our attention from getting caught up in single-minded lines of interest in the Problem wherein ". . . a field is mistakenly reduced to a point, and, over time, a succession of fields is reduced to a line" (Morson, 1998, p. 603).

### **SITTING ON THE EDGE OF ONE'S SEAT: EXCITEMENT, NARRATIVE THERAPY, AND THERAPEUTIC POSTURE**

Narrative Therapy practices are interested in the shift or distance between what is known at the start of a conversation and what becomes possible to know over time

(White, 2007). A range of established practices exist, often referred to as “narrative maps” (e.g., re-authoring, re-membering, definitional ceremony, etc.) that aim to document and explain ways therapists can diligently aid young people in traversing the *already known* in approaching what is within reach and *about to be known*. Throughout this journey the therapist assumes a particular posture, or attitude, to the outcome of these conversations that is embodied in spontaneous excitement. This posture is best described as a being “in suspense” (White, 2007) and comes from the therapist knowing “it is entirely impossible to predict the destination at the outset . . . the only thing that can be safely predicted is that the outcome will defy any prediction” (White, 2007, p. 250). This posture is often referred to as “de-centered and influential” (White, 2005). This does not imply a passive role in conversation, as if to indicate that children’s natural wisdom (White, 2000) will ready them to single-handedly negotiate life’s problems. It does, however, demand that we actively look for children’s knowledge in the context of their lived experience. We seek to reacquaint children with knowledge that has become distant—things they have thought of and done before, and with what is less known and familiar—things they have imagined or are presently poised to imagine, things connected to their local context and heritage (Epston, 2008). This reflects the broader intention to promote rich story development by assisting young people to grow preferred understandings of themselves that take into account family, significant others, and locally held cultural knowledge. The therapist’s influence is linked to the distance people travel during the course of a conversation, and leaves the destination (e.g., preferred images of life, values, purposes, etc.) to the people who consult her/him. With this preferred posture in mind we enter the space of childhood as one would a wondrous land:

No doubt child psychologists have speculated on the phenomenon of children’s imaginations and the extraordinary energy invested in play, and surely it has to do with the testing of perimeters of the self and of ‘reality,’ and, of course, imitating adult models. But the fact remains that it is a mysterious activity, exciting, fascinating, and unpredictable. Like Lewis Carroll’s heroine Alice, the child plunges willfully down the rabbit hole, or through the looking-glass, into another dimension.” (Oates, 2003, p. 42).

In order for children’s know-how and agency to take center stage, we argue that adult-centric predictions be put aside and that the therapist be on the ready to witness, encourage, join, and enrich possibilities that could not have become known without the center-stage involvement of the children and families who consult us.

However, in meeting with young people in the grips of serious problems we find that this posture is at odds with what people have come to expect from therapy or from themselves. Many young people and their families have become convinced that the predicaments of their lives are reflective of “negative truths” about their own or the other’s character. It follows then, coupled with traditional discourses of childhood, that even the suggestion that children in strife may have something useful to contribute could be perceived as “a mere positive spin on things” or a failure to recognize the magnitude of the problem. We understand this as a reflection of

the cultural phenomenon that promotes these deficit-based understandings of the self, while locating skill and knowledge elsewhere. Foucault's description of the Panopticon and its function serves as an apt metaphor for how cultural phenomena can reduce people, young and old, to objects of study and deny them any sense of agency, their fascination with others' knowledge superseding any curiosity of a more local nature. "A central point would be both the source of light illuminating everything, and a locus of convergence for everything that must be known: a perfect eye that nothing would escape and a center towards which all gazes would be turned" (Foucault, 1978, p. 173). This understanding sets young people at a great distance from the knowledge around which we seek to engage them. Adopting a de-centered and influential position leaves the center position in a young person's life open and available for their occupancy and "... the pleasures of keeping company with [their own] imaginations ..." (Epston, 2008, p. 109). It is our task to take note and engage them in such ways that will give rise to their sense of eminence and it is our ethics that make us available to such achievements and give rise to excitement.

### **EXCITEMENT AND THE UNRAVELING OF NEGATIVE IDENTITY CONCLUSIONS**

A post-structural view of identity is "always critically involved in minimizing domination" (Hoy, 1998, p. 21), in this instance by laying bare relations that would authorize only certain lines of power/knowledge (Foucault, 1978, 1985) and convey a top down flow of expertise and information. The aim, according to Hoy's characterization of the work of Michel Foucault, is to expand the field, "to find new descriptions of ourselves that locate new possibilities in our situations" (Hoy, 1998, p. 31) and in so doing, to allow for a broadened focus in which the exhilaration of creativity and the construction of other accounts of identity becomes possible.

Our experiences with narrative practices informed by such a view of identity suggest to us it won't be long before a counter-rendering to that of the Problem's account of the young person will very likely achieve some degree of expression (Epston & Marsten, 2010). We resist the idea that a given expression of self could in any way be an essential or core representation. It is a medicalization of the self that would tempt us, ill advisedly, to produce exclusive strains or breeds of personhood.

Real "genres" as such do not actually exist; rather, they play at being all-encompassing and "total." Consequently, the very notion of a "unity" is false, since that supposed "unity" encompasses infinite strata of other, autonomous unities" (Hoy, 1992, p. 766).

The DSM-IV-TR and the epoch of medicine and scientific inquiry that created the context for its legitimation have fostered an understanding of human behavior and identity as fitting onto a "periodic table" of sorts where they can be numbered and organized according to types or "genres" of self. "Science will continue along its own path with an inner necessity beyond its control, and it will produce more and more

breathtaking knowledge and controlling power” (Gadamer, 1976, p. 10). We do not wish to oversimplify the diverse understandings and positions generated by scientific inquiry. However we draw attention to the risks connected with any wholly deductive method in and upon human experience, and hope to stand against practices that reduce subjects to stable texts. In the area of medicine, Jerome Groopman addresses this concern: “. . . today’s rigid reliance on evidence-based medicine risks having the doctor choose care passively, solely by the numbers (2007, p. 6). He points to:

. . . a wealth of research that modeled “optimal” medical decision-making with complex mathematical formulas, but [he explains] even the advocates of such formulas conceded that they rarely mirrored reality at the bedside or could be followed practically (Groopman, 2007, p. 7).

It is commonly the case that in the course of a single meeting those with whom we consult manifest themselves incongruously in some small or everyday way. It is in the midst of such multiplicity that we find opportunity. Far from being disconcerting, incongruity reminds us of our commitment to a multi-storied view of identity and can put us onto the scent of alternative values, hopes, and dreams. It is often the case that young people, along with their parents, have become well acquainted with the Problem’s description of who they are. Though “counterworlds” (Oates, 2003) show themselves, they are often brief appearances in the form of fleeting expressions. Because of the Problem’s dominance these appearances can be mistaken for random or accidental expressions, stimulating little or no interest, let alone excitement, and consequently vanishing as quickly as they appeared. Morson asserts that “[a] haze of possibilities surrounds each actuality” (1998, p. 602) but remains unattended and out of focus, our eye drawn repeatedly to a synchronous ordering of events. It is the narrative therapist who has trained eyes and ears for just such moments, and is at the ready to bring them to light through lines of inquiry that are intended to lend support to young people in considering such moments with the interest they require and deserve.

It is in the presence of the extra-ordinary, the trace expressions of alternative thoughts, ideas, and actions, that we encounter our own heightened enthusiasm. But because no meaning has been assigned as yet to these uncharacterized expressions, we are in an undefined space where trace expressions of know-how and the meaning they portend are, as yet, strangers to each other. It is the exhilarating space of the *soon to be known* where we can anticipate that some meaning will be made. At this momentous edge of invention, we experience the bubbling-up of a spontaneous and ethically congruent excitement.

### THE INVIGORATED PRACTITIONER

It is the detection of know-how that takes the conversation in unanticipated directions beyond “the canon” and brings the work to life. It is the revelation of

hidden talents and skills, heretofore untended, that gives rise to excitement. The excitement felt is the thrill of pursuit in tracking something new and as yet unnamed. It is the sense of promise that what was spotted in a flash, when carefully scrutinized, will very likely be something of considerable pertinence, a key value that, once authorized as knowledge, can be called upon to great effect. The intrepid detective—only here it is two or more people, therapist and young client, along with family and community, working alongside one another—having lit upon a clue, must feel a similar sense of exhilaration. With such a presentiment s/he can feel her/his pulse quicken and the tingle and sensation of goose bumps. It is the same for the narrative therapist, who is anything but calm and aspires to something other than neutrality or objectivity at such moments. “Values are screened *in*, not out. Our theories are never neutral or value free” (Laird, 1995 p. 152). We wear our bias. We find noteworthy, trace expressions and knowledge that may be awaiting witness and legitimation. Our role is key, given that legitimation is not a project to be taken up by the self, alone. Rather, knowledge becomes admissible, only as it makes its way in and through communities and authorizing bodies (Gergen, 2009). With neutrality set aside as an interest or attainable goal (Melito, 2003), we move in close and listen with intent.

In the same way a therapist could hold her/himself at a certain remove from the therapeutic encounter, such a distancing could make young people’s contributions to their own lives seem remote. At such a distance, these talents for living can appear small and unimportant, insignificant and certainly secondary to descriptions of the Problem and the identity that inheres in them. Such a vantage point might contribute to a kindly though uninspiring view of children.

The discourse of the innocent child, which emerged with Romanticism, constructs children as inherently virtuous, pure, angelic, and innocent. This innocence makes children immature, ignorant, weak, and vulnerable, and creates a need for protection (Meyer, 2007, p. 87).

We cannot will ourselves to genuine excitement, but we certainly can willfully take up positions that put us close at hand with premonitions of young people’s imminent and meaningful contributions. In the same way that an audience member who has “scored” front row seats for a concert readies her/himself for what will likely be an exhilarating experience, the narrative therapist knows from experience that the same rewards await. It is more a matter of making oneself available to them, with a kind of anticipation, than anything else.

How we manifest this expectancy, and the meanings made of it within our local contexts, is also worthy of consideration. Excitement conjured up to serve the interests of adult direction and control can be spotted a mile away by young people. But given prevailing attitudes about children and the “social disregard” (Walker, 2006) in which they are often held, we may be better prepared than they to grasp the potential value and significance of their contributions, at least initially. We certainly want to be accountable to the moment and to young people and not



carelessly impose upon them our enthusiasm through cheerleading efforts (e.g., That's amazing! You're so brave!). This is in keeping with established narratively informed practices of acknowledgement, as opposed to practices of applause (Russell & Carey, 2004). The excitement we are proposing is genuine, spontaneous, and arises from bearing witness to particular moments in conversations. We do not wish to suggest that its usefulness ought to flavor the tone of interviewing at all points of conversations. We simultaneously acknowledge the importance of what Michael White referred to as a "cool" engagement at certain times, as opposed to a "hot" engagement to keep our co-researching efforts located in curiosity as opposed to stepping into problem solving or enacting reforms (White, 2007, pp. 27–28). Still, we wouldn't want to remain subdued or be less than genuine in our interest in small traces of *knowledge and agency*. For this reason we find it most agreeable and accountable to give genuine expression to our excitement. It can take many forms; there is dogged enthusiasm, tentative ebullience, and burgeoning excitement, leading to unbridled exuberance.

Whatever form it takes, there may be some disparity between our reaction and that of a young person and her/his parents. In such instances we must be prepared to justify such excitement and to hold it tentatively until such time that our two positions can be reconciled. We would attempt to reconcile our current differences by instituting a series of inquiries with the intention of establishing the order of significance, of what has up to this point been stated in incidental terms.

The following dialogue provides an example of a young person's know-how and the gradual closing distance between the excitement felt by the narrative therapist and the initial lack thereof on the part of the young person and her/his family. The excitement embodied by the practitioner is intended, in part, as a counter-measure to the more commonly embodied disinterest in children's inventive contributions to close encounters with Problems. In offering this expression, the practitioner positions her/himself as a witness and audience to the young person's story, and in doing so intends only to set the stage, but never take the stage or upstage. The *mise en scene* may show our fingerprints but the movement and motives are the actor's or young person's own. As witness or audience, we are very active in our support of the young person as s/he embodies the role of protagonist:

DM: OK, I'm beginning to understand from what you're telling me, that these "Thoughts" can get into your head and be pretty tough on you. (*Here "Thoughts" are the subject of an externalizing practice intended to make a space for self-agency.*)

ISABEL: I try not to think about it. (*Is this the potential seed of an idea Isabel is laying claim to?*)

DM: Is that right? How do you not think about Thoughts that insist you think about them whether you like them or not? (*Treating the young person as intentional; this is intended as a direct counter-measure to those responses that would treat the young person as precious but lacking purpose.*)

ISABEL: I just try not to. (*Young person appears disengaged, perhaps she is unaccustomed to knowing herself as useful.*)

DM: Would you say you've been trying to do something about this, like you said, by trying not to think about them? (*This is an attempt to invigorate a space for initiative, with an awareness that the young person may find such an occasion unrecognizable.*)

ISABEL: Mm-hmm. . . . I just won't think about it or I'll ignore it. (*Marginally engaged, at best.*)

DM: Did you just come up with that? (*Maintaining steadfast curiosity and holding the space open and reserved for the young person to step in with her own meanings.*)

ISABEL: I don't know.

DM: That sounded important to me. When you think over what you just said, does it seem important to you? (*Treating the seeds of possible knowledge as worthwhile and, at the very least, treating Isabel as knowledge-able.*)

ISABEL: I don't really know.

DM: Well in that case, can you repeat what you said so we can both pay close attention to it at the very same time? (*Inviting focus and reflection. It is our responsibility to preserve—a step up from reserving—and invigorate the space that is normally occupied by adults.*)

ISABEL: Um, whenever I start having bad thoughts, I'll try to ignore it. (*Stated with increased conviction, perhaps embodied.*)

DM: OK, do you mind if I write that down so I can study it? (*Documenting Isabel's knowledges and treating them as document-worthy. How often are young people's ideas accurately and diligently recorded by their professional aides?*)

ISABEL: Go ahead, that's fine. (*Isabel appears to be moving into the lead position in the dialogue by sanctioning the documentation-worthiness of what were, in the above, casual or incidental comments.*)

DM: Well, let me see, you said, "Whenever I start having bad thoughts I'll try to ignore it." (*Taking the position of scribe or amanuensis.*)

ISABEL: Yeah.

DM: Am I right in thinking that there is more than one thing you've figured out—first, trying not to think about it and secondly, even if the thoughts do come around, ignoring them? (*Seeking confirmation—e.g. "Am I right in thinking . . ."—which Isabel can confirm or deny.*)

ISABEL: I guess so. (*It is not unlikely that Isabel would be a little uncertain in assuming a spearhead position in this conversation.*)

DM: Do you have the kind of mind that can think up good ideas? (*Situating Isabel's good ideas in her mind; an opportunity for her to be the holder of "good ideas."*)

ISABEL: Yeah.

DM: Are you putting your mind that can think up good ideas to work here on those Thoughts that have been so tough on you? (*This question is intended to destabilize adultist hierarchy and in the process create a more democratic space*

*where knowledge and the skills required to access it are also the dominion of young people.)*

ISABEL: I guess . . . I'll try not to pay attention to that and once I don't pay attention to it, I'll get used to it. *(For the first time so far, Isabel is considering herself as the sole agent responsible for these promising developments.)*

DM: Hold on, hold on, okay wait a minute. Let me document this. "I'll try not to pay attention to that, and once I stop paying attention . . ." *(This is taken up as even more documentation-worthy than on the earlier occasion.)*

ISABEL: Yeah, I'll get used to it.

DM: "Once I stop paying attention, I'll get used to it"? *(Care is taken to quote Isabel verbatim.)*

ISABEL: Yeah, and all the bad thoughts will go away. *(Isabel becomes far more comfortable asserting her ideas under these circumstances.)*

DM: ". . . I'll get used to it, and all the bad thoughts will go away"? *(Once again, filling any gaps by rechecking her documented words.)*

ISABEL: Mm-hmm. *(Isabel confirms the accuracy of the quote.)*

DM: How many people your age and even my age would love to remove bad Thoughts from their lives, even those Thoughts that have been on and in their minds for some time? *(Pointing to the potential significance of what began as chance comments as she moves beyond her own age and generation.)*

ISABEL: A lot I guess. *(She confirms, but not surprisingly, with a tentative "I guess.")*

DM: What do you think of yourself for putting your mind to work to think up such good ideas against a Problem that was worrying you day and night? *(Inviting her to consider her opinion of herself in acting as sole agent in relation to the Problem.)*

ISABEL: It's cool. *(She responds enthusiastically as evidence that the two very different positions inhabited by practitioner and young person at the start of this conversation have been reconciled.)*

DM TO PARENTS: Were you aware that your daughter had both the will and capacity to do something all of us perhaps wish we could do? *(Turning to Isabel's parents to see if they are equally reconciled.)*

MOTHER: I knew nothing about this. *(Isabel's mother acknowledges having only presently apprehended this information.)*

FATHER: Me neither, but I certainly wish she could teach me how to go about it. *(Isabel's father does the same but then goes a step further by proposing that he might seek his daughter's tuition in such matters, thereby turning the tables on the usual direction knowledge travels in families—e.g., down the generations rather than up.)*

MOTHER: (laughing) I could take some instruction myself. *(Isabel's mother repositions herself, in this instance, as Isabel's student rather than mentor.)*

DM: So could I! *(This completes the older generation's ceding know-how in this matter to Isabel, laying the ground for the re-grading of Isabel's identity.)*

This conversation draws our attention to the burdens that can be placed on young people, especially children, when we invite them to become the source of information in what is typically a role occupied by adult professionals. It is therefore incumbent upon us to be an active partner in the conversation and participate in ways that makes it possible for young people, like Isabel, to incrementally and progressively traverse the space, from what is already known to what is more possible to know. We are reminded of the determination and purpose that must be found in our participation as practitioners and the exciting and unprecedented directions our young clients can take given the opportunity:

It is in traversing this gap between what is known and familiar and what is possible that people experience a newfound sense of personal agency: a sense of being able to regulate one's own life, to intervene in one's life to affect its course according to one's intentions, and to do this in ways that are shaped by one's knowledge of life and skills of living (White, 2007, pp. 263–264).

## CONCLUSION

We must not neglect the real and important contributions of young people who have the potential to assist in the betterment of their own lives. Nor should we resist our excitement and risk complicity with those discourses and understandings of identity that impose limits on children's abilities to demonstrate personal agency in the face of Problems. Instead we dedicate space for expressions of excitement that are ethically congruent with those ideas and practices established within traditions of post-structuralism and Narrative Therapy. Above all we embody our excitement in the form of persistent inquiry in following trace expressions of *knowledge and agency* to potential rich ends. Lewis Carroll's Alice rode her imagination down the rabbit hole and through the looking glass into an exotic world that confronted her at every turn. At one point she "had quite a long argument with Lory, who at last turned sulky, and would only say, 'I am older than you, and must know better'" (Carroll, 2000, p. 20). Thankfully, Carroll conjured up an Alice who knew plenty and what she didn't know she applied her mind to with a conviction that guided her and us through a "land of wonder." And that is something to get excited about.

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