A narrative inquiry into the use of nature-based therapy material in children's identity development

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

the degree

Doctor of Philosophy

In the Department of Psychology at the

UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

SUPERVISOR: Prof. T.M. Bakker

August 2016

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ABSTRACT

A need to develop creative practices in child therapy, which address elements of environmental and therapeutic sustainability, is evident. Practices that are accessible, affordable, adaptable, and cross–cultural offer therapeutic options that are applicable in a range of contexts. This study explored the potential for nature-based material used in therapy, to facilitate narrative identity development. The therapy process preceding the study entailed the use of an Embodiment–Projective–Role (EPR) ideas for narrative play therapy, incorporating nature as metaphorical material in exploring identity. As a descriptive qualitative study the collaborative narrative inquiry allowed for an account of identity development through the co–creation of a significant statement of self research document. The inquiry into six children's identity documents, differing in age and gender, yielded intentional states of being as identity conclusions. Statements of what was done, statements of knowledge about self, and statements of how their identity informed decision–making, were made. Identity conclusions were reached by every participant and the knowledge that was co–created resulted in rich feelings across all participants. Participants acknowledged the sustainability of the therapeutic process through concrete natural reminders. When engaging in revisiting conversations with their caregivers, it was evident that each participant had experienced changes that enriched their daily life experiences following the research. The research fulfilled objectives of contributing knowledge of alternative, sustainable therapeutic resources and creates opportunities for continued research and practice in narrative nature–based play therapy.

Keywords: Narrative, children, nature–based, therapy, identity, sustainability, inquiry, creative, resources, metaphors

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

As the reader ventures through this research process, a description of the motivation for the study aims to situate the process. The background to the development of this study is described, along with the need for play therapy opportunities within a multicultural context. The ambitions and objectives for the study are presented as an introduction to the research approach and process. An outline of the chapters is then presented as an overview of the dissertation. The need for development within the field of play therapy motivates this study along with the creative potential of that which is readily available.

Background and motivation for the study

Within the field of psychology, it appears that therapeutic activities are evolutionary (Gilbert, Bailey, & McGuire, 2000). Many approaches toward therapeutic activities with children are available, but a call for activities that embrace creativity and alternative opportunities is present. Schaefer and Drewes (2011) maintain that although there are many outcomes–based studies in play therapy, research lacks focus on process studies investigating therapeutic factors that are able to facilitate change. An exploration into the factors promoting change within therapy led to the consideration of specific activities or techniques that contribute to the quality of therapy (DeRubeis, Gelfand, German, Fournier & Forand, 2014). The exploration of innovative practices within play therapy research needs to be coupled with a focus on sustainability of therapeutic skills (Bratton, Ray, Rhine & Jones, 2005).

The sustainability of therapeutic skill is a concern presented within a world–wide focus on all human practices, taking into account sustainability of environmental resources (World Environment Centre, 2011). Within this context of sustainability, play therapy is also called to take heed of practices that benefit humankind, but are at the expense of our environment. It is apparent to me that available play therapy research appears to have neglected focus on environmental issues. This research aims to address sustainability in terms of therapeutic skill and environmental resources, creating an opportunity for environmental resources to partner in the challenge to create activities contributing to the quality of therapy.

Research in the field of environmental psychology reveals a link between eco therapy, or nature based therapy, and creative practices (Berger, 2006; Berger, 2016; Kelly, 2016) to facilitate therapeutic opportunity. Investigating the field of environmental psychology creates

an opportunity for integration of knowledge across disciplines to promote psychological health. This study envisions these possibilities being applied to the field of narrative play therapy to generate alternatives to "buffer the metaphorical message within an environment of receptive familiarity, which in turn helps to release a rich field of symbols, background structures and themes" (Mills & Crowley, 1986, in Chelsey, Gillet & Wagner, 2008, p.402).

Within the context of South Africa, unique cultural aspects require attention when creating possibilities for therapeutic practices. Through research, Berger and Lahad (2013) maintain that incorporating nature into therapy allows a cross–cultural connection with nature, allowing children to express themselves freely in a multisensory, exploratory manner. The use of natural material within the research contributes to the adaptability, flexibility and diversity of therapy creating additional therapeutic and research options.

When considering therapeutic options, research is called upon to generate alternatives that are considerate not only of environmental sustainability, but of therapeutic sustainability. Stets and Biga (2003) have discussed the possibilities of developing an environmental identity, defined as "the meanings that one attributes to the self as they relate to the environment" (p. 406). Through this research, the possibility of the experience of nature within therapy, attributes meaning to future natural exposure, which could assist in therapeutic sustainability (Hinds & Sparkes, 2009).

Utilising nature-based material within narrative research appears to be an innovative approach to narrative therapy. I am unaware of any narrative studies exploring new materials within the play therapy context. This innovative narrative research follows a process of exploring issues, generating alternatives and practically facilitating the utilisation of alternative possibilities. Adams and Jordan (2016) assert that the natural environment offers clients alternatives and supports the development of different and healthier identity conclusions. Within this narrative inquiry, the use of natural materials and the opportunity to create identity conclusions are described through the co–creation of the research document of significant statements of self.

Explanation of the research question that motivates the research

The research study explores the following research question: What are the possibilities of developing children's identity through a narrative play therapeutic process utilising nature-based materials? The research aims to describe this question through a

narrative inquiry of a preceding therapeutic process. The objective of the research entails the creation of therapeutic opportunities for the field of play therapy, along with an acknowledgement of the sustainability of resources in the field of children's identity development. The research heralds the therapeutic potential of natural materials in the process of narrative identity formation in children.

Research framework, methodology, aims, research design, data collection and interpretation

The narrative constructivist orientation of the study places focus on individual narratives reflecting identity (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). The narrative stance to the research is employed throughout the therapeutic process that precedes and informs the research study, forming the basis for research on possibilities of identity development.

The research journey is a qualitative narrative inquiry. As a descriptive study, the research explores identity conclusions through the use of natural material. This culminates in a record of identity conclusion through the creation of significant statements of self (Squire, 2013). Narrative inquiry is, however, a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds Clandinin & Connelly (2000). A decentred and deconstructive approach to research invites the participants to take up agency within narrative collaboration (Crocket, Drewery, McKenzie, Smith & Winslade, 2004; Tootell, 2004). The narrative inquiry within the study assists in the co–creation of a representation of experience from therapy to research.

Non probability sampling enabled an exploratory study of six participants, meeting a quota of age and gender (Bryman, 2016; Denscombe, 2014). Participants had been selected from the age group of between six and eleven years old, from both genders. Elements of sample size and saturation were considered, leading to the appropriate sample selection. Following the completion of a therapeutic process, participants were invited to take part in the study. Once consent and assent had been obtained, the generation of a research document of significant statements of self were compiled by the participants. This research document comprised of identity conclusions that were their significant statements of self. These significant statements of self contribute to the body of knowledge regarding nature-based narrative therapy activities within the scope of identity formation.

The structure of the research dissertation is presented as an outline of the chapters in which the research unfolds.

An outline of each chapter

The focal areas of each chapter are presented here as an introduction.

Chapter two: Literature review

Theories of childhood development informing the selected age range are presented in Chapter two: Literature Review. Play therapy ideas, specifically the embodied, projective, role play (EPR) ideas for narrative play therapy (Jennings, 1999), are discussed here. Play therapy research and research on specific materials that inspire change (Schaefer & Drewes, 2011) are presented. Shortfalls within the arena of play therapy are discussed, with a focus on sustaining skills through reminders that are available, accessible and affordable. Related disciplines and fields are explored as their research supports the development of this study. This overview of development and research informs the journey of narrative collaborative research.

Chapter three: The narrative assumptions of the study

Postmodern thinking, social constructionism and constructivist thinking are described in Chapter three: The narrative assumptions of the study as the basis to the narrative study. The emphasis of individual authorship in co–creating identity conclusions, are central to this narrative inquiry (Botella & O'Herrero, 2000). The uses of nature-based materials, along with narrative practices, are described and therapeutic documents are presented as a means to affirm preferred identity (Epston, 1991; White, 1995). The research process, which allows for the co–creation of documents of significant statements of self, is discussed in Chapter four: The research journey.

Chapter four: The research journey

This chapter outlines the research methodology, along with the steps taken in conducting the research. Sample size and selection along with invitations for involvement are presented. Conservation of the quality of research is heralded in this study through considerations of trustworthiness. Ethical components of the study are discussed and provide a platform for the presentation of research documents.

Chapter five: Natural means to playfully express identity

Within Chapter five: Natural means to playfully express identity, the research journey is described. Participants are introduced and individual journeys are presented as personal narrative accounts. The chapter culminates in the documented significant statements of self that support the research aim. Identity conclusions are represented on these documents that offer preferred ways of understanding the self and its capabilities. Parental input regarding the children's experience following the research process is included. This chapter marks the beginning of a reflection and discussion of research possibilities in Chapter six: Conclusion.

Chapter six: Conclusion

This chapter draws conclusions from the research process, along with revisiting the ambitions and objectives of the study. Chapter six: Conclusion provides a platform for reflexivity. Significant reflections on the conclusions of identity are affirmed with specific focus on the abilities of what *can* be done, what is *known* of the self and how this new knowledge informs *decisions*. Critical reflections on the process are presented within this chapter. Future research and therapeutic possibilities are discussed and hope to engage the excitement and inspiration of other professionals.

An outline of key terms used within the study

Within each of the following chapters key terms that are relevant to the study are introduced. Due to the study focussing on the use of natural and environmental materials in play therapy, such as sticks and stones, the term *nature-based therapy* or *eco*-therapy (Berger, 2006) has been used to describe this approach. The study is situated in a *postmodern approach* (Foucault, 1977) with social constructionist ideas informing the work. *Social constructionism*, a key term within the study, offers the view that knowledge is socially constructed and that narratives allow people to organise and communicate knowledge that has been socially and culturally created (Freedman & Combes, 1996). *Relational constructivism* places further focus on transforming narrative through the recognition of language as a tool to communicate subjective meaning, in order to offer opportunities to transform narratives of identity (Botella& O'Herrero, 2000). These key terms are presented throughout the research study and play an integral role in the co-creation of documents of identity development containing significant statements of self.

Terminology regarding therapeutic work is represented in two distinctly different ways within the study. Traditional psychology terms, specifically therapeutic techniques and interventions, are used within the context of discussing literature and research within the wider field and context of psychology. These terms are defined, within the context of this study's narrative framework as therapeutic activities and practices.

Conclusion

This collaborative research into the possibilities of co–creating identity through narrative play therapy utilising natural material, is situated within theories, research, developments and emerging needs within the field of play therapy. The research has aimed to provide opportunities for the field of psychology to consider alternatives to acknowledge the role of environment in creating possibilities for sustainable therapeutic effects.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter aims to outline the current theories and research in the field of play therapy and the developments needed within the field. Current experiences are informed by historical development regarding therapeutic practices with children. Play therapy has shown remarkable development but, as with any evolving body of knowledge, various areas present concerns and await further expansion and evolution. Due to the specific nature of concerns within the field of play therapy, it is evident that development is warranted. Difficulties within the field regarding finance and practical application are discussed and evaluated in the context of possible alternatives utilising specific existing knowledge. The available tenets of environmental psychology will be explored to examine the possibility of applying themes and theories to possible innovations within play therapy. In addition to environmental psychology, other allied therapies and theories may provide some insight into the utilisation of media within the context of child related therapy. In exploring options existing within psychology and related therapies, it is evident that natural familiar material could be a resource to therapists. This chapter is, therefore, not only a description of development thus far, but a step into the possibility of further development. In examining future development, it is imperative to be certain that the development is warranted and will make a significant contribution to the field and to the people benefiting from relationships with the field. My research will explore the employment of natural materials in play therapy to inspire personal identity development in the context of narrative inquiry.

Developmental Theories: A Working Understanding of Child Development

As a precursor to discussions of the development of a working study with children, understanding their own unique developmental processes is needed. Developmental theories, classed as structuralist philosophies, are included as informants to the therapeutic process preceding the study. "The structuralist approach to knowledge…assumes that every system has a definitive, discoverable structure [with] general laws by which structures function" (Freedman & Combes, 2012, p. 1035). These developmental theories provide a foundation from which poststructuralist narrative therapy practices engage in a deconstruction of this knowledge and move toward the co-creation of narratives (White, 1990). Freedman and Combs (2012) describe poststructuralism as growing out of structuralism. "Poststructuralist scholars became more interested in local, particular stories rather than universally applicable

generalisations" (Freedman & Combes, 2012, p. 1035). Both structuralist and poststructuralist approaches are therefore present through the therapy process but the research study, following the therapy, has been undertaken with a poststructuralist approach. The making of meaning is an important part of poststructural and narrative thinking. In poststructural and narrative therapy there is no objective expert knowledge and clients are regarded as having authorship of their own life narrative (Freedman & Combs, 2012; White & Epston, 1990). The theories of development therefore provide a starting point for therapeutic activities and then narrative practices co-create opportunities for the development of meaningful identity documents within the research process.

A brief chronological history of theories of development is presented here. It is documented that toward the late 1800s, parents began compiling the first baby biographies regarding their children's developmental progress at various stages of life (Charles, 2011). With these accounts of development being generated, interest in researching developmental patterns and expectations grew. The research that was inspired by these biographies took the shape of developmental theories generated between 1933 and 1943 by the front runners in the field, namely, Freud, Watson, Gesell and Piaget. Following the development of these theories, two decades of research appear to have been devoted to the application of the theory. Parke (2004) maintains that a further four decades were then dominated by themes of development rather than the development of new theories. The primary themes within developmental theory, that were given attention, were the examination of genetic and neurological bases for behaviour, the interdependence of cognition and emotions, the recognition of the role of culture within development and the multidisciplinary focus on childhood development.

When studying the developmental theories, it is clear that some theorists have placed a focus on the cognitive and physical areas of development while others have placed more emphasis on the affective and social areas of development. Current research does, however, tend to acknowledge that developmental processes that seem to be biological in nature have a transactional influence (Hartup, 2013; Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). Transactions within the environment are evidenced to promote physical brain growth and increase brain functions (Davies, 2011). Although the focal points of the pioneering research in development may be different, it is clear that across the board, changes in development are documented to occur within similar age ranges.

The period between birth and eighteen months is described by the pioneers as being a phase of dramatic physical development. Freud ear–marked this phase as being the pivotal oral phase of personality development, where needs of an oral nature are required to be met by the environment (Kline, 2014). Erikson (1950) focused on the emotional–social development of trust vs. mistrust during this developmental phase. Piaget's (2013) sensorimotor period is highlighted as being in development, while Vygotsky focuses on emotional communication and private speech development during this time (Semmar & Al–Thandi, 2015).

At the age of eighteen months to two years Erikson (1950) began to focus on the struggle between the development of autonomy and independence and the possible experiences of shame and doubt. Freud (Kline, 2014) saw the anal stage being experienced then, where mastery over bodily functions becomes paramount. Pre–operational language and cognitive development was examined by Piaget, and Vygotsky focused on the development of overt private speech, manipulation of objects and self–regulation (Semmar & Al–Thandi, 2015).

At the age of three, Erikson's (1950) research revealed the development of initiative and associated guilt as children begin to become aware of society's boundaries. Freud (Kline, 2014) focused on the phallic stage of development where sex–role identification and development becomes prominent. At six years of age Vygotsky identified the pre–school age where the leading activity is play (Semmar & Al–Thandi, 2015).

Between seven and thirteen years, Gesell (2013) focused on the development of physical strength and co–ordination. Erikson (1966) identified the phase of industry and related inferiority. Freud focused on the consolidation of gender identity in the latency phase. Piaget (Inhelder & Piaget, 2013) identified the concrete operational phase, where abstract symbols are able to be applied to concrete situations, a movement from the actual to the potential, and Vygotsky focused on learning and the development of silent private speech. Piaget (1968) noted that from the age of seven children, become capable of cooperation as they no longer confuse their own point of view with that of others.

As a therapist, it is this last phase of childhood development that provides the possibility for the creation of self–constructed identity. The ability to begin to examine abstract symbols and engage in a personal learning experience appears to develop in this

phase of development, due to both biological and affective ability (Erikson, 1966; Piaget, 1968). Atance (2008) suggests that from the age of five, children develop the ability of flexible planning and foresight, which enables self–control and delayed gratification. This flexibility remains key to self–exploration within therapy as new meanings are ascribed and explored. From the age of six years, children generally have developed the cognitive skill of conservation. "Conservation simply means that children are able to use cognitive processes to override experiential input to make their perceptions more consistent with reality" (O'Conner, 2000, p.114). I believe this skill is invaluable in the kind of therapy investigated in this study, as it allows children to assess their perceptions and beliefs in an increasingly objective manner and to make active decisions regarding the information they retain about self and environment. Conservation initiates the child's ability to self–evaluate and view the self as an individual, in comparison with others (O'Conner, 2000). The ability to differentiate who I am in relation to others allows me the opportunity to truly "see myself" for who I choose to be. Independent delineation with society is therefore instrumental in the development of self–awareness. At this development phase, the recognition of ambivalence increases and therefore a holistic view of an integrated self is possible. The assimilation of both positive and negative attributes within the self can promote therapeutic movement in that the child acquires a realistic and well–balanced view of themselves and their capabilities. One of my personal goals as therapist is to facilitate the development of an integrated perception of self that may prove helpful in the face of negative personal or environmental experience.

Piaget's concrete operational phase allows for the ability to carry out complex thinking processes about concrete events (Shaffer & Kipp, 2010). Due to my focus on concrete nature-based material utilised within play therapy activities, the manipulation thereof and creation and relation to concrete practical experience can truly be experienced within this stage. According to Freud, the development of superego at this age enables the development of self–esteem that is relatively independent of external feedback (Gemelli, 2009). I believe self- esteem is a by–product of an integrated self–perception.

The regulation of mentalised affectivity (Fonagy, Gyorgy, Jurist & Target, 2004) allows children within the age range of six to eleven years old to think about what they are feeling and be self–reflective. They are also able to utilise memory to transfer predictions on daily experience and challenge prior experience (Gemelli, 2009). The utilisation of memory

plays an important role in narrative therapy, as self–defining memories can result in changes in life stories or act as motivators forming an important role in the development of the self (Singer & Blagov, 2004). Research indicates that the highest correlation of childhood behaviour predicting future adult behaviour exists for the age group of six to eleven years, therefore optimising the opportunity to empower these children to harness their ability to direct their lives (Gemelli, 2009).

My practice experience recognises the possible applicability of the developmental principles outlined by these pioneers, although the timing and organisation of these experiences can be unique to the individual. When considering development, cultural context must be taken into account. The development of normative African developmental milestones is, however, problematic and contextual (Marfo, Pence, Levine & Levine, 2009). Given the tapestry of context, culture and economic situations in South Africa, childhood development needs to be viewed in terms of plasticity with multiple influences (Macleod, 2009). As indicated by developmental theorists world–wide , the skill of self–control, flexible planning, conservation, integration of self and self–reflection are beneficial to the therapeutic process at this age. These skills are important in identity development. It is at the age range of six to eleven years where play therapy appears to have many possibilities in the area of personal identity development.

The Development of Play Therapy

Although many practitioners and theorists have been involved in developing play therapy approaches and theories, my exposition of the field is shaped by the theory that developed my practice and impacted this research study. In no way is this an exhaustive overview of the field in general, but a synopsis of the influences that have spoken into my professional development.

Early psychodynamic play therapy

The first account of play therapy was published by Hug–Hellmuth in 1913, *The Mental Life of a Child: A Psychoanalytic Study*. It involved the use of systematic child observation in the treatment process of children (Levy, 2011). This systematic observational technique focused not only on the use of play in the treatment of children, but in the role played by parent and therapist in the process. A considerable amount of focus was placed on

education regarding the management of the child at home within the treatment process (Plastow, 2011). This approach emphasised the adult environment surrounding the child and not solely the child's experience. Verbalisation within the play process was kept to a minimum, believing that the understanding of a child is limited to an unconscious or preconscious process (Blake, 2011). Hug–Hellmuth appreciated the representational value of play and acknowledged the ability of play to reveal phantasies with an element of distance. Many therapists, including myself, place value on engaging and understanding the child's environment (Hanft, 2000; Solomon & Chung, 2012) and focusing on the development of relationship, as is indicated by Danto (2005). In addition to this, an important point is whether the child's full potential to communicate is being harnessed and given voice, as is the focus of this research. Worchell (2007) maintains that Hellmuth believed that a child lacked verbal ability and patience in communicating with a therapist. As development took place within the realm of child therapy, the amount of contact, communication and relationship with children increased.

Anna Freud further utilised play in order to create therapeutic alliance with children and focused on interpretation as a means to create awareness of defences. Although Anna Freud initially believed in establishing a sound rapport with the child prior to engaging in an interpretive process, this was later discarded to focus on interpreting initial defences, which was in line with the work of Melanie Klein (Blake, 2011). Anna Freud and Melanie Klein were rival psychoanalysts that both focused on interventions with children in the same era (de Mijolla, 2014). Klein believed that children were able to relate to others from birth, but her primary focus was on the inner world of the child. Children were seen to be able to transfer their inner world onto those around them through a process of transference. Anna Freud was more concerned with the influence of external factors on the child's world, while Klein believed that play was, undoubtedly, a manifestation of unconscious material, Freud was far more sceptical in analysing play. Despite these differences, both psychoanalysts were united in the value placed on analytic interpretations in order to inspire insight (Blake, 2011). Melanie Klein continued to expand the use of play, not only to allow for the development of alliance, but to substitute verbalisations as a natural means of expression in therapy (O'Conner, 2000). This development lent itself to the further development of a humanistic approach to child therapy where children were recognised for their ability to verbally direct therapy.

Humanistic play therapy

The critical aspects of this early psychodynamic therapy, I believe, centre on the lack of voice and respect for the child in developing their own personal repertoire and verbalisation of insight, analysis and skill. Relationship with children (Wampold & Budge, 2012) is paramount to the development of the therapeutic process and has a marked influence on therapeutic progress as is evident in humanistic approaches. The humanistic approach (Schneider, Personhood & Bugental, 2014) to therapy allows children to express and create possibilities within a secure relationship (Schaefer, 2011). Children are empowered to be the primary contributor to therapeutic insight (Raby, 2014). Historically, therapy with children continued to evolve and included children's verbal input as vital to the therapeutic process. Allowing children to give voice to their emotional world creates the opportunity for empowerment as abstract concepts are converted into a sensory input that can be understood and processed in a different manner. The recognition of the expressive possibilities in play, coupled with the ability to facilitate awareness, allows play to take its place as a valuable psycho–therapeutic tool.

Alfred Adler, reflecting on humanistic beliefs, acknowledged the interpersonal and social dynamics of children's behaviour and play, which expanded therapeutic possibilities. Adler acknowledged the goal–directed orientation of play, along with the creative possibilities, therefore generating the possibility that children are capable of resolving issues within their play (Shaw & Magnuson, 2006). Giving children the opportunity to create, in a concrete form, what resembles their abstract thinking, implies the possibility of creating options and solutions that were not previously available. This empowering position enabled the field of play therapy to expose its ability to facilitate change and inspire possibilities. Virginia Axline further developed a person–centred approach to play therapy, which focused on the child's self– direction, ability to take responsibility and need for unconditional positive regard and empathy (Cochran, Nordling & Cochran, 2010). It appears that, as theory developed within the scope of play therapy, so did the capacity for recognising the inherent abilities of children to participate in and direct their lives. Axline (1947) maintained that the child leads and the therapist follows throughout the therapeutic process. This non–directive approach led to the development of child–centred play therapy driven by Gary Landreth.

Landreth (2002) teaches a reflective stance which is adopted by the therapist to track the child's input in therapy. The therapist trusts that the accepting environment, which allows for spontaneous free play, allows the child the opportunity for expression of difficulties and resolution of these, to enable an integrated experience and self–concept. With the rare exception, a response of 'congruence' is tolerated within certain boundaries. These responses of 'congruence' relate to the answering or expression of feeling that is congruent to the child's play experience (Ryan & Courtney, 2009). This self–directed healing focuses on the philosophy of 'being' rather than 'doing' in the eyes of therapists (Campbell & Knoetse, 2010) The materials used within this reflective process include art material, doll houses with representative families, animal figurines, sandboxes, doctor's kits, binoculars, toys for aggressive play, toys for fantasy play, puppets and cooking toys The materials are somewhat prescriptive with Landreth (2002) listing certain brands within his work. The playroom would be set up in a certain order and this order must be strictly maintained to allow for security and predictability to enter the child's therapeutic space, as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Playroom. An example of the set–up of a playroom

I value the aspects within these developing modalities that embrace the ability of children to express, create awareness, self–direct and take responsibility for their lives. Having started my practice as a client–centred therapist, I have since maintained the respect for self–direction but utilise my professional knowledge to facilitate practices that introduce

areas of exploration and offer unique exploration options. This movement from purist client–centred work was informed by the following influential theoretical developments.

Release and structured play therapy

Between the period of 1939 and the 1950's, release play therapy was developed by David Levy. Levy introduced the notion that the therapist becomes more involved in staging the scenarios which were deemed to precipitate reported distressing reactions in children (Levy 1939). Therapy is always focused on addressing a predetermined issue. The therapist is also compelled to observe reactions and not to engage in play with a child. Should reactions become severe or the child not manifest the capacity to tolerate certain situations, the therapist will introduce another scenario. This would be evident if the child was to be working therapeutically on a conflict situation experienced by friends through a staged schoolroom scenario, severe emotional reactions would call for a change in activity. Structured play therapy developed by Hambidge expanded this concept to include an assessment of the capacity of the people in the child's environment to cope with the effects of the therapy when structuring interventions (Menassa, 2009). In these approaches, a considerable amount of focus is placed on the therapist's ability to ascertain which issues need to be explored and to what degree this exploration is intended to take place. I value the thought preceding the introduction of specific material to the child, but my concern rests in the dominant position of control the therapist maintains and whether this supersedes the child's ability to self–regulate and exercise agency in the process.

Gestalt play therapy

Gestalt play therapy was developed by Violet Oaklander (Mortola, 2006) who focused a significant amount of her work on the sensory experience of children within the therapeutic setting. Here, the materials used are not as prescriptive as in client–centred therapy. The creativity of the therapist is accommodated within this modality providing the principles and processes are followed. Within the framework of gestalt therapy, it is essential to examine different aspects of the child's experience and how they contribute to the whole experience.

Aspects of cognition, physical, emotional and social experience are examined separately within practices in order to integrate them more effectively into a consistent and integrated experience. The therapist's role is one of facilitation and not of education. Through

play, Oaklander believed that children often express metaphorical representations of their lives and that once these projections were owned, self–awareness and boundaries intensify (Oaklander, 2007). Oaklander places significant emphasis on the development of self–nurturance through the therapeutic process.

Cognitive–behavioural play therapy

Cognitive–behavioural play therapy focuses on the integration of cognitive and behavioural interventions. Cognitive theory sees the child as active in adapting to the current environment utilising its cognitive construction relative to knowledge and experience (Lillemyr, 2009) It defines the therapist's role as educator in assisting the client in challenging and modifying maladaptive thoughts and behaviours (Swank, 2008) .This approach holds value for the connection between mind and body and the effect they have on experience. Due to the role of therapists in reinforcing behavioural and cognitive skill in specific experiences, the ability of a child to generalise these skills is regarded as a concern for practitioners (Knell, 2009).

Narrative play therapy

My chosen theoretical assumption of narrative therapy (White & Epston, 1990) is rooted in deep respect for the capacity of people, including little people, to select ideas, thoughts and actions toward the world. Cattanach (2008), a proponent of children's narrative therapy, defined play therapy as being a developmental, symbolic process through which we understand a child's world The importance of the developing narrative within play became central to Cattanach's developing practice and was developed through work by Jennings (1999) in a theory–neutral way of working with children. Sue Jennings (1999) proposed ideas for play therapy, where concrete experience of emotional skill is imperative. The embodiment–projective role (EPR) approach to therapy "forms the basis for the growth of identity" (Jennings, 2005, p.104). Incorporating physical activity into emotional therapy processes allows for sensory experience with natural materials based on a co–creative process (Jennings, 2005). These play therapy ideas were embraced by Cattanach (2005) and used together with narrative play therapy ideas. Although the beginnings of EPR ideas may have been birthed in structuralist and developmental foundations, within this study they are used to create and contribute toward the postmodern principles of knowledge creation and generation of possibilities. Narrative play therapy follows a process of exploring issues, generating

alternatives and practically facilitating the utilisation of alternative possibilities (Cattanach, 1992). In narrative play therapy, the possibility exists for children to explore possible worlds, stories and alternatives through the manipulation of objects, and conversation is generated in explanation of their experience. Creative and symbolic representations of real and imagined situations are played out, therefore generating possibilities of alternative realities. The communication of thought, beliefs, ideas and actions are explored and developed through the co–creation of alternative possibilities. Constructing, elaborating and extending existing thought patterns allows preferred realities to develop (de Faoite, 2011). Within this extension of thought patterns, an integration of thinking skills with intuitive and emotional knowledge maximises the opportunity for rich experience and deep understanding (Hadley, 2015).

Neuroscientists highlight the fact that our brains are "wired to act before we think" (Trevithick, 2014, p.289). Engaging the cognitive elements of logical thinking and reason in emotional experience allows for self–regulation or the "capacity of people to understand and control their emotions and behaviour...in ways that are flexible and adaptable to the situations encountered" (Trevithick, 2014, p. 290). Neuroscientists also place emphasis on concrete experience playing a primary role in learning and stimulating memory (Siegel, 2012). Zimmerman (2015) places focus on creating experience to harness memory in therapy. Narrative therapy is viewed by Zimmerman (2015) as a process that has the potential to change how people experience the world. This approach, applied to narrative play therapy, allows concrete experience to be a contributor to conversations that co–create meaning.

Michael White (2005) expanded the practical process, highlighting that narrative expressions of children are the catalysts for awareness from which meaning can be created. It is, therefore, deduced that in order to develop meaning and understanding, expression is essential. Within the narrative therapeutic orientation, the manipulation of objects allows for the introduction of materials formulated into tasks or practices, which the child completes while directing conversation about symbolic meanings and personal experience. The objects or materials are not prescribed and the creativity of the therapist is embraced. Cattanach (2007) identifies three processes of therapeutic imaginative play: Embodiment; Projective and Role–Play.

Embodied play. Embodied play involves the differentiation of environment and self through the use of sensory experience (Jennings, 1999). This is often necessary to establish self–awareness. Children may engage in this play to differentiate what they experience from

what the world imposes on them. Sensory objects within the playroom may assist in defining preferences to different experiences. This may take the form of a literal experience in terms of sensory defensiveness to sand in the playroom and a preference to explore using different material, or a symbolic preference of leader or follower roles within play.

Projective play. Projective play involves the assignment of characters to material based on personal experience. From this point, children are able to express their internal world in a concrete fashion. Within these play processes, children are able to examine characteristics of themselves or others and assess the way these characteristics may shape up under different circumstances (Jennings, 1999). Within this play process, children may examine the strength of certain objects and the ability to maintain pressure until breaking point. This play then offers the opportunity to explore personal positions of strain and reinforcement to avoid symbolic breakages.

Role play. Role–play involves the playing out of roles based on their own identity. Within this play process, children may select objects that may have the qualities they currently have or wish to develop and play out scenarios monitoring different options or reactions of the object or persona in the playroom (Jennings, 2005). Children wanting to obtain power and control within their lives may enact the role of a policeman being able to arrest, charge or question people from a position of authority. They may also role–play the role of the accused in the policeman's company to mirror their current position of submission and powerlessness. This affords them the opportunity to examine the dynamic of their current reactions to the world and to assess the repercussions thereof. Often this play is a point of identifying other possible alternative realities.

In the therapy process preceding the data collection phase of this study, the principles of embodiment were utilised in the creation of sensory natural material through projective play. Children were given the opportunity to exercise agency in the selection of material and in their creations from the material. The meanings created from the nature-based materials were generated and documented by the children affording them agency in the process. This material facilitated the ability to role–play and discuss new skills or perceptions. Projective play involves the assistance of objects to allow children to externalise and explore alternative stories in order to expand perspectives (Cattanach, 2003). Projective play allows children to distance themselves from difficult emotional material and formulate possibilities. "Narrative therapy offers opportunities for externalising the problem by placing it within the play and the narratives created. It offers opportunities to try out different stories and alternative endings" (de Faoite, 2011, p. 36). It allows for a playful approach that can be applied to serious problem saturated stories. Gil (2003) states that "by distancing themselves by symbol they buffer themselves from perceptions, cognitions of affects that feel uncomfortable, overwhelming or threatening." (p.155). Traditionally, toys have been utilised as material to elicit projections with children. Maclagan (2001) heralds the ability of arts and creativity in documenting our experience of the world. Curiosity underlies my interest in the therapeutic possibility of expanding on these traditionally employed materials and incorporating nature as a means to co–create therapeutic art. Jennings (2005) suggests that children can engage with their therapist in natural media to co–create and construct a shared endeavour. Narrative therapy is situated as foundational within this research study.

The goals of narrative play therapy. I believe play therapy is a means to allow children a sense of agency in developing understandings about themselves and the world with which they interact. Landreth (2001), although not a narrative therapist, asserts that the play process allows children to consider new possibilities, expanding the expression and constitution of the self while fostering self–control. Narrative play therapy uses "the developmental potential of both play and narrative to support the child in developing a coherent narrative of his or her experiences" through the co–construction of meaning to arrive at preferred realities (de Faoite, 2011, p.33). It is for these reasons that narrative practices are a fitting choice for the study.

With the theoretical assumptions of narrative play therapy being central to this study, it is important that the study take into account the development of research studies with children, to ensure that this narrative study embraces development within the field. Current focuses along with shortfalls within the field require discussion. As the research aims to initiate inquiry into elements of a therapeutic process the difficulties within practical applications in play therapy requires investigation too.

Development in Research Studies Involving Children

Historically, research approaches toward children have developed significantly over time. It appears evident to me, that changes in power relations and reflective involvement of children in research have been significant. Reflective involvement allows the children to re–think a narrative that has already been told and provide understanding about identities that arise from reflections (White, 2007). This reflective involvement forms the crux of the co–creation of the research documents created in the current study. These documents are discussed in Chapters three: The narrative assumptions of the study and Chapter four: The research journey and are represented in Chapter five: Natural means to playfully express identity. Power relations in early research appeared to favour researchers or placed the benefits of research in the hands of those outside of the process. Early research conducted by Skinner (1972) marks the introduction of outcomes–based research focused on facilitating the convenience of parents, including himself as parent. Jean Piaget, world–renowned pioneer in child research, has also faced significant critique around the creation of situational demands and task design that is beyond children's understanding and does not allow for holistic experience and meaning to be considered, rendering the validity of research findings

questionable (Lourenco, 2016). Critique regarding Piaget's reliance on experimental analogues to the exclusion of the crucial elements of relationship, have been noted (Emler, 2013). Collaborating with children in research is a progression from traditional research approaches.

A broad range of possibilities exist between the approach adopted by traditional children's research, where children were considered the objects of research, and that which awards them an exclusive central role in investigating issues of interest to them also within the context of scientific research (Casas, Gonzalez, Navarro & Aligue, 2013, p. 193)

The introduction of collaboration with children in research was introduced by Vygotsky, along with the notion of knowledge as a socially constructed process (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2012). This allows researchers freedom to engage in a collaborative approach, where the expert knowledge of children is valued and incorporated into the process. Repositioning children as partners and not objects in research has become imperative when conducting ethical research (Christensen & James, 2012). Research has also generally been criticised for "promoting institutional and discipline interests" rather than the interests of the people who are studied (Gaddis, 2004, p.1). In the face of collaborative research, the goal of generalising stands the risk of becoming a professional or institutional agenda rather than an opportunity to promote a platform for further communal reflective learning and implementation. Having explored the benefits and necessity for research to be a mutually beneficial collaborative approach, the extent to which this is applied to child–orientated research needs to be addressed. As narrative therapists assert: "It has continued to astonish us how resourceful, responsible, and effective children can be in facing problems!" (Freedman, Epston & Lobovits, 2015, p. 204). This had led me to value the expertise of children. An active decision, within my research, to collaborate with children must be made clear. Children adopted a central role within the current research study as their nature-based creations formed the basis for discussions of identity, children were awarded agency in compiling their own research documents which gave voice to developments of identity.

Existing research within the field of children appears to be organised around different goals or outcomes. Greig, Taylor and Mackay (2007) have identified six different themes that current research can be categorised into: research on learning; research on deviations and delinquency; research on relationships; illness; theory and therapy. The "theory and therapy" category is most applicable to this research study and an overview of current research may

provide some insight into developments or tendencies within the field. The category of "theory and therapy" is organised in a way that research typically appears to be focused within designated theoretical underpinnings. Within the category of "theory and therapy", my reading reveals a diversion where these can be investigated with a focus on a specific area of difficulty or disorder or a focus on a specific technique that intervenes within a specific issue. My research journey is somewhat different in that it focuses on the ability of practices to facilitate conversation or therapy with any given issue or difficulty.

An investigation into narrative research focusing on children, yields information indicating gravitation toward specific focal areas at the expense of others. Many studies within this context appear to focus on theory–specific therapies related to specific experiences or difficulties (Vetere & Dowling, 2012). Difficulties, such as trauma, conflictual home environments, depression, violence, and parent mental health status frequently form the focus within studies (Carr, 2013; Girz, Lafrance, Robinson, Foroughe, Jasper & Boachie, 2013; McGuinty, Armstrong & Carrière, 2013.). Willis, Walters and Crane (2013) discuss the dilemma that many outcome–based studies focus on theoretical ideas, rather than on the individual elements within the approaches that are responsible for creating change. This study will place emphasis on the specific practices employed and the knowledge emerging based on the practices employed.

Through a study conducted by Buckley and Decter (2006), which was focused on therapeutic involvement as a result of crisis, two pertinent questions were asked, the first being: "How could we work with children and families in crisis so that they experienced us as doing things with them in an 'ethic of collaboration' as opposed to doing things to them in an 'ethic of control'?"(p. 4). In challenging the notion of an "ethic of control", reference is made to White (2011, p. 61), who proposes that when we assist people in recognising, acknowledging and honouring the efforts they are making and the options available to them, we increase the sense of personal agency required to work toward collaboration with people rather than an attempt for therapists to obtain control over the personal journey of a client. Collaboration in this research will embrace the ability of the child to exercise choice and to enlighten the researcher regarding their personal experience. Buckley and Decter (2006) also asked: "How could we use externalising conversations to playfully engage the creativity of children?" (p. 5). The value of externalising conversation, as discussed in more detail in Chapter three: The narrative assumptions of the study, lends itself to the narrative inquiry that

leads this research journey. These questions speak into the development of this research as a creative collaborative process where children have the ability to exercise agency in the co–creative process of documenting their own research regarding their own processes in a familiar medium of expression.

Recent developments in play therapy studies

Current research in play therapy appears to focus on the efficacy of play therapy, ideas of practicing therapy, use with specific concerns and the use of play therapy in different contexts. The enriching effects of play therapy on general functioning and specific complaints have been researched for over 45 years (Bratton, 2010; Bratton, Ray, Rhine & Jones, 2005). Among the benefits of play therapy are the possibilities for children to be empowered within their lives, experience control and agency, change meanings, explore alternatives and develop identity (Cattanach, 2003)

Some criticism is directed to the limited scientific base of knowledge in play therapy and the generation of scepticism is raised when therapists draw conclusions that are beyond the data collected (Phillips, 2010). It is, therefore, imperative that studies remain grounded in the respect of reporting the children's perceptions of their therapeutic process. I believe it is crucial that the research documents focus on the children's perceptions of process, therefore facilitating a trustworthy account based on actual experience and not on deduction. Schaefer and Drewes (2011) maintain that although there are many outcomes–based studies in play therapy, research lacks focus on process studies investigating therapeutic factors that are able to facilitate change. This study focuses on different materials used within the process and ability to promote meaning–making. In addition, this study centres on the usage of materials within therapy that promote the sustainability of therapeutic skills and knowledge.

Shortfalls in the Field of Play Therapy

Play therapy attempts to access the child's perceptions and creation of their experience of reality. The exploration of the child's creations allows the development of knowledge that is available for use in life circumstances. "The importance of imaginative play for the child is to create a world in which they are a powerful presence and have mastery over what they have created" (Cattanach, 2003 p.31). It is imperative that play therapy ensure that mastery is not limited to the therapeutic experience but applicable to the child's lived

experience outside the therapy room as well. Mastery limited to therapeutic experience creates a situation of dependency where growth and development is limited to usage only within the therapeutic space. In examining criticisms of therapeutic practice, Eckhardt (2002) asserts that "some creation of dependency still persists, thus discouraging an active meaningful productive engagement of the patient in his or her own world" (p.22). The skills developed within therapy need to be available and sustainable outside of the therapeutic milieu. My study aimed to place focus, not only on the child creating opportunities to obtain mastery and agency over themselves and their unique characteristics, but sustaining those skills. The material utilised within this therapeutic process allowed for continual exposure to therapeutic reminders beyond the termination of therapy.

In addition to the development of personal knowledge in therapy, the sustainability of this personal and therapeutic progress requires assessment. It is known that clients can become regular investors in therapy throughout their life span (Claveirole, 2013). Similar issues may be addressed at different times in one's life and if therapy has once proved valuable, it may be an avenue worth re–visiting. Therapists may question whether abilities and skills were entrenched or internalised sufficiently at the time of termination if similar therapies are continually sought. Staller (2008) states that psychotherapy should be viewed as something more than an acute revolving door with suggestions for change being related to research and problems in service delivery. Additional questions are raised regarding the on–going process of re–enforcing or practicing of skills following termination. Gilligan (2008) proposes that young people are active agents in their own development and that they manifest capacity for autonomous, independent and intentional decision–making and action. Therefore, therapists are called to embrace the ability of children to exercise their agency in remembering learnt skills in order to avoid dependence on the therapeutic process. Practices employed within therapeutic context therefore need to lend themselves to the opportunity for self–reflection and remembering. If the knowledge developed in the process really is owned by the client, they should be able to access it at any stage and have the benefit of daily reminders of the completed process. Due to the nature of therapeutic resources, they are not always readily available for reflection outside of the therapeutic context. The role that materials play in the process of therapy with children therefore becomes an important focus when initiating discussion around the development of therapeutic resource.

O'Conner (2000) proposes that the world is becoming increasingly westernised and that humanity risks losing the diversity that contributes to the complexity and creativity of human thought. It is, therefore, questioned whether therapeutic practices have lost diversity and creativity through the focus placed on commercially available material in order to complete therapeutic activities. A fair degree of play–therapeutic material is westernised and available commercially. Concern around the possibility of therapeutic resources, specifically play therapy resources, becoming commodities that can be bought or prescribed, may add an element of commercial exploitation into the process of psychological healing. A polemic issue arises from the exploitation of the field of healing by the commercial world (Alexander, 2009). It, therefore, becomes questionable whether the most effective and least exploitative resources are being employed within therapeutic contexts. In my experience, regarding play therapy, the available resources, namely toys, are often broken during sessions. Although broken toys are resultant of overuse or significant symbolic catharsis, they practically have a significant impact on therapist's financial budgets causing commercial concerns to enter therapeutic space, a tentative issue for therapists (Woody, 2009). This study aims to offer an alternative to the financial and cultural bind created by therapeutic material.

It appears evident that the activities available in therapeutic practice are by no means exhaustive and that opportunity for development is embraced. Eckhardt (2002) proposes that psychotherapists have to adapt to shorter–term therapy utilising different modalities. My research focus rests on the implementation of natural environmental material as a proposed alternative to addresses the current concerns within the field of play therapy.

Difficulties in the Practical Application of Play Therapy

When engaging practically in the process of play therapy, the materials utilised can, at times, be a hindrance to the therapeutic process. In developing awareness of these complications, the opportunity is exposed to further develop alternatives.

Abandonment of resources

Upon termination of play–therapeutic processes, play therapy materials are generally left in the therapist's care as part of the therapist's resource and possession. Children may have established strong attachments to the objects they have used to facilitate their self–expression. Due to the possibility of subtle dependence on the therapeutic resources within

the process, the abandonment of these resources may well create a symbolic link for some individuals regarding the abandonment of commitment and patience to development that those very resources demanded of them within the therapeutic context. Oftentimes clients develop a preference around resources that, for them, are most meaningful or cathartic and may show difficulty in parting with these resources until their next appointment (Wheelan, 2017). A need to borrow or keep resources is often expressed. Using toys as conventional therapeutic resources prevents their removal from the therapists care as it limits the access of other clients to the array of resources offered by the therapist. Limits are often set by therapists to ensure that toys and materials are not taken (Landreth, 2002; Knell, 1993). It appears that should resources for therapy be less costly to loose, more beneficial to distribute and possible to "take with you", the face of therapy and the degree lasting impact may be altered (Case–Smith, Weaver & Fristad, 2015; Kason, Culsrud & Helleman, 2012).

Entertainment value of materials

The advantage of utilising concrete material in therapy lies in the ability to overcome language barriers through the projective nature of concrete media. "Through the manipulation of concrete objects, clients create nonverbal metaphors to represent and reconstruct their view of self in the context of their cultural surround" (Chelsey, Gillet & Wagner, 2008, p. 399). The disadvantages attached to the utilisation of concrete westernised material relate to the entertainment value of the toys employed as resources within the process. A lack of exposure to westernised toys could often result in a fascination with their attributes and capabilities, which can hinder the emotional focus which therapy aims to initiate. The 'entertainment factor' refers to the captivation of the client with the qualities and capabilities of the toys utilised as resources. Some therapists (Kalra, Churgh & Dinakaran, 2014; Siu, 2010) assert that this exploration contributes to the personal choice and investment in a particular medium of expression. The exploration of the 'entertainment factor' of resources may, however, tend to prolong therapeutic engagement, investment and termination. Addressing the issue of the 'entertainment factor' of therapeutic resources may rid the therapeutic process of lucrative exploitative markets being introduced to disadvantaged communities and may prove to be a valuable contribution to therapeutic development. Should clients have significant exposure to the westernised toys, the play therapy environment runs the risk of replaying experience based on exposure with others relative to the material. Therapy, therefore, becomes a representation of the experience of others rather than of self.

Accessibility of play therapy

With the development of therapeutic practices and materials that are exclusively for the use of therapists, an issue is created in terms of the ability for material and research on material, to be accessible to the client in various settings and segments of the South African population (Macleod & Howell, 2013; Watermeyer, 2006) The accessibility is further exacerbated by the difficulties in transporting material to conduct therapy in remote venues, be that of a rural nature or within a school context. Should therapeutic resources be accessible to everyone, everywhere, the opportunity is created for therapeutic activities to be conducted anywhere with minimal prior preparation and financial implication. The availability of resources in turn contributes to the ability of clients to exercise a process of remembering of therapeutic principles. The utilisation of readily available material would, therefore, contribute not only to accessibility but also to adaptability and flexibility of therapy.

Face validity of therapeutic activities

A concern confronted by many therapists involves the degree to which parents understand and accept the play therapy process (Kottman, 2014). The possibility exists that parental attitudes influence the degree of value the children invest in their individual processes, all be this through modelling attitudes. On one occasion a father of a client involved in play therapy remarked about the wonderful job I have – I, according to his understanding, play all day long. This comment had been made following what I believed to be a comprehensive explanation of the processes underlying play therapy. My office is mainly occupied by toys and therefore, on appearance, his statement appears to be justified. Evaluating the planning and process notes a different story is told. It is therefore questioned that if different resources were utilised within play therapy, would the perceptions of both children and parents be altered regarding the "working value" of play therapy. This may address the issue regarding play therapy being perceived as a child minding activity rather than a complicated therapeutic process.

It is essential, in my opinion, to investigate alternative play therapy materials that address the concerns regarding financial constraints, adaptability and accessibility.

Addressing Shortfalls Within Play Therapy

In contributing to a new body of knowledge regarding new therapeutic resources, it may be helpful to consider resources that would be available in the everyday experience of the client, years after a therapeutic process has terminated. The development of these resources should create the opportunity to assist in reinforcement, healthy self–dependence and internalisation of processes undergone in therapy.

When exploring the possibility of therapeutic material being culturally applicable, readily available and affordable, natural material comes to mind. The field of occupational therapy, specifically with interest in paediatric therapy, has encountered similar concerns and devised activities that allow therapy to thrive in conditions where finance, accessibility and familiarity are concerns. It is worth investigating the approaches that other fields have taken in addressing the concerns experienced within psychology.

Occupational therapy

The field of occupational therapy has invested a fair amount of training and research into the development of toys and therapeutic material from waste. Recycled objects are recreated and given new purpose within the therapeutic environment (Fletcher, 2012). The use of recycled objects aims to address issues relative to finance, accessibility, entertainment, and adaptability. Singakwenza (2016) is an organisation, developed by an occupational therapist, which recognises that "the most important element in a child's education [is] not shelves full of expensive equipment" As a South –African organisation operating in impoverished areas, it believes in giving the community a "Hand–up not a hand–out" (Hill, 2016) in mentoring caregivers to utilise tools that are readily available and affordable. Smith (2012) maintains that rich sensory materials which can be reused are appropriate for therapy clients of all ages, with or without developmental delays. Shaman (2009) recognises that cognitively 3–D components and the resulting representations are more easily recognised as symbols for real objects. This research inspired the usage of 3–D representations with accessible natural material in this study. It is possible for psychology to expand the option of recycled or familiar materials being incorporated into directive therapeutic possibilities.

Rodger (2010) asserts that learning across nature-based contexts tends to promote generalisation and produce more useful information regarding a child's experience. Familiar

materials utilised in play would therefore yield meaningful information and address a myriad of therapeutic obstacles to practice.

Impact therapy

Impact therapy (Beaulieu, 2006) is a psychological approach to therapeutic intervention that utilises mnemotechniques which enhance the creation and retention of new memories. Impact therapeutic practices are designed to focus on the utilisation of readily available objects that are familiar and multisensorial in the process of therapy. Mnemonic laws, initially developed in the field of commerce, are used specifically to assist in the retention of therapeutic skill that will enable access to skills at any time. Ensuring that abstract emotional concepts are made concrete and developing skill from available competencies are key to Impact Therapy and, therefore, lend themselves to work with children. The principles of simplicity in practices and application also render this practice suitable for work with children.

Although the study is not theoretically based on impact therapy, the applicability of these principles lent themselves to the development of concrete experience within the research. The concrete application of abstract concepts and focus on the use of familiar material that accesses available competencies were key in developing practices with nature-based material within this study.

Environment and urban planning

When engaging in research, I am struck by the worldwide tendency to focus on the restrictions placed on children's experience of their natural environment (O'Brien & Murray, 2007). Morris (2004) discusses naturalistic intelligence as one of eight forms of intelligence. Naturalistic intelligence refers to an ecological sensibility that acknowledges, through ethical and holistic practice, the human situatedness in the ecosphere (Morris, 2004). Creativity is regarded as an important dimension of intelligence and, therefore, creativity within interactions with nature, exercise intelligence and dimensions of intelligence (Kincheloe, 2004). It appears that the opportunities, created by natural environments, to enhance creativity and naturalistic intelligence are placing pressure on urban town planners to consider this developmental need in their design and consider factors of accessibility to the natural environment for children (Fjortoft & Sageie, 2002; Kellert, 2002). These concerns have developed out of the restriction of access for reasons of safety, availability and

accessibility. This reinforces the need for structured exposure to that which naturally provides opportunity for growth. This need to incorporate the natural environment in every aspect of children's development creates a therapeutic possibility. Bateson (1979), one of the pioneers in ecology research, acknowledges that stories can act as vehicles of interconnection. Through this research, our interconnections with nature and its creative expressions in stories exercise natural intelligence and holistic understanding.

Natural Material in Therapy

In examining possibilities for available and developing therapeutic resources, natural environmental material becomes a viable and beneficial contributor. It is possible for psychology to rely on its specialist field of environmental psychology to provide some insight regarding the possibilities and potential of environment to play an active role in the development of therapeutic material.

In exploring multi–sensorial methodologies in engaging with teenagers and young adults, Bingley and Milligan (2007) explored the ability of sand play, sticks and clay to explore and articulate memories, feelings and ideas. These principles are applicable to younger clients although the scope of their research did not include younger participants. Ridgers, Knowles and Sayers (2012) expressed concern regarding the disengagement of children from the natural environment and explored the possibility of such exposure to build confidence and skill development in six and seven year old children.

In examining the focal areas of impact therapy; occupational therapy; town planning and environmental psychology, it is clear that the natural environment offers substantial resources that could be employed in the field of child psychology. The cultural benefit of utilising objects such as sand, sticks and stones allows familiarity in the context or geographical area where the therapy happens. Discourses regarding the material can directly enter the therapeutic space where their personal applicability can be explored.

Environmental Psychology and Play Therapy Application

In examining the utilisation of natural environmental material in play therapy, it is clear that development in this area is warranted. Rust (2004, p.50) asserts

that psychotherapy is a powerful tool for reconnection with our world, but that it would benefit from expanding beyond its human–centeredness, to embrace our relationship with the other–than–human world. This would involve relating to nature as subject and embracing our anthropocentrism.

The utilisation of natural material within play therapy provides an opportunity for the field to heed global focus on all human practices taking into account sustainability of environmental resources (World Environment Centre, 2011). Besthorn (2002) states that:

> Psychotherapy's notion of environment and its environmental responsibilities has always been narrowly defined. The profession has tended to either neglect natural environmental issues or accept shallow conceptualisations of nature as something other, quite separate from the human enterprise and/or outside the reach of psychotherapy's main activity (p. 2).

Swank and Shin (2015) developed nature based client centred play therapy (NBCCPT) as an innovative approach to "emphasise the child's relationship with nature in addition to the relationship with the child" (p.151). Dr. Green (2015) has presented training on Jungian nature based play therapy activities, giving participants the opportunity to develop their own nature–based activities for indoor or outdoor use (education.Jhu.edu//playtherapy/learningobjectives.html). Evidence–basedchildtherapy.com, is renowned as a research database for play therapy practices and for disseminating research on a global scale. Numerous other searches, yielded no further information or research in this area.

It is, therefore, called for that therapy expand its current focal areas in order to incorporate nature to maximise potential.

Environment as a restorative reminder

Our daily exposure to our natural environment creates an opportunity to incorporate the natural environment into therapeutic practice which may serve as a daily reminder of therapeutic material and skills invoked by that material, once the therapeutic process is complete, therefore sustaining memory of the process and eliciting therapeutic reminders. "Research in environmental psychology suggests that people's desire for contact with nature serves an important adaptive function, namely, psychological restoration" (Van den Berg,

Hartig & Staats, 2007, p.79). When examining the use of alternative material in play therapy, it is imperative to ensure that the benefit thereof is not only centred around environmental benefit but that the material is able to provide benefit to the client. An evolutionary biologist, Wilson (1984), researched the effect of nature on people and explored the human affiliate with biological environments and life as an instinct. This uncovered connection was termed the "Biophilia Hypothesis". Wilson's (1984) "biophilia hypothesis" as reported by Besthorn (2002) asserts that:

> Human beings not only derive specific aesthetic benefits from interacting with nature but that the human species has an instinctive genetically determined need to deeply affiliate with natural settings and life forms and the response to ecosystems and non–human organisms is innately biological and intensely emotional. (p.2)

Through further research, the link between the 'biophilia hypothesis' and human development has expanded. "The therapeutic implication for biophilia is eco–therapy: restoring health through contact with nature" (Burls & Caan, 2005). Therefore, the need to interact with nature and natural materials not only provides an opportunity to develop therapeutic practice but an opportunity to develop therapeutic significance as instinctual needs are accommodated within the therapeutic milieu. My study examined the possibility of the development of identity development through the use of nature-based material which would sustain the memory of skills to assist in continual restoration and strength through visual reinforcement.

Environment and cultural applicability

Kahn (1997) asserts that environmental sensitivities and commitments are interwoven within the larger cultural and contextual fabric. "Our research, for example, reveals ways in which children have an abiding affiliation with nature, even in impoverished urban communities where such affiliation seem least likely." (Kahn, 1997, p.54) It, therefore, is applicable in the multi–cultural context of South Africa, to develop therapeutic activities using therapeutic material that will appeal cross–culturally without the influence of westernised, commercial toys.

> Most African children in South African townships and rural areas from disadvantaged families do not have toys. They improvise by playing with freely

available materials for instance, sticks and stones, clay, sand, soil and so on. They play games that do not require commercialised material. (Kekae–Moletsane, 2008).

In addition to the employment of sustainable material, the use of natural materials in the therapeutic process creates an opportunity for therapy to enhance creativity in therapy with recognisable and familiar materials. This enables children to "buffer the metaphorical message within an environment of receptive familiarity, which in turn helps to release a rich field of symbols, background structures and themes." (Mills & Crowley, 1986, in Chelsey et al, 2008). In this vain the opportunities for remembrance are enhanced, creating the sustainability of therapeutic effect. "Treatments that use topographical details are, by their very nature, reflective of the culture in which they are developed…and can be evaluated in terms of cultural adequacy" (Vandenberghe, 2008). The nature of materials and context within which the study was conducted contributes to the cultural relevancy and adequacy of therapeutic practice. Therapy conducted within familiar environments has been researched to provide clients with a sense of care and environmental qualities as providing cherished reminiscence (Levitt, Butler & Hill, 2006). Having daily access to the material that assists in the creation of therapeutic strength may serve to reinforce these principles after the therapeutic process has terminated in order to increase their accessibility in later stages.

Environment and sustainable emotional connection

Research by Wasserman, Rafaeli and Kluger (2000) indicates that aesthetic symbols do generate predictable patterns of emotional scripts. It is further defined that aesthetic symbols include natural or artistically created stimuli (Wasserman et al, 2000). It is due to this ability to generate emotional script and meaning in relation to natural sustainable material that this study resolved to describe the therapeutic significance of the use of such on identity development. Utilising concrete symbolic material within therapeutic practice assists children cognitively to transfer this information to abstract concepts within their lives (Kaminski, Sloutsky & Hecker, 2006). The environmental material utilised which I explored has the potential to constantly remind children, through their daily exposure to environment, of the abstract concepts developed in therapy and assists in the contribution of sustainability of therapeutic principle and self–reflection.

Familiarity of material and context creates the possibility of concrete reminders of abstract therapeutic progress. The "life span" or sustainability of progress may then be

addressed. It is promoted in psychology that personal development be viewed as a natural process and progression throughout life and the use of natural material and natural reminders of the process supports this notion. South Africa, as a developing nation has an opportunity, through the development of sound therapeutic practice, to contribute to global sustainability and environmental concerns. This research intended to contribute meaningfully to the field of play therapy, while maintaining sensitivity toward culture, environmental concerns and therapeutic sustainability.

Environmental Play Therapy Research

It appears that emerging research is increasingly acknowledging the benefits of including nature in therapy. Berger (2009, p. 32) states that "it seems that nature therapy joins eco–psychology's philosophy as it offers a practical framework that can help reconnect people". Recent research indicates that engaging with nature contributes to mental health and has a restorative function (McCurdy, Winterbottom, Mehta & Roberts, 2010; Stigsdotter, Palsdottir, Burls, Chermaz, Ferrini & Grahn, 2011). Berger (2009) acknowledged a need for further research possibilities of incorporating nature into therapies and research regarding the finding of personal meaning through engagements with the natural environment. Swank, Shin, Cabrita, Chueng and Rivers (2015) have studies the possibility of integrating nature–based activities with client–centred play therapy but I was unable to access any narrative studies grounded in the use of nature–based play therapy.

Collaborative Practice–based Narrative Research with Children

Historically, research of specific clients, children or adults, appear to have begun with the observation of 'patients' by their doctors, leading to observation and theory building. It appears that earlier research of people began with a focus on theoretical analysis based on the memory and the prior assumption of the practitioner. This research was centred on the analysts' input. Clinical case studies were the chosen method of inquiry for first generation psychologists (Mcleod, 2013, p. 10).

One of the strengths of clinical case studies is that they enable the outcome of a case to be understood and explained in the context of a rich description of the therapeutic process that occurred within each case. While the shift toward controlled quantitative studies of the outcome made it possible to make more reliable and rigorous statements about effectiveness of different forms of therapy, this precision came at the cost of relentlessly eliminating almost all of the complexity that could be captured in a case study (Mcleod & Howell, 2013, p. 13).

The clinical case study therefore also marked the beginning of an era of naturalistic research focusing on rich individual descriptions, even if these were therapist centred, which paved the way for a qualitative approach to research (Seidman, 2013). Research as an extension of the therapeutic journey enables children to continue telling a story that they have already begun to author (Wampold & Imel, 2015).

The investigation of significant events in therapy, according to Mcleod (2003a), was pioneered by Mahrer and Nadler (1986). Mahrer and Nadler focused their research programme on the identification of therapist operations that contributed to the 'good moments' in therapy. Their research focus yielded an identification and definition of moments of therapeutic change and created possibilities for researching resources that create change. The narrative stance within this current research study defines those 'good moments' as 'unique outcomes' or 'pivotal moments' and the research aim was consistent in researching resources that were vehicles in facilitating change. The value I place on the relational aspect of therapeutic processes and the contributions that children can make to the process of inquiry were accommodated by a qualitative collaborative process (Darbyshire, MacDougall & Schiller, 2005). Marrying this process of inquiry with my narrative theoretical stance, it was fitting for my study to be directed by these values and to incorporate children as a collaborative partners throughout the research process.

Moving Forward Through Narrative Collaboration

Many factors need to be considered when designing practices that are collaborative with children. The wealth of knowledge generated by pioneers throughout history has provided a sound platform for the development of innovative approaches to working with children. Although much progress has been made in recent years in terms of technique development, it is acknowledged that on the whole, there is still untapped creative potential (Kaduson & Schaefer, 2002). Drawing on knowledge of various fields, even those that are seemly unrelated to psychology, we learn much about peoples responses to the natural environment and how those responses can be maximised in therapeutic contexts. When constructing any new practices, it is imperative that a sound understanding of the pre–existing theoretical influences is established, in order to contextualise the framework on which the practice rests. Narrative practice supports the development of these research outcomes and is represented in Chapter three: The narrative assumptions of the study.

CHAPTER THREE: THE NARRATIVE ASSUMPTIONS OF THE STUDY

Through this study of natural means to playfully express identities, there is an underlying theoretical assumption that defined and shaped my involvement with the participants prior to, and during the research process. In order to appreciate and contextualise the research study, the therapeutic process must be outlined. Together with the focus on sustainability of material and therapeutic skill, the narrative school of thought creates the possibility to explore these through a storied account of experience. In order to appreciate the possibilities that this study created, one must create a framework from where the practices it undertook, can be understood. This chapter aims to situate the study in terms of the therapeutic processes preceding and underlying the research.

Within this chapter, the narrative constructivist study is firstly discussed, from its origins in postmodern assumptions and social constructionist thinking. Narrative theory, specifically narrative constructivism, informed the narrative practices employed within the therapeutic journey and research documents. Theories of self–narratives which speak of identity were included as crucial elements in this chapter as they informed the therapeutic journey. The process of co–created therapeutic documents and stories is outlined as they were an integral part of the research documents entitled "Significant statements of self".

Postmodern Assumptions

Postmodern ideology was introduced by pioneer Lyotard (1984). Lyotard described the era of modernist thinking as characterised by grand narratives which "present an idea of the development of knowledge as a progress towards universal enlightenment and freedom" (Malpas, 2005, p. 38). These grand narratives can be present as speculative grand narratives or grand narratives of emancipation (Lyotard, 1984). "Speculative grand narratives chart the progress and development of knowledge toward a systematic truth: a grand unified theory in which our place in the universe will be understood" (Malpas, 2005, p.38). Grand narratives of emancipation regard the "development of knowledge as a tool to improve the human condition" (Malpas, 2005,p.38). Grand narratives are therefore seen as being generated as totalising theories from authoritative sources (Lyotard, 1984). These grand narratives are represented in narrative therapy as "dominant discourses" which are challenged by White and Epston (1990) as they aim to "protest their subjugation to unitary knowledges" (p31.). Postmodern perpectives uphold the tenet that there is no universal truth or cultural certainty.

Narrative therapy enables an inquiry into this taken-for-granted wisdom and proposes curiosity and exploration for knowledge and meaning. Postmodernism, is described as "a form of scepticism- scepticism about authority, received wisdom, cultural and political norm" (Sim, 2005, p.3). Narrative therapy emphasises curiosity and the upholding of "local knowledge" as more important than expert knowledge (White, 1990).Postmodernism accommodates a focus on individuals' 'petit recits' or little narratives which humanise humankind (Lyotard, 1984) and allow for the dispersement of the foundation of control and knowledge from authoritiative sources to individuals (Lyotard, 1984). Postmodernism therefore changes "the nature and status of knowledge along with the structures of legitimate knowledge" (Malpas, 2005, p.38). Postmodernism and narrative ideas support examining and heralding personal meaning through narrative accounts offering the individuals, even children, inclusion in decisions rather than assuming professional authority over them (Winslade & Monk, 2007)

Postmodernism (Lane, 2016) allows for the initiation of thought and action which challenge the status quo, in an effort to liberate thinking and explore the possibilities offered by expansive practice. This way of thinking filtered throughout many fields, inspiring new ways of approaching existing theories. The ecology movement in the later twentieth century, which focussed on questioning modernism and technological progress on the environment, led to the development of a postmodern epistemology and raised scepticism about the existence of cultural and economic growth at the expense of liberation (Sim, 2005). This study sought to offer opportunities to current approaches of therapeutic activities, providing a possibility of materials that are sustainable and, in this respect, liberating. It, therefore, is implied that the therapeutic process underlying the study upholds the same. Postmodern thinking allows for the recognition that people's knowledge, derived from concrete experience, is a valuable source of information to be regarded as expert knowledge (Payne, 2006). This study described identity development through concrete experience with nature-based material, heralding children as the experts within their lives.

Postmodernism is said to be a rejection of many of the cultural certainties that western life has been structured around in past centuries (Dickens & Fontana, 2015; Eagleton, 2013; Lash, 2013; Sim, 2013). The degree of scepticism over the status quo in postmodern thinking initiates ideas for interpretations of significance and meaning, which resonate with the basis of this study. A postmodern intelligibility allows for no single claim to be universally

accepted as truth and no single story to be able to provide meaning to life (Nichols, 2014). It accommodates the complexity and individuality of experience. The central role of narrative in organising, maintaining and circulating knowledge of ourselves and our worlds has been stressed by many postmodern writers (Freedman & Combes, 1996, p. 30). White (1991) maintains that people make sense of their lives both through cultural and individual stories and differences are celebrated. This resonated with my need to provide a therapeutic platform that allowed for individual experience and elaboration of each technique, without prescription or direction. White (2007) maintains that we have responsibility "to consider the ways in which we may have unwittingly reproduced assumptions about life and identity that are disqualifying of diversity in peoples acts of living" (p. 31). As postmodern, narrative practitioners we are called to re-author conversations that generate identity conclusions that contradict those associated with dominant storylines (White, 2007).

Along with postmodern worldviews, a social constructionist conceptual framework provides further opportunities which encourage a rethinking of everything that has been taught about the world and yourself (Gergen, 2009). Postmodernism, according to Freedman & Combes (1996) embraces the view that "realities are socially constructed…constituted through language…organised and maintained through narrative…[and] there are no essential truths" (p.22). It is this social constructionist conceptual framework which provides a therapeutic platform for experience within research, supported by reconstructing and re–evaluating what you experience.

Social Constructions of Meaning

It is asserted, by social constructionism, that knowledge is socially constructed and formulated into discourse. One of the philosophical pioneers of this way of thinking, Foucault (1977), used the term "discourse" to describe the ideas created by significant social groups (p.18). Knowledge is, therefore, regarded as socially created and socially manipulated. "The reality we live in are the outcomes of the conversations in which we are engaged" (Gergen, 2009, p.4). Social construction ideas herald the "central role of narrative in organising, maintaining and circulating knowledge of ourselves and our worlds" (Freedman & Combes, 1996,p.30). This implies that reality can be ever–changing, according to the conversations we are privy to. Social constructionism asserts that the knowledge we have about society is grounded in social processes, which are historical and culturally influenced (Burr, 2015).

Engaging with others involves questioning and exploring that which is generally assumed. A constructionist intelligibility opens what can be a precious space for reflection, reconsideration and possible reconstruction.

> Herein lies emancipatory potential, granting us a capacity to step outside the taken–for–granted and to break loose from the sometimes strangulating grip of the commonplace. And herein lies the possibility for new futures as we are invited to consider possibilities for reconstruction (Gergen, 2001, p. 10).

As liberating as the post–modern social constructionist movement has been, there are difficulties that arise in a society where obligations of self–definition are not personally accepted or when social constructions have been influenced through relationship pressure (Gergen, 2009, p. 2). My concerns with the idea of a society that has the power to prescribe our reality are then addressed by the narrative constructivism aspect of the framework which allows for focus on individuals' experience within their social context (Sparkes & Smith, 2008).

Social Constructionist and Constructivist Thinking

Although both social constructionism and constructivism allow for engaging in transformative conversations and both can embrace narrative therapy, the emphasis may differ (McNamee, 2004). In both approaches, reality is reached through a process of co–construction as an active interpersonal process (Botella & O'Herrero, 2000). Social constructionism views identity as an achievement of relation, whereas constructivism views identity as including personal features, moral character being an achievement of the mind that we have authorship over (Castello, 2013). Social constructionists Berger & Luckmann(1966) acknowledge the process of "reification" as a process whereby people are "capable of forgetting [their] own authorship of the human world" (p. 89). It is, however, stated by Freedman & Combes (1996) that unexamined reification can be an "impediment to progress" (p.25). The emphasis of constructivism is on the development of the individual's sense of authorship within their life stories. It is important, however, to note that even when the focus of a constructivist process is personal change, this takes place within a relational practice (Sools & Murray, 2015). Elements of both social constructionism and constructivism supported the development of this study, as their different emphases were relied on at different times through the process. Relational constructivism views therapy as a

collaborative dialogue aimed at transforming the client's narratives of identity through conversations, which create positions of self and conclusions of identity (Botella & O'Herrero, 2000). Botella & O'Herrero (2000) outline the assumptions of relational constructivism as being the following:

> 1)Being human entails construing meaning… 2) meaning is an interpretative and linguistic achievement… 3) Language and interpretation are relational achievements… 4)Relationship are conversational… 5) Conversations are constitutive of subject positions… 6)Subject positions are expressed as voices… 7) Voices expressed along a time dimension constitute narratives… 8) Identity is both the product and the process of one's self narrative construction… 9)Psychological problems are the consequence of the process of construing one's narratives of identity… 10)Psychotherapy can be equated to a collaborative dialogue addressed to transforming the client's narratives of identity. (p.408-411)

Narrative therapy encompasses these principles as their practices are relevant to "understanding meaning-making activities in life, of the construction of personal narratives, and of the constitution of people's identity through everyday acts of life" (White, 2007, p.80). Narrative therapy embraces the agency of individuals in embracing their authorship over their lives (White & Epston, 1990). Within this study collaborative relational dialogues were encouraged in order to co-create preferred senses of identity, which are voiced as narratives, that have been constructed through interpreting experience and creating meaning. This study relied on relational constructivism in the co–creation of significant statements and on social constructionism in exploring the knowledges that informed descriptions and meanings of the significant statements.

Narrative Opportunities of Constructing Stories

When exploring people's ideas and knowledge, Cotter, Asher & Weiser (1994) asserts that "the primary vehicle for organising meaning is the narratives and stories we socially construct to provide ourselves with a sense of coherence, meaning and identity" (pp. 7–8). Dickson (2011) acknowledges that narrative practices pay particular interest to stories which have the power to shape our reality as they construct and constitute our actions and feelings. These ideas of the power of narrative have been formulated into a narrative therapeutic

assumption which provides a platform for the telling of and construction of stories situated in meaningful experience (Castello, 2013).

The narrative approach to therapy aims to assist individuals in revising internalised culture stories into stories that are more inclusive and appreciative of their personal power and responsibility (Polkinghorne, 2004). Narrative therapy's assumption that cultural, social, and political factors are often enmeshed with individuals due to a process of ascription, is essential to the fabric of the creation of alternatives within the therapeutic process. The construction of new possibilities invites the creation of new realities that marry the central notions of personal choice within postmodern thinking with the individual focus offered by narrative possibilities.

The emergence of narrative therapy came about through the problematic social construction of meaning in people's lives (Duschinsky, 2013). As problematic stories had been constructed within relationship, narrative therapy began to deconstruct these stories through relationship and conversation that offered an opportunity for individuals to re–evaluate the meanings attached to their beliefs. This reinforced the agency of individuals to co–construct their individual identities. Social constructionism contributes to narrative therapy in that it is stated that "we now work to help people notice the influence of restrictive culture stories in their lives and to expand and enrich their own life narratives. We strive to find ways to spread the news of individual triumphs- to circulate individual success stories so that they can keep our culture growing and flowing in satisfying ways" (Freedman & Combes, 1996, p18). In this way social constructionist and narrative constructivist theories inform the therapeutic approach to obtain an individual developmental experience in a way that enables the individual to exercise agency within their knowledge about themselves.

Narrative Constructivism Focus

Due to my interest in the development of preferred ways of being with individuals within the narrative way of thinking, narrative constructivism provides the opportunity to acknowledge the significance of relationship, but the focus is on the effect of that significance on the individual. The narrative constructivist orientation places focus on the individual experience and narratives reflecting identity and emotion (Sparkes & Smith, 2008). Narrative constructivism allows individuals the opportunity to generate meaningful stories of experience which inspire questions, interpretation, creation and defending of ideas

(Fosnot, 2013). Although the participant's difficulties may be presented briefly in the introduction to their stories in Chapter five: Natural means to playfully express identity, problems do not form the focus of the study. The descriptions given by the parents of participants, regarding their children's progress following the research process, is brief and occurred after the research was completed. "Narrative therapy is about privileging the voice of those who consult with us, about working with their truth and their version of reality" (Stillman & Erbes, 2012, p.77). True to this tenet of narrative therapy, only difficulties articulated by the participants are incorporated into the narrative process of therapy and research. Narrative therapy is known to avoid placing focus on diagnosis in favour of co–creation of meaning (Hill, 2012). The current study was centred on this practice where the agency of the individual to harness and direct their stories is upheld.

Narrative Practices

I am inspired, as researcher and as therapist, by the narrative ideas that recognise the possibilities that people can exercise in meaning–making. Narrative therapy centralises personal responsibility and accountability in therapeutic process. When clients embrace their personal responsibility it opens up possibilities for development of self–control and reflection. This self–control is referred to as "personal agency" (Mackenzie, 2008, p.11). Personal agency is harnessed within therapy as a tool for empowerment. Developing personal agency through therapy, allows clients opportunities to re–author their lives in a self–directed and self–governed manner. Narrative therapy allows for focus on the abilities that people already hold within themselves and are able to harness, in order to create change and be the change they need in their lives. The pioneers of narrative therapy, Michael White and David Epston, were particularly interested in Foucault's (1977) focus on the regulation of people by society. Developing personal agency through conversation creates the opportunity for individuals to exercise power and control over their own lives. White (2007) through his work with children proposes that people be "radically consulted about what is important in their lives" providing "opportunity to define their own position in relation to their problems and give voice to what underpins this position" (pg. 39). These ideas, developed from the field of anthropology, assist us to obtain "rich descriptions" of people's experience through the development of new rituals which help to strengthen stories (Harper & Spellman, 2006).

Rich descriptions

When engaging in accounts of experience, narrative therapy demarcates two different levels of descriptions which shape meaning and personal connection that people have to the stories they relay. Early theorist Clifford Geertz (1973), distinguished between "thin" descriptions and "thick" or "rich" descriptions when examining accounts of experience. "Rich descriptions" are those descriptions that embody the meaning of those events to persons actually involved in them, as opposed to a socially influence preconception (Geertz, 1973). White (1997) clarifies a "thin description" as an individual's unexamined socially and culturally influenced belief and "rich" descriptions as corresponding to the actuality and complex personal experience. Through carefully constructed conversation, therapy becomes a breeding ground for rich and complex descriptions of experience. Within the therapeutic process, the client's current concrete experience and perception of self will be situated in a story of previous experience and transposed into the possibilities of future experiences. Examining the choice of language in relaying experience is crucial to creating a dual–understanding of experience and feelings about the experience (Duvall & Beres, 2011).

Language is a primary tool in the creation of a rich therapeutic and research document (Newman, 2008). Being respectfully aware of the value of language in a narrative process allows the use of externalising questions and the examination of unique outcomes through careful scaffolding. This process, along with the use of therapeutic documents, facilitates the movement from internal states of understanding to intentional states of understanding. These narrative practices, that employ language as a tool for co–creation, will be explored in the remaining sections of this chapter. In order to enter into a process of examining individual lives and experience, narrative theory utilises these specific practices to enable a rich account of experience that can enable personal ownership and authorship over an intentional state of understanding.

The development of intentional state understandings

When engaging in a journey involving rich accounts of personal experience, it is likely that various internal state understandings may be encountered. Internal state understandings are "conclusions about...manifestations of specific elements or essences that were considered to be the bedrock of...identity" (White 2007, p 101). As stories are constructed, the increase of personal agency allows for the development of an intentional

state of understanding, whereby individuals become active mediators and negotiators in shaping their existence to achieve personal identity conclusions around preferred senses and essences of identity (White, 2007). This is a process of harnessing personal agency and control over beliefs and identities. Moving from the internal state to the intentional state requires the use of intentionally constructed externalising questions. Michael White (2000) showed particular interest in devoting attention to the "absent but implicit". The development of this interest was born from the work of Jacques Derrida (1978), which placed focus not only on what is presented to us, but on what is omitted, the backdrop of beliefs and understandings. In exploring these absent but implicit understandings, the possibility of developing preferred stories is supported. In mapping out a scaffolding of questions to utilise externalised accounts, identify unique outcomes and pivotal moments, we are empowered to connect these across time, with the help of documentation, which reinforces personal agency.

Externalising questions

This narrative concept was initially developed through work with children and it is used in the context of conversation to enable understanding of the influence that situations, emotions and people have on their lives (Carey & Russell, 2004). Externalising conversations can be entered into where unhelpful strategies or experiences are viewed as being outside of oneself and evaluated as separate entities to the individual (Harper & Spellman, 2006). Externalising is not only used to describe unhelpful influences but also those helpful influences that impact on our experience. The benefit of externalising lies in the belief that intentional understandings of experience promote a rich awareness of the influences upon our lives (White, 2007). Recognising the presence of entities along with their impact, influence and effect on our lives, we are able to better control their presence. It is often easier to talk about the full character of an entity if you can objectively assess it as something outside of yourself. Carey and Russell (2004) regard externalising conversations as providing the doorway to skills, ideas and knowledge. Externalisation allows for significant acquaintance with knowledge and skills in people's lives (White, 2005). Within the therapeutic process experiences, reactions and, more specifically, personal characteristics are externalised to enable evaluation of their impact in children's lives.

The therapeutic process used in this study allowed externalising conversation to be initiated through the metaphorical use of familiar material. "Even young children (one might say especially young children) are very adept at talking in metaphors. Skilful; narrative

counsellors learn to speak in terms that join with the child's language" (Winslade & Monk, p.16). The characteristics of the external nature-based material were then discussed in relation to personal experience or lack of experience of a similar characteristic or tendency within the child's life through their language. This evaluation allowed for their assessment of their will to recognise, accommodate, nurture and grow certain characteristics or to revoke their presence in their lives through unique outcomes.

Unique outcomes and pivotal moments

Through conversation, narrative therapists seek out accounts where the problematic story or problematic influences have not been able to dominate an individual's life and these instances are known as "unique outcomes" (Harper & Spellman, 2006). Unique outcomes conversely could be uncovered in situations where the presence of perceived enriching influences that have played a significant role in experience, are examined. Michael White (2005) asserts that unique outcomes or exceptions provide a starting point for re–authoring conversations. During the course of conversation, the possibility of recognition of a shift in meaning or realisation of a preferred way of being may occur. This experience is defined as a pivotal moment (Duvall & Beres, 2011). If acknowledged and authenticated, we can ensure their "stickability", or ability to be lasting (White, 1990, p.121). Acknowledgment through language and documents assists in the reincorporating this into identity (Duvall & Beres, 2011).

The therapeutic process can harness the power of unique outcomes and pivotal moments to create opportunities to facilitate conversations, recruit lived experience and examine alternative story lines. It is through the careful scaffolding of questions that conclusions of identity are explored and re–authored. It is the re–authoring of personal stories that create possibility for inclusive, helpful descriptions and experiences of the self.

Scaffolding of questions

Throughout the therapeutic process, questions were asked to support the development of emerging stories of identities. These questions create a carefully constructed scaffold, enabling the individual to engage in their story and examine preferred stories driven by unique outcomes and pivotal moments (Harper & Spellman, 2006). Scaffolding of questions is a notion derived from the work of Lev Vygotsky, a learning theorist in the early twentieth century (Vygotsky, 1986). Vygotsky proposed that the use of stepping stones in a learning

process supported movement from that which is known, to that which is unfamiliar (Carey, Walther & Russell, 2008). White (2007) considered this approach in the development of personal agency and identity.

> This is a scaffold that assists people to recruit their lived experience, that stretches and exercises their imagination and their meaning–making resources, and that is engaging of their fascination and curiosity. As an outcome, the alternative story lines of people's lives are thickened and more deeply rooted in history, the gaps are filled, and these story lines are clearly named. (White, 2005, Workshop notes)

In developing this scaffold, therapists create 'landscape of identity' questions. Landscape of identity questions are often supported and initiated through questions that provide a landscape of action.

Landscape of identity and action

White (2007) places emphasis on the ability that the concepts of landscape of identity and action have in supporting the practitioner to build a context that supports meaning–making and re–authoring of significant events which have been forgotten, discounted or overlooked. Landscape of action and identity are therapeutic concepts that intertwine and conversation moves between landscapes of identity and action regularly enabling clarity of thought situated in experience. Scaffolding questions that provide a landscape of identity involves the exploration of internal and intentional understanding, understanding of preferences of value, realisation, learning and developing knowledge (White, 2007).

According to White (2007), landscape of identity emphasises the fact that renegotiating life stories is also a renegotiation of personal identity. Providing a landscape of action situates unique experiences in concrete events, times and sequences. Individuals' stories of their personal identities can be considered to compose landscapes of identity which involve composing identity conclusions that are richly described (White, 2005).

Narrative and Identity Formation

Narrative identity is a person's internalised and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Developing conversations and landscapes of identity through

narrative means include the ability for people to evaluate past ideas connected to personal identity and evaluate their relevance, but also to evaluate future possibilities for change. Narrative conversations allow for the development of personal agency over conclusions of identity. A journey of identity allows for an empowering situation for children, where they become the agents of negotiating their identities

Focal aspects of narrative identity formation

When considering the possibility of initiating conversation with children regarding their landscape of identity, the landscape of action that supports the conversational process informs the ideas of my therapeutic practice. These conversations are not limited to linguistic exchanges, but may be supplemented by working with materials as symbols and metaphors of their lived experience. The concept of "identity" is an abstract concept. Although action is connected to the manifestation of identity, it is not identity itself. Due to the concrete nature of children's thinking, working with concrete activities and relating these to lived experiences, enable conversation seated in metaphorical explorations of possibilities that are grounded in actual experience. This inspires intentional lived experience of the abstract through the use of metaphor. Exploring identity conclusions through concrete experience allows for an acquaintance with skills and knowledge that may appear disconnected (McLean, Pasupathi & Pals, 2007). Relating this concrete experience to our own story of identity makes it an experience already lived. This autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Kober, 2014) encourages the development of stories related to concrete life events or times when aspects of the self have been exercised. Stories of identity emerging during those experiences would form part of a personal account of identity. Awareness of identity conclusions allow for the discussion of such and the ability to decide to retain and integrate those or to explore alternatives.

Conversations of identity do not always involve the rejection of aspects of experience, but can result in the celebration of identity. A sense of causal coherence is also important when engaging in conversations of narrative identity. Causal coherence ensures that the experience of self– identity can be linked and integrated across time to create temporal coherence (Habermas & Bluck, 2002). "Authoring a landscape of identity that is a personal account that has temporal coherence as well as a possibility for integration and retention requires a depth of composition that can only be achieved through the richness of the account" (White, 2005, Workshop notes).

These rich accounts, co–created within this study, hoped to facilitate a retention through the remembrance of richly described aspects of identity.

In the first place, people are likely to respond to landscape of identity questions by generating identity conclusions that are informed by the well– known structuralist categories of identity – needs, motives, attributes, traits, strengths, deficits, resources, properties, characteristics, drives and so on. These structuralist identity conclusions invariably provide a poor basis for knowledge of how to proceed in life. (White, 2005, Workshop notes).

Aiming toward descriptions of identity that uphold meaningful conclusions, this study created opportunities for the co–construction of non–structuralist identity conclusions.

As these conversations further evolve, there is opportunity for people to generate identity conclusions that informed by the well–known non–structuralist categories of identity – intentions and purposes, values and beliefs, hopes, dreams and visions, commitments to ways of living, and so on. It is in the context of the development of these non–structuralist identity conclusions that people find the opportunity to progressively distance from their lives, and it is from this distance that they become knowledged about matters of how to proceed. It is from this distance that people find the opportunity for more significant dramatic engagements with their own lives, and to take further steps in the habitation of their existence. (White, 2005, Workshop Notes).

The development and documentation of a rich account of identity, therefore, needs to be supported by means and metaphors which enable the creation of rich descriptions which can be supported by documents of knowledge and affirmation.

Therapeutic Documents

In order to document these newly authored identity conclusions, the creation of a therapeutic document is helpful. Therapeutic documents assist in making conversations and conclusions concrete. Epston (1991) speaks of elements of therapeutic conversation that may be so profound that the client may experience difficulty in recalling them. "But the words in a letter don't fade and disappear the way conversation does; they endure through time and

space, bearing witness to the work of therapy and immortalising it. (Epston, 1991, p.112)" The use of different forms of therapeutic documents exist within therapeutic work.

The use of therapeutic documents is regarded as a significant aspect of narrative practice and can hold value in the power they hold as documents of knowledge and affirmation (Fox, 2003). These documents focus on documenting skills and preferred identities and formed the research documents within this study. Fox (2003) writes of documents of knowledge being a helpful tool to remember preferred realities. These are referred to as being focussed on awareness of skills, performance or identity. Documenting knowledge serves to affirm preferred identity. Within these documents, "statements of position" may be made (White, 2005, p. 5). White (1995) refers to "statements of positions" as those words reflecting the position taken in relation to an externalised problem or developing story. These statements of position may be recorded onto paper alongside the materials around which conversations take place. Each document may recount the discoveries and the individual's own identity ideas or perceived progress (Payne, 2006). Photographs, as well as written transcriptions and documents of "significant statement of self", may form part of the documentation process. Therapeutic documents not only help to keep track of the process of therapy, but inspire narrative to be built into rich accounts over time as evolving accounts of experience. The collaborative nature of the creation of these documents is discussed further in Chapter four : The research journey and displayed in Chapter five: Natural means to playfully express identity. "Put to words valued conclusions about their lives and identities, these valued conclusions have the opportunity to open possibilities for people to take action" (White, 2005). The therapeutic documents later formed part of a document of "significant statements of self", which was used as the primary research document in this study.

"Documents in which the child's perceptions and knowledge are taken seriously, and co–operatively re–written with or by an adult, have a self–empowering effect during therapy, and a final award document can be a literal souvenir" (Payne, 2006, p.106)

This final award document, through my definition, will be called the significant statement of self. The process of creating this document, through the use of these narrative practices, is described by David Epston in his recent work of "wonderfulness inquiries". Epston refers to the process leading to a "revelation of moral character in young people who

then accordingly engage with their 'virtues'…with the problems on their own moral terms and on their own metaphorical home ground" (07 March 2016, personal communication).

All these narrative principles and practices were employed within the therapeutic context to facilitate the development of preferred identity.

Facilitating Rich Narrative Identity Formation with Children

When considering the therapeutic process as creative, we imply that co–construction will take place. Narrative therapy, in its essence, relies on the possibility of creation. Within narrative processes, we create meaning, we create stories, and we create possibilities. In the case of narrative therapy, constructions or creations of new possibilities and alternatives form the focal point of the ideas. In order to access the development of stories related to concrete life events, it becomes helpful, especially when working with children, to engage in a concrete experience. Metaphoric expressions of the content of self–experience are regarded as being valuable in creating awareness, acknowledgement, awareness and facilitating change (Blom, 2004). Metaphorical representation of lived experience can be introduced to children in many ways. Nonverbal metaphors serve to access information and feelings otherwise inhibited by verbalisation (Arizpe, Colomer & Martinez–Roldan, 2015; Bruhn et al, 2006; Chesley et al, 2008; Dayton, 2005; Drucker, 1994; Gillis & Gass, 1993; Guijarro, 2016; Hanes, 1995; Manicom & Boronska, 2003; Samaritter, 2009).

Within the therapeutic process, narrative (Parry & Doan, 1994) conversation plays a crucial role in the examination of the ascription of meaning to metaphors in exploration of personal identity in order to create an awareness of current perceptions and co–constructions of new possibilities. These meanings and possibilities of identity are the focal point of the research study in developing "significant statements of self" research documents. John–Steiner, Shank and Meehan (2005) assert that the co–construction of therapeutic metaphors offer opportunities to explore internal perceptions which can be difficult to uncover. The construction of metaphors provides unique insights into conceptualisation allowing for construction, conceptualisation and manipulation of ideas and experience. Metaphoric expressions of the content of self–experience are regarded as being valuable in creating awareness and facilitating change despite the limitations of language (Payne, 2006). Concrete metaphors present the possibility of exploring something you have prior knowledge about

and then relating it to the self in constructive play. This is the essence of the therapeutic process which preceded the research study.

Metaphors Inspiring Landscapes of Identity with Children

When working with children, narrative therapy supports the creative possibilities within the therapeutic process that allow children to engage in constructive play to model their preferred outcomes or alternative stories and skills. In choosing natural environmental materials to assist in the provision of concrete metaphors, the therapy upholds the narrative principle of growing the possibilities that already exist (Phoenix & Smith, 2011). Natural materials provide opportunities for the re–visiting and co–construction of life stories offering new possibilities, the very principles on which the therapeutic process is based. This enables children to "buffer the metaphorical message within an environment of receptive familiarity, which in turn helps to release a rich field of symbols, background structures and themes" (Mills & Crowley, 1986, in Chelsey et al 2008, p.402). This process, therefore, allows for the development of sustainability, not only of material, but of newly formed identities. Narrative therapy asserts that the process is not complete when alternatives have been identified or when stories of identities have been re–authored. Morgan (2000) maintains that narrative therapists should be interested in developing ways in which these alternative stories can be "richly described". This rich description may come in the form of creating reminders of those identities or remembering what it was that was recognised about the new identity. This is where the natural material used within the study provided the opportunity for continuous visual exposure to the concrete metaphors that initiated the process of identity recognition. The primary therapeutic goal remains to enable the child to create opportunities for ownership of their developing identities, while having the opportunity for therapeutic reminders reinforce skills and knowledge, contributing to the sustainability of therapeutic effect. Within this study materials are living reminders of therapeutic documents of knowledge and affirmation.

Materials Within the Therapeutic Journey

As adventurers within this therapeutic journey, which informed the co–creation of research documents, the individuals are given their first task to collect an array of natural material from the natural environment outside. This step of the therapeutic process already inspires a degree of agency as the individual's choose their own therapeutic material. This

agency, established within the therapeutic journey, is carried through into the research process which follows. This ability to engage in thoughtful decision–making is a product of various personal processes that should be recognised within the therapeutic process. Baldwin (2010) recognises that central to any decision–making process is narrative agency. The element of choice at the outset of the therapeutic technique aims to inspire a platform of personal agency.

As no standardised material is necessary to conduct play therapy (Bratton, Dillman & Akay, 2014; McMahon, 2009), materials that were utilised within the process of these narrative conversations are sustainable natural resources. Natural sustainable resources that are available and renewable within South African contexts include natural vegetation that could be replaced after usage (e.g. dry twigs, stones, dried leaves or fallen green leaves). As this material would already have been regarded as no longer growing or developing, their usage would not limit further sustainability of the primary resource. Resources that were not regarded as vegetation but could be replaced after usage, such as water and soil, proved helpful as therapeutic material as they provided a sustainable resource when returned to their origin following usage. Therapy took place as the children physically constructed pictures of themselves from the natural materials available to them. In employing descriptions of attributes of the natural material, a rich description of knowledge and experience is obtained. Through carefully constructed scaffolding of questions, these attributes were examined metaphorically to obtain accounts of personal experience and landscape of identity. Characteristics were externalised and examined regarding their relevance and potential. An account of emerging identity was, therefore, developed through narrative means and the process was carefully documented as an expression of identity. The process of self–reflection is a well–established therapeutic process but the initiation of this process through the use of sustainable therapeutic material is innovative (Nijnatten & van Doorn, 2007).

The children were engaged as explorers and adventurers within the process of therapy. For me, therapy invites an exploration of a preferred self and it often takes you along a journey of adventure where new possibilities and approaches emerge, sometimes in the most unlikely scenarios (Moore, 2015).

Although the children selected their therapeutic material, for purposes of explanation, my selection of materials is presented in Figure 2:

Figure2: Natural materials: an example of the materials collected for a session

It was assumed that the children would generally have had exposure to these materials prior to therapy as they are familiar and available in their immediate environments. Due to their familiar exposure, it is likely that they had memories associated to experiences centred on the material. Throwing sticks into the dam, playing soccer on the grass, swimming in water or making mud cakes with soil and mud for example. These experiences and the emotional connections are different for each child . Some individuals may report memories based on practical experience with objects while others may relay narrative memory. Narrative memory is defined as differing from habitual memories as it has emotional connections (Williams, 2010). These narrative memories are important as they have bearing on the metaphorical expressions that follow in the process. Awareness of these allows for the possibility of the evaluation thereof. These pre–existing memories may reinforce new memory creation or may be relinquished in the light of memory creation. The adventurers could, in this vein, educate the therapist as to the material collected and the characteristics and memories thereof. These identified characteristics were vital to understanding the interaction that followed with each of the materials.

As the adventurers constructed representations of themselves from the material, their constructions were explored through the narrative scaffolding of questioning. Questions regarding relations between material characteristics and personal characteristics were explored. Differences and similarities were also explored. Constructions of their own identities and personal lived experience began to emerge. Stories of congruence with characteristics and incongruity were explored. It is via this process of meaning–making that individuals can selectively appropriate events to be integrated into a larger life story

(Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). The children were encouraged to take ownership of their creations and alter them or formulate them in any way that they were comfortable. So the story of the self begins to emerge. Their levels of comfort with the technique will be checked and their statements of experience were documented throughout the process.

Carr (2004) acknowledges that children are better able to develop a sense of trust in relationships and general hopefulness when they are met with predictable rules and environments. Due to the therapeutic environment inspiring change and adjustment, I believe that the response to change is far more hopeful when it is entered into from an environment and activity that is predictable. Each session, therefore, was specifically structured to begin in a predictable manner and progress along a predictable structure. The action of construction and characteristic explanation was repeated due to the evolutionary nature of their experience. From week to week, the child's experience with the material changed due to altered experience or knowledge regarding the material. The documentation of these over time was what allowed for the development of a richly described congruent experience.

In general terms, therapy is often addressed as an indoor, verbal, and cognitive activity, with the relationship between therapist and client at its centre (McLeod, 2003a). Due to the use of natural materials within the journey, it seemed fitting to incorporate the exploration of natural processes and elements that the material was exposed to in the natural form. It is with this in mind that an exposure to the elements (which created an experiential journey) was introduced to the therapeutic process. In developing the creative structure of therapy, elements of water, air, fire and earth are incorporated in the therapy sessions as "partners in the process" (Berger & McLeod, 2006). One element was introduced in each session and the dynamics of nature became part of the therapeutic adventure. The description of each session outline will now be explored, as a means to situate the reader.

Session One

Within this session, children were encouraged to select their natural material as these "concrete symbols" allow the use of nature as a mediator to discuss elements of the self (Berger, 2006). The characteristics attributed to each natural material formed part of the discussion, as did the allocation of those characteristics in their places within the construction of the self. My personal construction of material is now provided in Figure 3:

Figure 3: Session one. An example of the representation of self from the natural materials in session one.

Session Two

In line with the predictability that the therapy aims to inspire, the children were once again asked to collect their material and construct an image of themselves utilising the material. Once constructions were completed with characteristics outlined, the introduction of a natural element was included. The first of these was the element of water. The possibilities of the exposure of the materials to water were explored. The child was encouraged to pour water onto the construction in order to observe the changes and reactions of the material. Richard Louv (2005) maintains that the way children respond to nature and changes within nature shapes their daily lives. The children are in control of adding the water in order for them to maintain a sense of control over changes occurring with their personal constructions. The speed at which the water was introduced could be altered from fast to slow and the reactions of the material to the tempo of the water is discussed. The materials as representation of the individual are also discussed. The reactions of materials and reactions of personal characteristics when exposed to change from outside was discussed as depicted in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Session two. An example of the representation of self with the introduction of water.

Session Three

Once constructions were completed with characteristics outlined, the introduction of the previous natural element, water, was again included in a different way. Eco–psychologist Susan Bodner (2012) states that "environmental changes segue into transformation of cognition and meaning" (p.17). This session aimed to accommodate changes in the experience of a natural element to translate into changes of narration of experiences in differing contexts. Two sets of material were collected in this activity. The second set of material that was not yet constructed into a depiction of the self was inserted into a container of water. The reaction of the material to the water is discussed. By the very nature of the different composition of the material, the reactions to the water are different. Some materials may sink, some may float. In some cases the material maintained form, in other cases it disintegrated or mixed with the water. The materials as representation of the individual was also discussed. The reactions of materials and reactions of personal characteristics when exposed to change from outside or emersion into differing environments was discussed. An example is shown in Figure 5:

Figure 5: Session three. An example of the representation of self with the introduction of a container of water.

Session Four

Once constructions were completed with characteristics outlined, the introduction of a natural element was included. The natural element of air was examined within this technique. Explorations of air and moving air in the form of wind was experienced and changes were noted and explored. The notion in "finding respite in nature from nature" (Hasbach, 2012, p.135) was introduced and personal connections to this need were explored. A bowl was introduced and placed over the creation to examine the effect of shelter or pressure on the creation and the effects thereof– practically and personally. This is depicted in Figure 6 below:

Figure 6: Session four. An example of the representation of self with the introduction of the element of air.

Session Five

Once constructions were completed with characteristics outlined the introduction of a natural element was included. The natural element of fire was introduced. The properties and meanings related to fire were explored. Some children may have perceived it as helpful, some as harmful, some may have had mixed perceptions. Even in the experience of fire being construed as dangerous, Beyer (2014, p.203) discusses the ability of nature to allow us to explore ourselves in nature and stories of fearfulness may relate to stories of personal boundaries and defence. The exposure to heat and flame were examined and the reactions of the natural material were explored. Materials reacted differently to the exposure to fire. Some burned, other smouldered, and others were not affected and had natural insulation. Different days also yield different results depending on wind. Resultant flames or smoke were also noted and discussed in terms of practical material reactions and personal reactions. The meaning and interpretations of the characteristics of fire were different and the differing meaning was embraced and encouraged in order to enable the child to select meaning that was personally created and individually embraced free of social influence. This is shown in Figure 7 presented below:

Figure 7: Session five. An example of the representation of self with the introduction of fire.

Session Six

Once constructions were completed with characteristics outlined, the introduction of a natural element was included. The final natural element introduced was that of Earth. Using a container of earth or sand to cover up creations lead to discussions regarding the parts of the

self, they may remain hidden by choice or otherwise. Other materials or minerals that remain hidden underground were discussed. Efforts to expose or retrieve the covered elements formed part of a discussion. The introduction of earth is shown in Figure 8 below:

Figure 8: Session six. An example of the representation of self with the introduction of the element of earth.

These six sessions concluded the therapeutic process that preceded the research study. The journey of exploring self–identity had begun.

Following completion of the process, the opportunity for involvement in the research process was presented to the parents of the children. If they were willing to be part of the study, the children's assent was obtained, following which the document of significant statements of self was drawn up from the documented therapeutic process notes. These documents of significant statements of self, although part of the research process, hold therapeutic value in that identities are documented, revisited and re–viewed.

Significant Statements of Self and Identity Development

Once the children had given assent to their involvement in the research process, the documentation of their significant statements of self commenced. The document of significant statements of self aimed to take elements of their therapeutic journey that highlighted insights regarding their personal identities and place them on a document where they could be viewed in their entirety. The decision for the children or myself to scribe their personal insights was theirs. The decision about how the document should be utilised or

where information was placed was decided by the author of the content, the children. In this way, the narrative of their identity was explored and built upon. "The analysis of narrative…illuminates core features of identity–building and meaning making it social activism" (Davis, 2012). The power of analysing and reflecting on narrative to build identity within individuals was, therefore, highlighted and became central to the study in that it conveyed the possibilities existing within natural therapeutic material.

The possibilities for personal growth, just in documenting a therapeutic journey, are substantial.

When narrative is used as an account of how someone (say, in therapy) reconstructs the self through producing a new story for and about themselves, the subject is split into a creative narrator (whose creativity is unexplained, except as a reflection of newly available discourses) and the object of the narrative, the self who is a product of the story (Hollway, W., Henriques, J., Urwin, C., Venn, C. & Walkerdine, V, 2005, p. x).

The document of significant statements of self became a document of their identity and the possibility that that identity presented.

Conclusion

Gathering and documenting the narrative is a process that is collaborative in nature. Flexibility is key when working with children to assist a process that is tailor–made to their preferred narrative. As questions within the research process involved scaffolding, so too did the research design. A careful construction of participants and methodology is needed to support the formation of a trustworthy research account. These principles and process are presented in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE RESEARCH JOURNEY

Just as theoretical assumptions defined my involvement with the participants prior to the research, so did my research methodology. The assumptions regarding the approach to participants and collaboration within research must be outlined. The research approach informed the journey that the participants agreed to be a part of.

Within this chapter qualitative research methodology is discussed as the approach within which the narrative research was conducted. Participant involvement as a collaborative process of constructing meaning is presented as a foundation to the narrative inquiry. The chapter details sample size, selection and steps taken to invite participants to undertake the journey. Considerations that contribute to the development of a study that upholds quality, trustworthiness and presents an ethical study has been detailed within this chapter.

Qualitative Approaches to Research with Children

According to Taylor, Bogdan and Devault, "the phrase 'qualitative methodology' refers in the broadest sense to research that produces descriptive data– people's own written or spoken words and observable behaviour" (2016, p.7). Qualitative research defines my approach to this study, as it aimed to describe of personal accounts of identity which are able to be flexible and open–ended, thereby increasing the opportunity for the children's experience to be told in a participant–led fashion (Willig, 2013). The qualitative nature of the study allows for an approach to the research within the context of the natural environment (Mcleod, 2003b), where research takes place in a familiar environment which supports documentation of experience. Within this study, participants collected material from the garden, amongst the familiar environment of sticks, stones, leaves, sand and water. Due to the research journey being situated within the experience of children, it becomes imperative that the stories of the children are told and documented in a manner that is familiar and natural to their lived experience. The study is focussed on meanings created through therapy and the possibility of these therapeutic practices offering new alternatives, therefore qualitative research offers an appropriate medium of inquiry (Merriam, 2014). Personally, a qualitative approach resonates with me as researcher, as I am interested in the journey, meaning making and verbal accounts. The flexible structure of emerging questions, exploration of meaning and the flexible formation of significant statements of self lends itself to qualitative design (Creswell, 2013). In addition to the overall qualitative nature of the study, I feel it is essential

to maintain a focus on the child's co–created meanings in order to be able to effectively document those meanings. Localising meanings into general patterns of societal discourse tends to depersonalise the detail of a rich account, which is not necessarily recognised within general categories and tendencies. "Qualitative researchers would want to argue that they too are interested in processes, gather linguistically rich descriptive data, sample flexibility and view their research as a cycle of inquiry" (Mcleod, 2003b, p.73). In light of this specific focus on personal meaning–making, a narrative research inquiry lends itself to the study (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Metaphorically speaking, qualitative research forms the ideas in the research process while narrative research inquiry builds the walls in which the research is contained.

Narrative Research

Narrative approaches to research embrace collaboration and focus on progressions and transformations in meaning–making (Andrew, Squire & Tamboukou, 2013). This narrative study is descriptive in epistemology (Willig, 2013), as the aim of the study sought to describe personal accounts of identity. Descriptive research approaches deal with "what things are like, not why they are that way" (de Vaus, 2013, 18). Furthermore, the descriptive approach to research allows for the placement of value on generating information based on personal narratives to provide understanding from people whom we may have known little about (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Tewksbury, 2009). Narratives are recognised as assuming many forms and can be "heard, seen and read: they are told, performed, painted, sculpted and written" (Sandelowski, 1991, p162.) As described in Chapter five: Natural means to playfully express identity, this study followed a process of physical creation, from which meaning was made, which relates to experience–centred narrative research. Experience–centred narrative research describes narratives as including movement and sequence, while articulating meaning and reconstructing meanings through stories (Squire, 2013). As Squire (2013) maintains, "almost all experience–centred narrative researchers try to obtain a full written, aural and/or visual record of research participants' stories" (p.53). The written record of the significant statements of self–document, also serves as a visual reminder of the development of identity conclusions through this narrative inquiry.

This narrative research process followed an epistemological approach of inductive reasoning, approached with a philosophy of description, not for purposes of generalising, but

to the end of creating possibilities for future use. Catannach (2003) suggests that the activity of induction involves the generation of new theories or possibilities emerging from constructions. This is consistent with the view that children are subjective in nature and their understanding, knowledge and meaning will emerge in interaction with others (Cattanach, 2003). This resonates with the importance of acknowledging participant agency in the process of identity development. These principles also uphold the ethics of narrative practice (Phelan, 2013). Respectfulness, acknowledging co–creation and facilitating agency resound with ethical principles, although they are deeply entrenched in narrative ways of co–constructing meaning.

Narrative Construction of Meaning

In terms of the narrative construction of meaning, Crocket, Drewery, McKenzie, Smith and Winslade (2004) maintain that:

> A deconstructive approach to this task in research… invites us to engage with and interrogate the discursive context as part of the construction of knowledge. If this principle is held in mind then our research practice would not treat those who participate with us in the production of knowledge in a functional way as providers of data who have no voice worth hearing in making sense of the data. Rather we accord research participants' agentive status in the research conversation as commentators, or even theorisers, through inviting them to make comment on the meaning of the data. (p.64)

The document of significant statements of self, therefore, became a collaborative research document that, in itself, highlights developments in identity. "There is a great diversity of ways in which stories can be told and conveyed that do not require what is generally considered to be eloquence or literacy, or for that matter any formal education" (Commonly asked questions, n.d).This approach to research has been termed a decentred research approach.

A decentred research approach is based upon the ethic of collaboration and equality, and seeks to document the 'local' skills and knowledge of the research participants (co–researchers). In this approach to research, it is the research participants rather than the principle researcher that do the 'analysis'. (Tootell, 2004, p.56)

Narrative inquiries assist in documenting these co–constructed meanings within the research.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry involves embracing words and stories as research material, while acknowledging that these words change the researcher and participant, focus on specific experience, and create alternative ways of being (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2006). Narrative inquiry is the method of employing narrative practices to generate, in story form, a representation of a person's lived experience. It aims to document processes and thoughts that an individual has developed through a process (Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik, 2014; Wells, 2011). Pinnegar and Daynes (2006) assert that narrative inquiry allows stories to be the method and the phenomena of study. Verbal material is generated through the inquiry of storied experience but these are not the only materials that can be used as a vehicle of communication. Concrete representations of experience in the form of objects, written accounts and other creative material can be generated within the inquiry process (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Odena, 2012).

Narrative inquiry often appeals to practitioner researchers, perhaps because it speaks to their interest in the particularities rather than generalities of peoples' lives, but perhaps also because they imagine that this will involve them in a familiar and not too distant or difficult practice of 'telling stories' (Reed & Speedy, 2011).

This form of inquiry lends itself to the cautious and respectful stance I aimed to employ in the privilege of sharing people's lives. As a narrative therapist, I value the ability of narrative inquiry to explore holistic experience, rather than fragmenting experience into categories or themes or parts of content as are often demanded by other qualitative approaches (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2012). It is particularly important when working with children that their personal accounts of experience are taken into account, as we as adults may have lost the ability to fully identify with their unique developmental experience.

> Children present an excellent source of the kind of data that are at the heart of qualitative research–rich descriptions in words and pictures that capture children's experiences and understanding, rather than the cold, abstract findings that often derive from numerical analysis (Greig, Taylor & Mackay, 2007. p.139).

Research that takes place within the context of therapy has the unique opportunity of being privy to these rich accounts of experience. "The premise is that qualitative research is a natural extension of the therapeutic process and thus can make a contribution to play therapy in the development of models and theories that will lead to future research and development" (Glazer & Stein, 2010, p. 54). Narrative inquiry has the ability to explore and communicate emotional and cognitive experience as well as concrete and practical experience while crossing the boundary between research and practice (Webster & Mertova, 2007). It is imperative, in my opinion, to bear in mind that the core goals of therapy and research are similar. The conversations generated through each, aim to develop knowledge that was not previously accessible or communicated. This enables my study to describe the development of identity through specific material.

Considerations in Collaborative Narrative Inquiry with Children

There are many aspects to consider when doing research in the field of child therapy. Michael White (1995), regarded as a narrative pioneer, stated that "those people who are practising therapy, along with the persons who seek therapy, are the primary or basic researchers, and those people who collect data in a more formal way are the secondary or supportive researchers" (White 1995, p. 78). This implies that the children within the therapeutic context are in fact the primary researchers and therefore must be included as active collaborators in the process. This stands against common societal discourses around the abilities of children. The Oxford dictionary defines a "child" as:

> A young human being below the age of puberty or below the legal age of majority... a son or daughter of any age… an immature or irresponsible person… a person who has little or no experience in a particular area… the descendants of a family or people… (child of) a person regarded as the product of (a specified influence or environment)…(http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/child.11/10/2013)

I have many difficulties in accepting this definition. This definition, grounded in societal discourse, has many implications for the potential of children to gain agency and control within their own lives. I maintain that although children may battle with certain responsibilities and need to obtain assistance from time to time, they do have the ability to make decisions but the outcomes thereof may not be deemed acceptable by social discourse. We, therefore, have to be cautious not to discount the right of the child to exercise personal

agency in co–constructing meaning in their lives. Should these social discourses be accepted by therapists, their practice with children may remain limited within the narrow societal definition of their capability (Brown, 2003; Daniel & Wren, 2012; Madigan, 2000). Therapy with children, therefore, is effective because children have the agency to benefit from it by taking responsibility for changing elements of their experience as they see fit. They also have a right to decide who is privileged to be part of that experience. Within narrative practices, children present unique perspectives which offer knowledge and solutions which inform their decision–making (DiGangi & Nemiroff, 2012). Ethical consideration regarding the children who collaborate in research is therefore paramount in ensuring a trustworthy, respectful approach to the valuable input of the participants.

Research Process

Steps toward knowledge construction

Prior to initiation of the research process, a therapeutic process was undertaken. The therapeutic process, as detailed in Chapter three: The narrative assumptions of the study, focussed on the development of intentional states of understanding and identity conclusions. These identity conclusions were developed through the understanding of EPR ideas of play as the narrative therapy guided the description of preferred identity. EPR as a developmental theory can "influence both the materials chosen in the practice of narrative play therapy and the therapists understanding of the developmental play level at which the child is choosing, or indeed, is driven to play" (de Faoite, 2011, p. 28). Natural materials were used, within the narrative process as tools to facilitate meaning making. Each week, natural materials were collected in the garden outside the therapy room and explored as a metaphor of the self, encouraging the development of a personal narrative. As the therapeutic process drew to an end, the opportunity for involvement in a reflective study of personal identity development was offered as an opportunity. Once children and parents had expressed interest in these research reflections, the children engaged in a session where therapeutic notes were revisited with the aim of co–creating "significant statements of self" (see Chapter three: The narrative assumptions of the study), where identity conclusions were documented for research purposes. These therapeutic notes are described in Chapter five: Natural means to playfully express identity as a means for contextualising the development of the research document. Consent was obtained for their inclusion. Drawing from a reflection on these notes, the

children identified the most meaningful and significant statements. These "significant statements of self" were reflected in a research document created by the child. The children designed and organised their document of "significant statements of self" in their own manner and placed significant meaningful information as they wished. The researcher's role involved a facilitation, observation and co–creation of their "significant statements of self".

Two questions were asked of the children once this process was complete. The first was whether the information they had learnt about themselves reminded them of anything. This reminder or representation of a reminder was added to the document. Incorporating memories into a storied experience can help to support a continued reminder of the story. "Once a change of identity is reflectively and specifically integrated into the life a story, simpler mechanisms of securing a sense of continuity will again do most of the work" (Habermas & Kober, 2014, p.149). Through this journey the familiar materials offer one such mechanism to remind, but other opportunities for reminders are created within this question. The second question asked what this information made their heart feel. Responses were added to the document. Eichas, Meca, Montgomery and Kurtines (2014) discuss the process of self–discovery as being primarily emotion–focussed, one involving feelings which resonate with the preferred self. It is in light of this emotional focus that this question was addressed. When documenting the research process in Chapter five: Natural means to playfully express identity, stories from the therapeutic notes and process was included in order to create a foundation from which the significant statements of self can be understood, from the context in which they were co–constructed. Consent and assent was granted on the inclusion for this information.

The addition of these two questions engaged a process of attaching new meaning to something practical or concretely experienced, be it a memory of an event, an object or anything else. The questions, secondly, aimed to establish an emotional link between these meanings and an emotional experience. Integrating thinking skills with intuitive and emotional knowledge maximises the opportunity for rich experiences and deep understanding (Hadley, 2015).

Research Participants

The research participants were selected from my private practice which is situated in Benoni, Gauteng. The practice comprises mainly of middle to upper income clients. The

majority of clients are of the white racial group and are English speaking with equal gender distribution. Following therapeutic termination, only first or second language English speaking clients, were presented with the opportunity for involvement in order to facilitate the journey in my mother–tongue and minimise translation issues. Due to developmental applicability (refer to Chapter two: Literature Review), children between the ages of six and eleven years were offered the opportunity of undertaking the research journey.

Selection and Sampling

Sample size

When considering an appropriate sample size, Warren (2002) maintains that within a qualitative process, a minimum of 20–30 sample interviews would reach acceptable levels. In examining studies at doctoral level, Mason (2010) found variations ranging from 1–95, with an average sample of 28. These samples sizes, in many cases, refer to once–off interviews and experiments. Although these general investigations into different research papers have merit, a rich investigation into the needs of a particular study is necessary. It is my opinion that placing quantitative demands of sample numbers on a qualitative process may resort to measures which aim to fill spaces rather than consider the detail that rich accounts contribute. Interview research that aims for individual cases to have a voice in a study, provides a guideline of 3–16 cases (Robinson, 2014). Without discounting numerical decision–making entirely, the following was considered within this study:

- The nature of the research provides rich, specific descriptions of experience among two different gender groups and three distinct chronological age groups (6–7 years; 8–9 years; 10–11 years). Each gender group and each age group was represented in the sample, as is indicated later in this section. This afforded the research the six participants
- Each of the participants represented their experience of six therapeutic and one research specific interview. Although the therapeutic notes were regarded as research documents, their contribution toward the overall 'richness' of the research outcome is acknowledged. Therefore, the inquiry (as presented in Chapter five: Natural means to playfully express identity) includes the knowledge co–created within the six therapeutic sessions. In the interest of rich narrative inquiry, the study, therefore, represents a total of 42 interviews.

This total exceeds the average number of interviews represented in the studies of both Warren (2002) and Mason (2010) in sample sizes of qualitative doctoral studies.

Due to the nature of the study being grounded in meaning–making, it is appropriate that the sampling process be guided by meaningful decision–making. The degree of saturation within the study was considered as a relevant means, although contentious, considering sample size (Francis, Johnston, Robertson, Glidewell, Entwistle, Eccles, & Grimshaw, 2010). Theoretical or data saturation refers to the principle that saturation is reached at the point where increased data or samples may not lead to more information in meeting research aims (Mason, 2010). Although saturation levels may be difficult to measure, various factors play a role in determining saturation levels. Richie, Lewis and Elam (2003) consider, among other factors, the homogenous nature of participants and the type of data collection. Within this study, participants are regarded as homogenous and multiple interviews represented with each participant contributed toward decisions of a smaller sample which achieves research aims (Jette, Grove & Keck, 2003). The quality of the descriptions generated from rich accounts of experience and the nature of the study supported the decision to include a small sample, which reflected the aims of the study (Morse, 2000).

If saturation is the criterion for sample size, specifying minima or maxima for sample sizes is pointless. Essentially, the criterion for sample size is whatever it takes to reach saturation (Bryman, 2016, p.417). Critiques in employing saturation as a means for determining sample size, have arisen due to the lack of clarity in the method of establishing saturation (Francis et al, 2010). The meaning of saturation is regarded as inconsistent and personally assessed by practitioners according to Morse, Lowery and Steury (2014) and Fuss and Ness (2015). Sample sizes then continue to provide a source of debate. Smaller sample sizes have, however, been recognised as allowing individuals to be given a voice and identity within studies, without being seen as anonymous parts of the whole study (Robinson & Smith, 2010).

It is my opinion that six participants represent saturation as they adequately fulfil the aims of the study.

Sample selection

Non probability sampling was conducted in order to support the aim of generating an "exploratory sample rather than a representative cross – section of the population"

(Denscombe, 2014, p.34). In promoting rich exploration within the sample, a consideration of possible participants led to the assumption that differences in development and gender could create opportunities for different types of exploration which would contribute to a full exploration of experience. In order to ensure that the age ranges within the research were adequately represented and that gender differences were accounted for, the selection of a quota sampling method allowed for the consideration of these subgroups or categories.

Quota sampling is regarded as useful in studies focussing on explorations which may generate innovative theoretical ideas (Bryman, 2016). The fulfilment of quotas took place using available and applicable participants (Lim & Ting, 2012)

Steps in inviting participation.

As the therapeutic process of six sessions was completed, children and parents were offered the opportunity for involvement in the research study. All invited participants offered their agreement without reservation. Consent and assent forms were signed as interest in involvement was indicated (Appendices A & B). Assent forms were explained in a developmentally appropriate manner. Participants were offered the opportunity of selecting their own pseudonyms to represent their stories confidentially within the study.

The following participants were included in the study as shown in Table 1:

Table 1: Participant details

Pseudonyms	Age quota range	Gender quota range
Mistery	6–7 years old	Female
Spongebob	6–7 years old	Male
Harper	8–9 years old	Female
Whisperer	8–9 years old	Male
May	10–11 years old	Female
Peter	10–11 years old	Male

Quality of the Research

Within qualitative research, it appears that the process of evaluating research has been debatable and is not as clearly defined as suggested by quantitative research (Willig, 2013). Due to qualitative research focussing on subjective meaning and interpretation, this provides a contrast to quantitative scientific rigour and objectivity (Cresswell, 2013; Willig, 2013). This difference implies that the criteria by which the quality of research is assessed is also different, as is the terminology. Within qualitative research, trustworthiness refers to the trust you can place in the findings of a study as assessed by those accessing the findings as opposed to validity in quantitative research, which is assessed by the researcher (Robson, 2011).

Trustworthy Research

When contemplating the involvement of children in narrative research, the principles of trustworthy research echo the very principles on which ethical practice rests (Johnsson, Eriksson, Helgesson & Hansson, 2014). The respect and caution that I believe authentic, trustworthy research dictates, contributes to the creation of research that is ethical. It is difficult to separate the need to conduct ethical research and the need to present credible witness to the child's voice within this study. Trustworthy research does, however, imply that the quality of the research is 'preserved', while ethical practice would ensure that the relationship is 'preserved' within the research process (Breckenridge, James & Jops, 2015). Accurate 'preservation' of the quality of research demands that the rigor of the research is supported. "Rigor refers to the practice and promotion of good science– in the study design, data collection, and interpretation phases of the research" (Balazs, Morello–Frosch, 2013). Researchers make judgements of trustworthiness possible through developing dependability, credibility, transferability and confirmability (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010, p.302). Added to this list of qualities is the concept of authenticity, as first introduced by Guba and Lincoln (1989).

Credibility

Credibility refers to the notion that research findings are compatible with participant perceptions and it reflects the integrity of the study (Stringer, 2014). Credibility is upheld in research when the portrayal of meaning and experience is accurate as lived and perceived by

the participants (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1983, insists that children who are able, have the right to express their views and have them considered (Carroll, 2002). The Child Care Act 38 of 2005 in South Africa (2007, p.22), states that:

> Every child that is of such an age, maturity and stage of development as to be able to participate in any matter concerning that child has the right to participate in an appropriate way and views expressed by the child must be given due consideration.

Participation in this research embraced the child's voice and allowed the child the position of 'primary researcher'. The initial therapeutic process assisted in establishing rapport which aimed to minimise performance anxiety. Allowing children to utilise their own means of expression assisted in their involvement in the study. The internal validity of the study was, therefore, increased through the empowerment of participants, to use their own vocabulary and conceptual framework in co–creating their research documents (Girden & Kabacoff, 2011). Questions related to the experience of the technique and specific life experiences, elicited personal detailed accounts. Credibility was increased within the study due to this inclusive approach (Polkinghorne, 2007). The overall research documents (discussed in Chapter three: The narrative assumptions of the study), assisted in establishing the credibility of the practices across participants and presenting concerns. The use of the practices, with multiple children in the study, highlights the potential of the material to create meaning in different contexts with differing experiences.

Dependability

Dependability is a concept coined by Guba and Lincoln (1989). In their early work they refer to it as a qualitative parallel to quantitative reliability in research. Core recommendations to improve dependability within research include the promoting of replication, sharing of data if requested, promotion of a mind–set of seeking the truth (Lishner, 2015). The current research hoped to inspire other researchers to replicate the study in different contexts in order to enrich the practice of nature–based narrative therapy. This dissertation in itself provides a document to assist in the sharing and distribution of the research. The collaborative approach supports the participants' formulation of the research document allowing them "authorship filled with possibilities" (Epston, 2016, personal communication).

Confirmability

Confirmability is regarded as the ability to trace research outcomes to the original sources (Petty, Thomson &Stew, 2012). Confirmability was evidenced through the documentation of sessions on a continuous basis, where notes were co–created and photographed. These formed the basis of the creation of the statements of self and are available to validate the origin from which the research documents were created. Member checking is advised in contributing to confirmability and is a process ensuring that the participant's reality is presented (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). Member checking was addressed through participant involvement in compiling documents which formed the basis of the research study.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability for the research to have meaning to others in similar situations (Streubert, 2011). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, this research does not profess to provide a means for a generalisable end, but did aim to create the possibility from which further research and therapeutic experience can emerge – each producing their own development and possibility. Willig (2013) asserts that transferability allows an exploration of the applicability of the research beyond the researched context. Transferability was, however, created in that the thick descriptions acquired through the research process could be conceptually applied to different therapeutic and research contexts, yielding the possibility of developing other significant statements of self.

Authenticity

Guba and Lincoln (1989) and Lincoln (2009) regard a study as authentic when the reporting of participant's ideas is reflected. The principle of fairness contributes to authenticity as it promotes continual provision of informed consent. Within the study, the participants led the exploration and exercised agency in deciding on "significant statements of self". Throughout the research process, the participant's comfort and compliance levels were regularly checked. Ontological authenticity refers to the ability of research to promote personal understanding and is embraced within the narrative approach (Guba & Lincoln, 2013). Through the development of their "significant statements of self", participants explore their relationships and understandings of self in relation to others which encompasses educative authenticity (Mertens, 2014). The formulation of significant statements of self is a

process of decision–making and development of personal agency, which defines catalytic and tactical authenticity (Guba &Lincoln, 2013). Not only does the study address the above elements of authenticity, it was designed to achieve authenticity as a research aim.

Ethical Considerations

Ensuring the preservation of sound research is essential but ensuring the preservation of relationship and ethical practice is, in my opinion, more important. As Bakan (1996) maintains, "they need protection for making their stories available" (p.3). These are the principles on which my practice rests. In considering some of the aspects relative to researching children, I have developed a respect for the caution demanded in attempting to document their experiences of therapy and how that experience may be documented.

Principle of protection from harm

The very nature of psychotherapeutic work implies that health and not harm is achieved (Pope & Vasquez, 2011). In staying true to these principles, a myriad of ethical principles need to be adhered to. In practicing the narrative principle and practice of "respectfulness" (Morgan, 2000), it is essential that this be employed from the point of initial contact with the participant. The principle of "respectfulness" refers to the narrative practice of creating a context of respect and acceptance of a person (Payne, 2006). Should any child refuse to participate in any or all material presented within the therapeutic or research process, this request must be respected and upheld without question. The agency that children possess to direct their experience is a fundamental narrative premise. Children have the right to refuse to continue participating in the research at any stage of the process and it is part of the researcher's primary obligation to respect these wishes. Should the participants at any stage of the process feel uncomfortable continuing in a research relationship with the researcher, alternative options will be made for them to initiate debriefing therapy with another suitably qualified psychologist. There were no specific anticipated harmful effects of the research.

Potential benefits to participants

The children involved in this study have the potential to develop knowledge from their personal creations and to continue to apply this knowledge in their lives due to the nature of familiar material. The children involved in the process stood to benefit from

revising their stories of development through involvement in the research process. Re–telling stories of unique outcome (discussed in Chapter three: The narrative assumptions of the study) aim to reinforce the impact of these achievements in our lived experiences (Green & Lee, 2011).

Candidates for inclusion in this study presented with a number of issues which may be unrelated. Referral issues within the practice include, but are not limited to, social skill deficit, adjustment difficulty, behavioural difficulties and traumatic exposure. Due to the emphasis of the research being situated in the development of self–knowledge possibilities, this reflective study had the potential to be applied to any individual experiencing current difficulties. The referral problem therefore did not influence selection of participants.

This reflective research journey provided an opportunity to revisit the therapeutic notes and personal identity aspects, after therapy was complete, therefore minimising any performance pressure on the child in the midst of the journey. Conducting the research journey in this way also assisted me in ethically conducting the therapy process in the same manner with all children without awareness of who may potentially request involvement in the research post–termination. The children stood to benefit from a reflective study as an integration of therapeutic process.

Engaging in the process of collaborative or narrative "co–research" (Epston, 1999) allows the client the opportunity to claim their story as their own efforts toward development. It also inspires the possibility of remembering fragments of a journey of development which informs the envisioning of their future.

Principle of informed consent

It is imperative to obtain informed consent from participants in research studies in order to conduct research ethically (Allan, 2008). Consent in this study was obtained from parents or legal guardians and assent from the children themselves in respect of their involvement (Appendices A & B). Assent forms were explained verbally to the children utilising their concrete creations to facilitate an explanation of the research process. Assent obtained from the participants assisted in fostering a sense of control, agency and individuality in the children. Assent was regarded as an ongoing process was verbally obtained throughout the duration of the research session (Van Der Westhuizen, 2012). Being

key players and participants in the process created the opportunity for informed participation from the children's point of view.

Financial issues

If the children and their parents requested involvement in the research process and offered their consent following the therapeutic termination process, no financial charges regarding the document analysis were made. Financial concerns, therefore, did not present any issues for this research study.

Dual role of therapist and researcher

There is great benefit in employing research within therapeutic practice. The advancement of psychological theory and practice from a position of experience in the field and experience in working with the practices has significant benefit to the recipient of activity (Martin & Groff, 2011). A chief ethical principle to consider throughout the process is that of beneficence. Beneficence is the expectation that researchers will protect participants from harm while maximising benefits for both participants and society at large (Cooper & Graham, 2009). The principle of beneficence was of paramount importance, as was the awareness of the dual role of therapeutic facilitator and data gatherer in the research process. Conducting insider research, as therapist and researcher has the benefit of increased understanding, natural interaction and intimacy which promotes truthful accounts but also increases the possibility of recording assumption as opposed to truth (Unuer, 2012). Reflexivity within the study aims to minimise this. Ethically, an insider role also creates the possibility that a participant may have willingly divulged information in the therapeutic setting that they may not want included in the research process. The regular checking of consent and respecting confidence may assist in ethically conducting research. "Transparency designed to increase trustworthiness intersects with ethics, for example, in relation to fairness in reporting, or where it might conflict with confidentiality" (Bazeley, 2013, p.407)**.** Thus transparency, requires self– reflection or reflexivity.

As Willig (2013) states, "it could be argued that the traditional conceptual separation of 'research' and 'practice' is not helpful, and that many important new insights have, in fact, emerged from systemic reflection on practice" (p.180). Although addressed here in concept, the practice of reflexivity is situated in Chapter six: Conclusion of the study.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is regarded as a reflection on research that includes an awareness of the interactions between researcher, participant and the research itself (Holloway & Wheeler, 2010). The reflection represented within Chapter six: Conclusion, presents an account of introspection and intersubjective reflection. Finlay (2002) distinguishes between introspective reflection as an awareness of the researchers own personal experience and intersubjective reflection as an awareness of relational aspects of the researchers experience. My reflections, in light of personal and professional experience, of the process were documented. Just as respectfulness was granted to my views and reflections, the same was afforded to the participants regarding the inclusion of their information. Confidentiality aimed to attempt to preserve this respectfulness of participants.

Confidentiality.

A responsive and enabling environment was created to ensure ethical participation. This environment was supported through the creation of rapport, consideration of developmental level, availability of resources and self–determination (Viviers, 2010). Safeguarding information provided by participants and only including agreed upon material in the study preserves confidentiality and privacy which serves the ethical principle of trust (Unluer, 2012). In order to preserve confidentiality and privacy, no identifiable characteristics or names were included in the study. This strategy is "known as anonymisation" (Punch, 2014, p.48).

I considered and addressed many ethical issues specific to children in the hope of creating an account of personal experience which is professionally and ethically sound.

Narrative Ethics

In discussing the ethical elements of our collaboration with participants, Freedman and Combes (2002) call for a focus on relationships rather than boundaries. Freedman and Combes (2002) suggest the consideration of "Whose voice is being privileged in this relationship?" (p.208); "What are we doing to foster collaboration?" (p.208), and asking whether the relationship allows for the experience of agency and what the effects of the relationship on other communities and cultures will be. Michael White (1997) refers to "decentred practice" and "ethics of collaboration" when discussing ethical practices within

narrative work (p.193). Collaboration is central to the research and contributes to the "foundations of possibility in person's lives" (White, 1997, p.198). Decentering within this study was achieved through placing the knowledge of the participants at the centre of its focus and committing to identify the effects of this work on their lives. This upheld accountability within the study. This dissertation allowed for the re–telling of identity stories which "contribute to powerful acknowledgements and are authenticating of person's preferred identity claims" (White, 1997, p.205). All of these elements have been carefully considered and the study endeavoured to promote the participation in ethical narrative relationships.

Conclusion

Through this qualitative narrative inquiry, rich accounts were enabled. The process of knowledge construction through the documenting of sessional experience and significant statements of self, ground the research in a trustworthy and ethical study that heralds the participant researchers as the key–role players in development of understanding the capabilities of familiar materials in the field of psychology. This journey of discovering a landscape of identity allowed the research to explore the possibility of the use of natural material in stimulating possibilities of metaphor, creation, meaning and identity formation. The following chapter explores the research process and presents research documents as they were created.

CHAPTER FIVE: NATURAL MEANS TO PLAYFULLY EXPRESS IDENTITY

This chapter aims to give voice to the journey the participants have been on, with particular reference to their significant statements of self. The participants will be introduced from the beginning of their therapeutic journeys. Their presenting difficulties will be discussed as an introduction to the journey they have undertaken. The elements of their therapeutic journey that led to the development of the research documents of significant statements of self will be included. It is not possible, or necessary, to include the entire therapeutic journey as the study is focussed on those parts that inspired the research document.

Reviewing the Journey

The narrative stance supporting the therapy and research will be an integral part of relaying therapeutic stories. Narrative terminology is used within the inquiry and documenting process. The therapeutic material that is discussed here, therefore, aims to situate the statements of self in the context in which they arose. Each of the six sessions will be described according to the processes leading to significant statements of self and intentional states of being. The presentation of the therapeutic accounts intentionally places focus on the connection between the material as a tool in facilitating conversations of identity rather than on the technique development or execution of technique.

The collection of natural material and discussions of experience and knowledge of the material give rise to opportunities to externalise these qualities. This externalisation allows the participants an alternative perspective from which they describe themselves. Internal states of understanding (White, 2007), unique outcomes (White, 2005) and pivotal moments (Duvall & Beres, 2011), as discussed in the previous chapter, give the opportunity to establish personal agency in concluding intentional states of understanding. These intentional states of understanding may form part of, or create a platform for, the construction of a document of significant statements of self.

Following the sessional accounts, the research documents of significant statements of self form part of the final storied account. Meeting to create our documents of significant statements of self took place after the consent and assent had been granted. The process of creation of the document and revisiting therapeutic sessions had been explained and all the

participants were informed. The documenting of their valued identity conclusions (White, 2005) into the significant statements of self documents assisted in the creation of an opportunity to reveal character (D. Epston, Personal communication, June 3, 2016).

Significant statements of self were to be placed on an A3 poster of their choice. All their therapeutic notes were kept and placed on a table and each one was revisited. The participants were encouraged to document the things that they felt told them about themselves in each session. A question of whether the things they had learnt about themselves reminded them of anything was asked, along with what the information made them feel. A pseudonyms was chosen by each participant to represent themselves in the storied process of research inquiry.

This chapter is not written as a transcript of sessions or as a conversation but merely as a story of statements in order to herald identity statements as opposed to highlighting the therapeutic process. Background information provides a context of environmental experience but labels and diagnoses have been omitted as these have a limiting effect on the definition of identity and are not always accepted by the individual. As Marcela Polanco states (2014), diagnosis may assist in impoverishing our moral responsibility to children. The words presented in describing experience have been described by the children themselves and all direct children's quotes from sessions are recorded in quotation marks.

Mistery's Journey

Mistery was seven years of age at the time her journey with me began. Mistery told her story as a thin description of her abilities regarding her school work. Mistery appeared to have developed a strong relationship with self–doubt and would frequently tell her teachers and her parents that she was unable to complete academic tasks. Following an educational assessment, by another psychologist, it became evident that Mistery's academic ability was strong and that her difficulties may have been a reflection of a relationship with self–doubt and anxiety. Mistery's enthusiasm and willingness to participate became a driving force for her therapeutic journey.

Mistery had no difficulty in collecting the natural materials required for her first session. Choices were made easily and she expressed curiosity at the process. As Mistery began constructing a picture of herself from the materials, she giggled as she completed the

task. Mistery built a picture of herself, portraying her stomach as a leaf. When describing the knowledge she had about leaves she went on to explain that leaves "give us oxygen", "can't live without it" and "look nice". Her description of these qualities led to a discussion about the things she could live without. Stories were told of food and "mommy's is the nicest". Externalising the role of food in her life, we spoke about the times she invited it into her life and when the invitation for food would be extended. Mistery discovered that her heart was happy when she had nice food and that eating provided a "nice feeling" for her when she was sad. The sand, placed in the position of her head was described as holding the grass together. Unpacking her metaphor, she described how her head held her body and her thoughts together. She described that her head "tells me to listen, then I can learn". Mistery stated that if she was able to learn her experience of school and sport would be different. She described that her possibility of learning would increase and she would feel able to manage what was expected of her. Her relationships with her teachers may improve as there would not be reluctance from her side to try. This intentional understanding was supported by her comment: "They would know that I wanted to work". Mistery experienced a unique outcome (Epston & White, 1990) and expressed her own personal agency when uncovering a skill within her body and the way it functioned to assist her when needed. She verbalised this as "when my heart feels weak, my head helps it to be stronger". Mistery seemed surprised at this discovery and expressed it by saying: "wow, I can do more than I thought", verbalising this unique outcome (White, 2007). "Narrative therapy seeks to bring forward these 'preferred accounts of identity' with the understanding that, once these are made visible, the person can more clearly see ways forward that are congruent with how they wish to live their life" (Walther & Fox, 2012). These preferred accounts had begun to take their place in Mistery's storied account of identity. Mistery then explored her neck and legs as sticks and spoke of how sticks are usually strong although the "baby ones" can break. She told stories of how the sticks held leaves onto the branches. In turn, she personalised the metaphor and spoke of her body helping her neck be strong. This was explored through concrete experiences of the strength of her body allowing a landscape of action to develop. A unique outcome was verbalised when she spoke of how "one part of my body can help another part of my body be stronger". Mistery's intentional state of understanding was reached by descriptions of her role in the sporting team and how her new personal knowledge could assist her in better team work.

In her second session, Mistery had no difficulty forming her construction of herself. She explained that her eyes and her mouth were grass and leaves respectively and that they both were linked to memories of playing on or playing with them. Her "tummy" was a big leaf that was "most important" and "gives us oxygen". Her head was a rock, "hard and strong" and "won't break easily". Her arms were sticks that could "bend and be strong for babies". Mistery appeared reluctant as the water was introduced and she was asked to pour it over her construction. She poured the water slowly and exclaimed "now my mouth and eyes are gone" she then added "I am cross, the sticks are gone too" as they all washed off her page. Mistery was visibly upset and showed this by crossing her arms over her chest. As we examined what was left behind, Mistery noted that "even when the fun things are gone, the most important stayed". She focussed on the leaf and rock that remained. Mistery accounted how her head was "strong", "it stays on his place and can't move". She remarked that a "brain is clever and helps us learn". Mistery believed that "things are easier with a head". Mistery's identity conclusion was clarified when she said "my head can think to save me if anything bad happens". This identity conclusion allowed the development of an intentional state of understanding as Mistery now felt safer in social situations as she was able to protect herself. Mistery further stated an identity conclusion in saying that "if my heart is sore, my head can help me think how to feel better".

During her third session, Mistery constructed her picture of herself with her arms, legs and fingers as sticks. In expressing her experiences with sticks, she relayed stories of "playing and throwing" them. She mentioned that sometimes they "break off...sometimes they break and sometime they bend". Mistery's hair, head and body were leaves which were described as being "for oxygen and to play with". Mistery mentioned that we "can't live without them" and "can't live without play". Mistery's feet were stones that she described as "heavy". As we added her materials to the water bowl, Mistery noticed that the leaves and sticks floated. She remarked that it is "better to float, if you can't float you sink and drown and die". When discussing the experience of feeling like 'floating or sinking' in her life, Mistery mentioned that "I battle with Maths and English, it's like sinking". Mistery also mentioned that "getting cross is like sinking". As the conversation continued, Mistery was able to identify a unique outcome as "listening and thinking can help me do well and float. Sometimes working slowly is working well. Listening and thinking slowly will help me to float and not get cross". "As a result of rich descriptions of these unique outcomes or sparkling events...might develop new stories in...life" (Harper & Spellman, 2006, p.107).

These instances were explored and a landscape of action was created through memories of experience. Mistery likened this experience of listening and thinking to be "just like an owl". Mistery developed an preferred outcome by claiming "reminding myself to listen and think slowly will help". This intentional state of understanding was further clarified as assisting her with school work and in difficult times with friends. Intentional states of understanding put Mistery into the role of active mediator within her predicaments in life (White, 2007). In discussing the ways in which reminders may be available to her, Mistery said "When my heart beats fast, the beats tell me, slowly think, listen well. I can remind myself".

Mistery constructed herself, for the fourth time, with a stone representing her head, eyes and mouth. Mistery described the stone as staying "in one place", "some bigger than others" and that one "can walk on it". Mistery also mentioned that in rain and wind "it keeps still". Mistery's body, legs, hair and fingers were made of leaves which "give us oxygen" and we "can't live without them". Mistery's arms were sticks which "grow on trees" and "can hurt you". As we examined the effect of air through blowing wind onto the construction, some materials began to move, Mistery tried to shelter her construction stating she was "protecting it". We then placed the bowl over her construction which offered protection. In discussing "protection" in her life, Mistery mentioned that her "parents protect" her. Mistery stated an intentional state of understanding by acknowledging her abilities. "I can do things to protect myself...call teachers, run to parent". This ability was explored in memories of past experiences and actions. Mistery also acknowledged that "I can protect my heart by being careful who I play with. I need to choose the people in my life carefully". In discussing the materials that had been moved by the wind, Mistery attempted to "repair" the movement. Conversation around the ability to "repair" things in our lives Mistery mentioned a significant statement of self in saying "I can repair my heart by talking about and by playing".

Mistery used a leaf to construct her face and body in the fifth session, stating that leaves provide "oxygen, can't live without it" and are used to "play with" and "build nests out of it, part of a birds home". Grass was used for a mouth and described as "making things look clean and nice". Identity conclusions were made as Mistery said: "My mouth says nice things to people" and "can make people happy". As Epston and White (1990) have stated, self identities are shaped by these personal accounts of life and the stories people tell about themselves. The times in which this ability was evident created a landscape of action. The eyes were stones and described as being able to "hurt you, if you see the wrong things it can

also hurt your heart". Sticks, which were the arms and legs, were described as being able to "play with" and "some soft, some hard". As we introduced the element of fire to the construction, Mistery remarked that "fire can kill and burn". In discussing the effects of burning, we uncovered that the process of burning things change things from how we know them. As we investigated the relationship that Mistery had with 'change' in her life, a story of exercising agency in change emerged as a unique outcome. "My mouth can change people from happy to sad or sad to happy. My mouth can also change me from sad to happy." In discussing the things that assist Mistery in changing the way she felt, she added that "playing can change the way I feel, sad to happy. Arms and legs can move you close to people which will also change the way I feel from sad–happy". In discussing the ability of fire to "burn and kill", a conversation of safety emerged. Mistery stated "I know how to keep myself safe – stay close to people – use my mouth to get help – listening to important people keeps me safe" Mistery also stated the identity conclusion "my head can make a plan to get out of danger".

In her sixth session, Mistery constructed her picture of herself using a stone for her head. She described the stone by saying it can be used to "play" or "hurt". She included that "some heavy, some not". Mistery voiced an identity conclusion while constructing her head by saying that "my head only thinks of plans to play, not to hurt. It is easy for my head to make a plan". Mistery went on to construct her neck and legs from sticks and explained that sticks "let's leaves say on top to give us oxygen" and "makes sure we stay alive". Her "tummy" was made from grass and she described the grass as "helps us keep clean instead of being in the dirt". The feet were made from leaves and said to bring "oxygen". As we introduced the element of earth, we discussed some of the things we would find underground, discussions of "worms and snakes; rabbits and diamonds and gold" emerged. As our conversation led to the things Mistery finds about herself that are under everything, she said that she is a "good person" who "doesn't hurt friends" and "shares". These statements of identity were richly described in a landscape of action.

Mistery's significant statements of self research document

Mistery requested that I scribe what she told me to and the following was placed onto her research document:

- Listening and thinking help me not get cross

- Listening and thinking help me do well

- Working slowly helps me do well

- When my heart beats fast it tells me to slowly think...listen well– I can remind myself to do this

- I can do things to protect myself

- I can protect my heart by being careful who I play with

- I need to choose the people in my life carefully

- I can repair my heart by talking about it, playing

- I can change my feelings from sad to happy

- I can move to be nearby people who change my feelings from sad to happy

- If my heart is sore my head can think how to feel better

- My brain is clever it helps me learn

- One part of my body can help another part to be stronger

- My heart knows how to make me happy

- It's easy for my head to make a plan

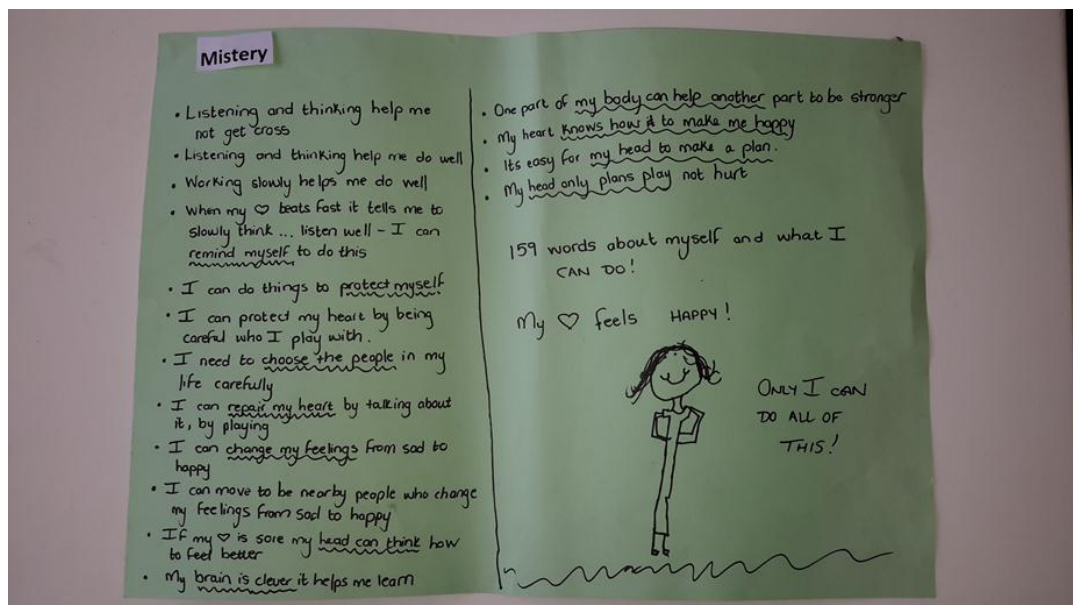- My head only plans play not hurt.

Her document is presented in Figure 9:

Figure 9: Mistery's document. A photo of Mistery's significant statement of self document.

Before asking the first question, Mistery requested that I underline the things she had learnt about herself that she wanted to remember. Mistery then remarked "159 words about myself and what I can do!"

When asked the first question: "Does the information you have learnt about yourself remind you of anything?"

Mistery responded "Only I can do all of this!"

When asked the second question: "What does this information make you feel?"

Mistery responded "My heart feels happy".

Mistery's story of identity told of the things she became aware that she *can* do. She concluded that she *can* protect herself and protect her heart. She *can* repair her heart and *can* change her feelings. Mistery described how she *can* move to be nearby certain people and that she *can* make a plan. Her identity conclusions included what she *knows* about herself. She reported *knowing* how to keep herself safe and *knowing* that her brain is clever. She *knows* that one part of her body can help another. Mistery *knows* how her thinking and listening help her and she *knows* how to be happy. Mistery's narrative developed conclusions of ability, through the "I *can*", and conclusions of agency, through the "I *know*". When reflecting on her own identity reflections, Mistery stated "Wow, I *can* do more than I thought". Her own reflection on these preferred accounts of identity led to a statement of "159 words about myself and what I *can* do". Mistery concluded that "Only I *can* do all this...It makes me feel happy".

Revisiting Mistery

Contact was established with Mistery's mother to enquire of Mistery's experience following the research process. Mistery's mother reported that Mistery was now able to set her own goals and realise them. Improvements in her confidence had been noticed and Mistery had taken up running on school and club level. Within her running club, Mistery had been given the nickname of the "Jack Russell" of her running team and had been awarded a prize for "not giving up". Academically Mistery had achieved an average of 83% on her recent school report. Her parents reported that they are both extremely proud of her progress and abilities.

Harper's Journey

Eight year old Harper visited the practice with a strong relationship with anxiety. Anxiety had been a part of Harper's life for a long time as reported by her mother and herself. Harper's mother helped me understand that, along with anxiety, came a strong relationship with control. Control had befriended Harper in order to help manage her relationship with anxiety. Due to the strength of control, Harper reported that she found it difficult when situations and people were outside of her control. Unplanned events, school activities, friend and family relationships often invited anxiety that was beyond her control. Harper said that she had become unhappy and struggled to allow fun into her life. It appeared that Harper's ideas of herself became serious and performance based. Harper's mom described Harper's view of herself as becoming restricted to her achievements, which created a strong relationship with pressure. In her initial sessions Harper would seldom smile and always asked the goal or expected outcome of a session. It is possible that these questions helped her engage control, in order to perform.

Harper appeared reluctant in selecting her natural materials within the first session. She expressed concern over whether they were the "right ones" when returning to her page. She seemed unsure of where to begin constructing a representation of herself. Harper seemed relieved when her construction was complete. Harper used sand to construct her head and she described how sand can be "played in" but can also be "muddy and messy" when wet. Through externalising conversation, we examined how muddy or messy things are allowed into our lives and how we go about keeping the out when they are not welcome. This externalising process assisted Harper in co–constructing meanings which facilitated a journey toward preferred senses of identity (Duvall & Beres, 2011). Harper described how "mess" entered her life when "someone is mean", or she is "without teddy". Harper uncovered some preferred ways of thinking when discussing how she kept "mess" out or "sends it out" when it entered unannounced. Harper developed her pivotal moment by stating that she was able to be happy by "doing happy things for myself like making a card".

> Narrative therapy aims to bring forward these alternative 'preferred accounts of identity' with the understanding that, once these are made visible, the persona can more clearly see ways forward that are congruent with how they wish to live their life (Walther & Fox, 2012, p.9).

Harper also realised that sometimes being with others sends out the "mess" and invites "playfulness", especially when "mom and dad hug me" or when "I want to play with my sister". Relaying these events in her life provided a concrete landscape of action, situating times where she could change her experience and this assisted in uncovering identity conclusions. Harper commented that "flowers grow in sand" and that the preferred outcome in this session invited the possibility that Harper could decide when to invite "mess" into her life and when to get rid of it so that she "grows happiness". This landscape of identity invited the realisation of her agency in life (White, 2007). Harper discovered, through discussing her leaves that offer "rest", that she could create restful opportunities by "watching TV". Through the unpacking of sticks used to create legs, Harper realised that she was able to invite friends to play and "grows happiness" too. Harper exercised her personal agency over inviting happiness.

Harper completed her construction with ease for the second time. She used a leaf to create a party hat. As we explored the creation a landscape of action was constructed by relaying the concrete experience of making a leaf into a beak for a school concert. A rich description of her ability to make things fun led to her identity conclusion of "I know how to have fun". This was a reminder of "The person substantiating herself as a person rather than as an insubstantial bodily object. Associated with this is the recognition of and entitlement to feelings, appetites, desires, opinions and thoughts" (Epston, Morris & Maisel 2012, p.78). Harper mentioned that "you have to do something to have fun." It was also stated that "having fun gives me energy". Harper's body was made of sand, which was described as being used to "make flowers grow" and to "build with". As the water was introduced and Harper poured the water on the page, she remarked that it was "all messed up and wet and ruined my picture". As we discussed the wet sand, Harper said "we build with wet sand" a unique discovery arose as she claimed "when bad things happen they help us to do things differently. Bad things aren't fully bad". In discussing this outcome Harper voiced that in her relationships with friends she often became stuck in their arguments having "bad" outcomes that were lasting. Harper began to acknowledge the possibilities that lay in resolving and moving beyond arguments.

Harper, in the third session, chose to construct herself presenting a construction of only her head with face, eyes, mouth and ponytail. Harper's mouth and eyes were portrayed by sticks, her face was made from sand and her ponytail was a leaf. Harper was excited about

the water bowl being present and wanted to get started with the water right away. As Harper placed her materials into the water bowl she said that it had "turned to dirt...don't like". Harper perceived the grass and leaf that were floating on top as "trying to get out of it". This led to a discussion about the ability Harper had to "hold things out of dirt". Harper explained that when she was able to "hold things out of dirt", it kept her happy. The things that assisted Harper in holding things out of dirt were "playing in pool, having fun with sister, watching TV, hiding seek, friends". These experiences became richly described accounts of action. When Harper saw that her mouth had sunk, she mentioned that it "is sad, doesn't speak". When examining the presence of not speaking in Harper's life, she said that her "mouth needs to learn to talk to rise out of dirt". Harper also stated that others said that Harper "is a good listener". Harper shared an identity conclusion when acknowledging that she was able to "listen to others to see how to feel better or ask them if they don't tell you". Harper acknowledged that she could use this skill with her teachers and friends and that this would help minimise the amount of worrying that she did about their thinking. As White (2007) maintains, when people are no longer tied to negative conclusions about themselves they are able to arrive at rich identity conclusions.

Harper constructed herself, in the fourth session, using the material of sand, sticks and leaves. Harper's body was made of sand and the sand was described as able to "build castles and make bricks". Harper's experience of sand was that it was "strong", that it allowed her to "have fun". Her eyes, nose and mouth were the leaves and sticks. The leaves were described as making "shade" and "sometimes falling off". When we discussed that leaves "sometimes fall off" and how it was decided if they "fall or not", Harper asserted her identity by stating that "I decide what I see and what I hear and say". As we blew air onto the construction, some of the sand moved. When placing the bowl over the construction Harper focussed on her ability to cover the construction "properly" to "protect" it from the air. In conversing around the stories of "protection" in her life, Harper stated an intentional state of understanding that "I am the best person to decide when and how to protect myself". Harper also stated that "I am the only one who knows myself well enough to protect myself, even my examiners don't know me".

Harper, in the fifth session, constructed her head from sand and reflected that sand represented "fun stuff". Experience in "playing with" and "making sand castles" were shared. Her eyes and mouth were constructed as grass. A dress was made with brown and green

sticks. As we introduced the element of fire to the construction, Harper described fire as "scary". Although it was described as being able to "warm you up" and "braai food", it was also described as being able to "burn you and hurt you". As the fire burnt the grass, Harper remarked that like her "mouth and eyes" had been burnt by the "scary" fire, "things we see, hear and say can be scary". The sand was not able to burn. Harper added that "the fun stuff won't be damaged by fire, fun stuff kills scary stuff". Harper then stated that "when we hear, see or say scary things we should do fun things to help get rid of scary feelings". Experiences of these pivotal moments were explored. As we examined that the "fun things" were part of the head, a conversation emerged as to how Harper's head dealt with "scary" things. Harper made an intentional state of understanding as she said "my head helps to think of ideas to get rid of scary feelings. My head is my best friend". This intentional understanding extended to allow Harper to consider how her head being her best friend enabled her to be friends and make friends with others. This revelation of character within Harper's wonderfulness inquiry marked the end of the fifth session (Epston, Marsten & Markham 2016).

Harper made her head, arms and legs from sand in the sixth session, explaining that "sand can be fun" and "you have to do something to make things fun". Harper created a swimming costume out of a leaf and stated that leaves "makes things look beautiful". Harper used a stone to create a hat and said that stones were used to "make mountains". Harper explained that in climbing mountains "some people find it hard, not me. I am good at climbing mountains". Harper also noted that "some people find things difficult that I find easy". Harper's mouth was depicted as a stick and she entered into a description of the ability of sticks to be used in "holding up a tent" and if you "put on fire, light it". A discussion then developed as to how we could make something "alive and bigger". As we engaged in introducing the element of earth to the construction, we noticed how the stick, which was the mouth, stuck out. Harper remarked that "when things get stormy it is the mouth that stands out, my mouth keeps me alive by breathing and calling someone to help me". Harper voiced an aspect of her identity stating that "difficult things can't cover my mouth, it always works". As we conversed around Harper's experience of "difficult things in her life", she said "I can find a way to make difficult things easier…I can find paths myself…or ask someone…or follow someone". Harper continued that "I could choose to follow someone who had a map…not just anyone". This led to a discussion about making careful choices in our lives.

Harper's significant statements of self research document

Harper requested that I scribe her statements onto her document. The following was documented:

- Doing things makes Harper happy.
- I am a good listener
- If I listen to others I can see how to feel better
- I can ask others how to feel better
- I can make myself feel better by playing, having fun, being with friends and relaxing
- Having fun gives me energy
- I decide what I see, hear and say
- I am the best person to decide when and how to protect myself
- I know myself well enough to protect myself
- My head is my best friend
- My head helps me think of ideas to get rid of scary feelings
- Fun stuff kills scary stuff
- I know how to have fun
- You have to do something to have fun
- Some people find things difficult that I find easy

Harper's document is presented in Figure 10:
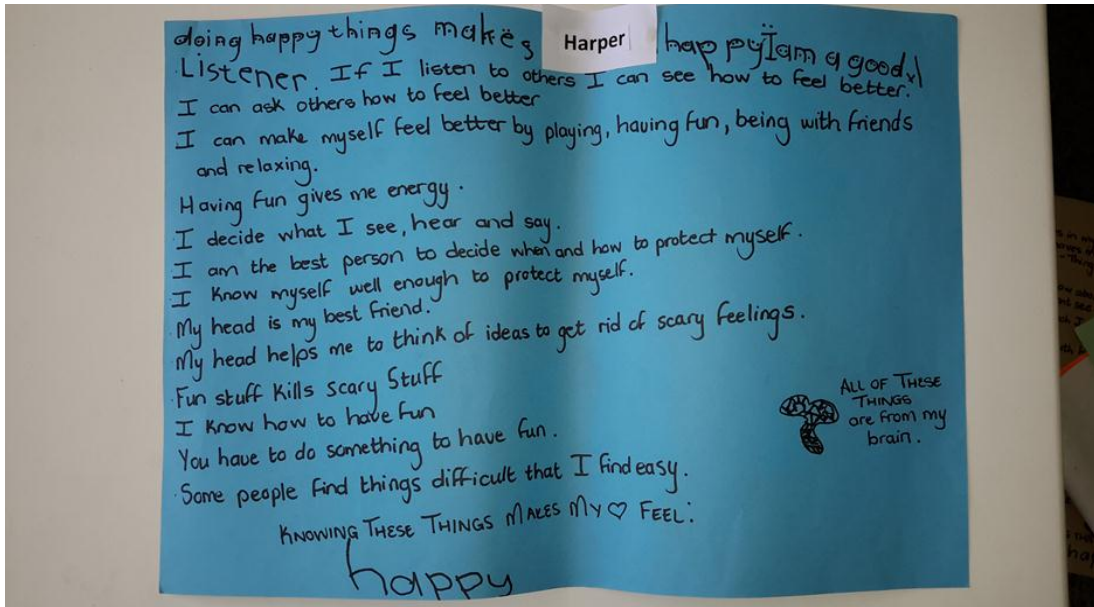
Figure 10: Harper's document. A photo of Harper's significant statement of self document.

When asked the first question: "Does the information you have learnt about yourself remind you of anything?"

Harper responded "All of these things are from my brain"

When asked the second question: "What does this information make you feel?"

Harper responded "Knowing these things makes my heart feel: happy".

Harper's story of identity encompassed many conclusions of awareness of her ability and conclusions of knowledge about her identity. Harper *acknowledged* that she can find a way to make difficult things easier. She stated that she *can* choose to follow someone...not just anyone. Harper is aware that she *can* ask others and she *can* make herself feel better. Her *knowledge* of herself revealed that her head is her best friend. Harper *knows* how to grow happiness. The research highlighted that Harper *knows* how to be a good friend and how to have fun. It is clear in her story, that Harper is able to exercise agency as she *decides* what she sees, hears and says. Harper intentionally states that she is the best person to *decide* when and how to protect herself. As part of her declaration of identity, Harper states that her head helps her think of ideas and her mouth keeps her alive. Harper *knows* that she is the best person to *decide* when and how to protect herself. Her own reflection of her identity led to a further conclusion that "All of these things are from my brain. *Knowing* these things makes my heart feel happy".

Revisiting Harper

Harper had returned for therapy following the termination of the research process. Her return was based on concerns that her best friend was immigrating and her mother was concerned around the effects socially and personally this may have on Harper. In engaging with Harper, it was evident that she is able to verbalise her experiences easily following the research. She was able to be pro–active in creating friendships outside of her best–friend. Following the leaving of her best friend, Harper was able to maintain an understanding of the process and facilitate different means of communication with her friend while fostering and actively cementing new friendships. Harper is a confident performer in dancing and acrobatics and often takes part in shows and championships. As her therapist, it is clear that her confidence and abilities have grown since the termination of the research process.

May's Journey

May is a charismatic ten year old child who presents as confident, her story, however, did not entirely reflect this. May's adoptive Mom brought her to sessions with a concern about her increased relationship with anxiety. May described how she experienced difficulty in engaging her ability to solve problems and express herself in relationships. In discussing her story of difficulty, May described herself as getting "stuck with feelings" and "not knowing how to change them". When faced with an emotional situation or a conflict, May described herself as "loosing" her own voice and only being able to "explode" or "shut down". These thin descriptions of "stuckness" and "lost voices" were accompanied by a sense of possibility, a knowing that she could be different– this was how our journey began.

May chose her materials quickly in the first session and returned to her page ready to engage in the task. May thoughtfully engaged in placing her materials on the page, organising and reorganising until she was satisfied with the outlay. I was surprised by the amount of information and self–knowledge shown as she spoke of her choices. May placed the rock in the position of her head and described the rock as material that was "solid" and "hard to break". She also defined a rock as unchanging over time. Through a landscape of action, this metaphor was related to her own life and times of change in her environment and what her constructed face thought about that change, May boldly remarked that "my brain listens to my feelings and then decides whether it changes its mind or not, whether it stays or not". The agency of self–control indicated in this comment marked the beginning of an exploration of a

landscape of identity. May had placed a leaf as her mouth and as we discussed the leaf she tasted it. May remarked that this particular leaf tasted good. This comment was followed by the statement that they don't always taste good. May was able to apply this metaphor as she described how "I have to choose carefully what I say. I think carefully about what I say and do". The degree of strength and authority that she exercised over her own decisions was acknowledged and identity conclusions were reached. These "alternative stories reduce the influence of problems and create new possibilities for living" (Morgan, 2000). May had placed a leaf resembling a dress on her construction. As we externalised the 'dresses' or 'attire' demanded in different settings and how we make decisions of how to present our reactions May richly described her abilities from this landscape. She took ownership of the fact that "I am different in different places. At school I listen, at home I only sometimes listen. Some things about me stay the same, like I am a friendly person, I'm also nice". This rich account of an intentional state of being was expanded upon even further. May evidenced her creativity when exploring the sticks she had presented as arms. When investigating their properties May tried to colour with them and whistle with them. It became apparent that they were not able to do everything the way she wanted them to. As we externalised the presence of difficulty in her life and how she manages her relationship with difficulty May's pivotal moment became apparent as she said that "I can't quite do it, but I try" May remarked that "I try to try my best even when it is difficult". 'Trying' transformed into a significant statement of self. May described how she used her skill of "trying" socially and academically. This skill assisted her meet her needs as well as the needs of others to connect with her.

May was excited to participate in the technique for the second session. From her construction, she explained that her hair, made of leaves, "helped the bushes look the way they should". Her face and head were made from sand and her knowledge revealed that "soil helps it grow". Her arms, as sticks, were explained as being able to "hold up" the rest of the plant. Her body, which was a rock, was described as keeping "stuff in one place". Her feet, which were grass, were described as "eco–friendly carpets to cover stains, they make it all look pretty". When pouring the water, she remarked "this is different". May noticed that her body "kept together and did not wash away". The soil "went everywhere and moves in different ways". When externalising 'different ways' in our lives and when we choose to take on 'different ways', May stated that: "I can grow in different ways when different things happen to me". As we unpacked the word 'grow' and examined its relationship with 'different ways', May asserted a significant statement of self in saying: "I can grow

anywhere". This was grounded in a landscape of action as May related her experience of growth in the many changes her relocations had brought. We discussed the leaves and grass that had moved into "different spaces" and we discussed looking carefully at things that are different. May explained that "I need to look carefully at different things to be able to grow. I am good at this, at school I look carefully at friends and teachers so that I grow well". May remarked that her sticks "went off the paper, like they were running away". She mentioned that they had "landed up outside of the page". We spoke about the sticks as the things that "hold up" plants, May added the word "support". When asking May to tell her thoughts about support being outside the page she explained that "sometimes the things that support and hold me are on the outside of me. Those things are my family".

May constructed herself using a leaf for her hair, stating that leaves can be used for eating, decoration or for drawing. She also stated that they are important for "breathing, eat and relaxing". A stone was used for her head and she described stones as being found in the garden and in the sea, being used "for bangles and bracelets...to make stuff and being hard and don't break easily". May's legs and mouth were sticks which were described as being able to break easily, being "hardish and softish and hold stuff together". May said that "when wind comes, it bends instead of breaks". When inserting May's materials into the bowl of water and observing the movement, May asserted an identity conclusion in stating that "throughout all the places my legs and voice have moved me to, they have managed to hold me together". When discussing the stone depicted as her head that had sunk to the bottom of the bowl May said that "Maybe the things that sink are not meant for swimming. Sometimes your head and what I see works better, sometimes where you go and what you say and you feel works better". May also mentioned that she can "think about something that is not there". In discussing May's thinking, unique statements and intentional states of understanding were made about her abilities. "My thoughts are stronger than I think. People may try and break them but I won't allow it." She also made conclusions of identity in saying "my brain is strong enough to think about fixing problems and making solutions". May ended the session with a bold statement of self: "There is always a part of me that rises to the top". Epston (personal communication, June 2, 2016) states that clients come to know themselves through respectful practice. This 'knowing' presents May with possibilities to co–create her preferred reality.

May used many of her materials in constructing herself. May used grass as her hair and described it as being like "a blankie which covers it and makes it grow". In reference to her "blankie", she said it "made me feel ok and cuddly when I couldn't make myself feel ok". Her head was a rock which she described as "pretty" and possible to be "different colours". The leaf placed as her body was also described as being "pretty" and "grows on trees". It was said that "things can grow into pretty things even if they're not pretty to start with". May's legs and arms were sticks. In discussion May mentioned that "if there wasn't a stem, there wouldn't be a flower, it's like an anchor". The soil which constructed the eyes and feet were described as helping "things to grow" and that can be "played in". As we added the element of air, May spoke of her experiences: "I see more in the different places I go so difference helps me to grow". This experience was richly described in accounts of relationships and events in her life. These rich stories could be instrumental in assisting May to live out new identities and futures (Milojevic, 2014). As we spoke of the sticks and what happened to the "anchors" during the wind, May asserted that "I decide with my legs, brain and heart where I anchor myself". She voiced an identity conclusion in stating that "My heart has helped my anchor to make good decisions and be strong". In discussing the "anchors" of her life and when there is a need to rely on them, May mentioned "when things are really tough I need to ask how do I grow this or change it". As we placed the bowl over the construction, May firstly mentioned that "sometimes you need to use things from outside to make you feel ok". Then May started to discuss the "pressure" that she was placing on the bowl and a discussion around her relationship with "pressure" emerged. May mentioned that she likes to be free of pressure. She shared that "pressure can help to keep things together". A need for pressure and a need to escape from the experience of pressure in social situations were discussed. May identified an intentional state of understanding in saying that "when I use my escapes I feel strong enough to go back to pressure". May appeared to be harnessing the agency to define herself, drawing upon the knowledge of the details within herself and her life (Todd, 2014). May situated her "escapes" in a landscape of action of "going outside, watching TV, drawing, painting and chatting".

At our next visit, May constructed her arms and legs from sticks and described them as being able to "hold things together". May added that "my sister holds onto me, she needs me as a friend". We discussed how May was needed in other's lives and what this may say about her. May proudly claimed "I am a helper". This emerging alternative story could possibly become one of "the means by which preferred futures are articulated" (Milojevic,

2014, p. 34). May's head was made from sand and May described sand as "things grow from it". May's hair was made from leaves and grass. The eyes were constructed from stones which were described as being "hard things" that you can "draw with". May depicted her heart as a stone and went onto to explain the reason for her choice of a stone. She said: "you can break stones, but not easily." In examining the influence of fire on the construction, May asserted a landscape of identity in saying "although dangerous things can hurt, my heart and my head always survive. My thoughts and feelings are stronger than I think". May also stated that "you have to be aware of danger to manage it. Your body and your senses tell you if something is dangerous". This led to the significant statement of self, in acknowledging that it was "important to listen to my own body".

In the following session, May created her depiction of her head as a rock which can "make stuff", you can "paint with" it, "normally dark colours" but "you can change the colour". In a conversation about her head, May shared knowledge about herself in stating that "my head is able to change plans when I think through things carefully. Using my thinking helps me make better decisions. I use my head as much as possible to have a good life with good decisions". This personal agency may result in May having some say in her life's direction where her values and beliefs can guide her future (White, 2005, 2007). May's body and face were created from leaves and stems which were said to hold things together. Through a landscape of action, May's identity conclusions emerged as she said "my mouth helps me hold friendships together. The more I talk, the more people know my likes and needs. Sometimes the more important things are not what you say but when you say it". The feet were made from grass which was described as "it doesn't taste nice". May did tell me that "when my feet go to new places and try new things my heart is excited". When engaging in the introduction of earth to the construction we spoke about sand storms and May identified that often diamonds are buried in sand storms. A unique outcome was stated as May acknowledged that "my heart is like a diamond. Storms may hide or cover it but it is always there shining underneath it all". May also acknowledged that in protecting herself from storms "my mouth needs to be mighty and not mousey to protect myself".

May's significant statement of self research document

May's research document included the following statements:

- I choose carefully what I say

- I think carefully about what I say and do

- I try to try my best even when it is difficult

- I can grow different ways when different things happen to me

- I can grow everywhere

- I am different in different places

- Something about me stay the same

- I am a friend day [friendly] person. I am also nice.

- Throughout all the places my legs and voice have moved me to, they have manag [managed] to hold me together

- I need to look carefully at different things to be able to grow. I am good at this. At school, I look carefully at friends and teachers so that I grow well.

- Sometimes the thing that support and hold me together are outside of me. Those things are my family.

- My brain listens to my feelings and then decides whether it changes it's [its] mind to not, whether it stays or not.

- My brain is strong enough to think about fixing problems and making solutions

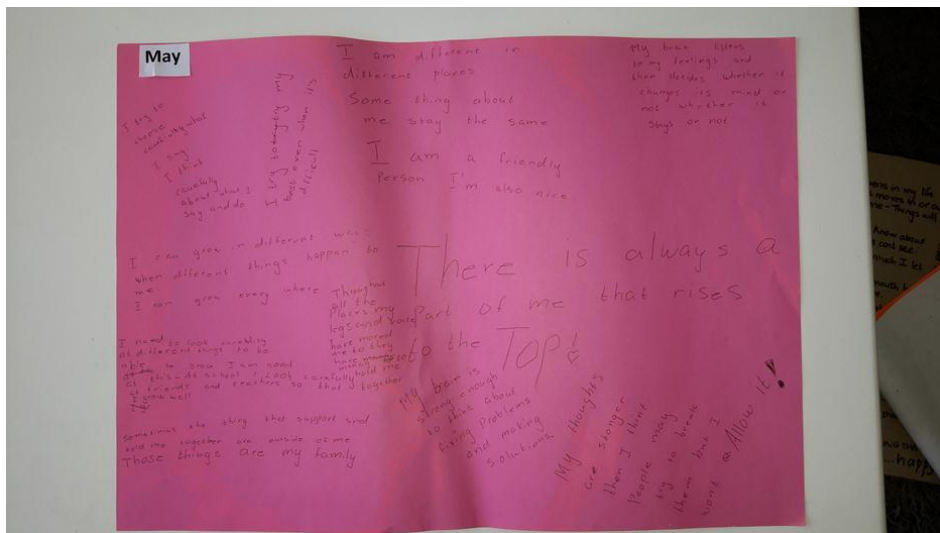Her document is presented in Figure 11:

Figure 11: May's document. A photo of May's significant statement of self document.

When asked the first question: "Does the information you have learnt about yourself remind you of anything?"

May responded "There is always a part of me that rises to the top!"

When asked the second question: "What does this information make you feel?"

May responded "My thoughts are stronger then I think. People may try to break them but I won't allow it!

May told part of her identity story as the things she *can* do and try to do. She stated that she *can* grow everywhere and in different ways. May intentionally stated that she tries her best. May asserted her agency in her life as she chooses what she says and uses her escapes until she feels strong enough to go back to pressures. May taught me that she is a helper who asks questions of herself that allow her to think. May claimed that she is able to ask questions of how to manage or change things. May's identity as a thinker emerged strongly as her brain listens to feelings to make *decisions*. Her brain is also strong enough to think of solutions and make good decisions along with her heart. May *acknowledged* that her thinking helps her make better decisions. May also *acknowledged* that difference helps her heart grow and that she is able to think about being different in different places. May's reflection on her developing identity led to the conclusion that "My thoughts and feelings are stronger than I think". A further identity conclusion was that "There is always a part of me that rises to the top".

Revisiting May

May's mother reported that following the research process, May was able to establish lasting friendships inside and outside of school. It was reported that she was able to handle pressure in a much better manner than before. May's mother reported that she was now able to handle life very well and was able to study and do homework independently . May's mother remarked that the therapeutic and research process "made a huge difference".

Spongebob's Journey

Spongebob, a seven year old boy, was introduced to therapy by his parents who were concerned about his anxiety and self–definition, related to his school work. Spongebob, reportedly, would not talk about his school day and started to dislike going to school. Spongebob's parents told stories of a fun loving boy who engaged easily with family friends and with his sister. Initially, Spongebob struggled to talk within sessions and wanted to play games. When encountering difficulty within a game, Spongebob would withdraw and gaze at the floor for long periods of time, making no eye contact or verbal contact. It became evident

that in order to engage Spongebob in a therapeutic journey, a different approach would be necessary.

In the first session with natural materials, Spongebob experienced a great deal of difficulty in selecting material. He required guidance as to which part of the garden to select material from even after he was reassured that there was no correct way or place to select material. Spongebob's uncertainty extended to his construction and he took a long time to complete his construction. Spongebob used a leaf to depict his head. As we unpacked his knowledge about leaves, Spongebob richly described that leaves "give us oxygen", "can't live without them", "caterpillars eat leaves, keeps them alive" and "it makes caterpillars happy, they get excited about their meal". When externalising the happiness that leaves invite into caterpillar's hearts Spongebob asserted that "our brains can also protect our hearts by thinking happy instead of sad". Spongebob's pivotal moment was stated as "I would like my brain to think more happy". This represented the first exception to the problem story in Spongebob's life. This preference provided a platform for further exploring his landscape of identity. Through rich descriptions of happiness, Spongebob reached an identity conclusion in saying "my head can also make me happy if I think excited thoughts, my brain decides what I think". "Preferred stories that highlight a person's skills, abilities and competencies are drawn out and amplified" (Bjorøy, Madigan & Nylund, 2016, p. 333). A few significant statements of self were encountered in this session. This sense of personal agency is based on the understanding that if we do in fact have the opportunity to grow some ideas about ourselves and what we are about, then we have a sense of being able to steer our lives in directions that will work for us and not against us (Carey, 2014).

Spongebob was a little more at ease when collecting his materials in the second session. He constructed himself with his head as a leaf. He explained that leaves "make the garden look pretty" and "give oxygen". Spongebob explained that "I can't live without my head, my head is thinking". Spongebob stated that "my head and thinking keeps me safe". Spongebob depicted his body, arms and legs as sticks. He told me that "sticks are used to draw in the sand and make us do stuff". Spongebob remarked that his arms and legs "make me do stuff that helps me". This was explored through the discussion of landscapes of action (White, 2007) and prior experience of doing "stuff that helps me". Spongebob also added a sun into his picture which was made of a rock. He remarked "I like sunshine, it makes me happy". After adding the water to his page Spongebob excitedly said "some things will make

me move but I don't disappear". When externalising Spongebob's experience with 'movement' in his life, he drew me back to his picture saying "the sun stayed in the same...even after the water came. Even when things happen that you don't want, you can think where to go and move there to stay happy". This realisation spoke of Spongebob's ability to "think" as being part of his identity. Spongebob described how his ability could help him within the schooling environment and how he could make the best of bad situations. He told stories of approaching tasks differently to get them done even if they were difficult.

Spongebob used two materials to construct himself in the third session. Sticks were used to portray his body, legs and arms. Spongebob described the sticks as giving oxygen, being "easy to break" although "they can bend". Spongebob also added that one can "build a tree and a person with sticks". Spongebob mentioned that "I can make things with my arms and legs". Through a landscape of action, we explored concrete events that supported this statement of identity. The leaf used to construct the head was described as giving oxygen and that we "can't be without it, can't do anything without it", "I need my head...to breathe, hear, taste, look, think". As these materials were added to the bowl of water, Spongebob remarked that the leaves floated and some of the sticks sink but some float. As we begun to externalise the concept of "floating" and what it means to float in life, Spongebob began to share how he did well at swimming and was very capable at floating. In discussing the other aspects of his life, where he had been able to float instead of sink, Spongebob shared that "I do more floating than sinking. I do a good job at school and at home and at being a friend". He was able to recall moments of being in good friend through exercising care and concern over sick friends. When examining what assisted Spongebob in moments of 'floating', Spongebob mentioned that "my brain helps me to float, it is strong and thinks well." We discussed moments when 'floating' in life became difficult and Spongebob stated an identity conclusion in saying that "if I feel there is a problem, my brain can think of how to swim or fix it".

In Spongebob's fourth visit, he constructed himself with ease, choosing a stone to represent his head. Stones were described as "strong" and "used to make stuff". Spongebob's arms were leaves which were "important" and "give us oxygen". Spongebob's legs were sticks which "bend" and "give us oxygen" and "move in the wind". As we introduced air through blowing on the page Spongebob remarked that the arms had "changed place but not disappeared". This led to a conversation around the things that change in our lives. Spongebob remarked that "when things change around us we decide which parts we put back

[and] which leave". This statement of personal agency in his life was remarkable in that it asserted agency and confidence in ability, which Spongebob initially experienced difficulty with, even in selecting material. Later on in the technique this identity conclusion was reiterated when Spongebob said "only Spongebob decides when his mind changes. I decide what I think". A statement of identity was communicated when Spongebob stated, "my mind decides what my life will look like". As we introduced the bowl over his construction and then monitored what happened with the wind, Spongebob remarked that it put a "kind of pressure tank" on the construction. Exploring Spongebob's relationship with "pressure" through externalising questions, Spongebob stated that "Rules keep you safe, I feel happy about rules, I like them".

Spongebob, in the fifth session, constructed his head out of stone and stated that stones "are hard" and "help things move and also stops things from sinking". His body and arms and legs were constructed out of sticks which "give us oxygen". When introducing fire to the construction, Spongebob remarked that fire is "for cooking and keeping warm". He also stated that it "can be dangerous if [a] house is alight". We discussed "danger" and how Spongebob has decided to deal with danger in the past. His knowledge revealed that "my brain will keep alive as long as I breathe. As long as I breathe I can make good decisions and keep myself safe". This self-knowledge, grounded in a landscape of action, was explored along with the experience of "good decisions". Spongebob discussed how he could make good decisions regarding homework and his choice of friends. In discussing his relationship with 'safety', Spongebob stated that "choices keep us safe, when we have no choice, we need to be careful". Spongebob's intentional state of understanding was evident in his statement about social difficulties in saying: "my brain is good at making good choices. My head helps me to do the right thing at the right time and have fun". When asking what Spongebob did to increase fun in his life, he responded, "my favourite thing is to run and play cricket".

Spongebob constructed his head as a stone which was "hard to break" and "strong" in his final therapy session. When discussing these qualities with Spongebob, he personalised his construction in stating that "it is not easy to change my mind when I know I am right". The rest of his construction was made from sticks and Spongebob stated that you can "make stuff with them" like "nests". In discussing what his body made, Spongebob stated "my body helps me be comfortable. My body helps me make friends and be part of a team. When discussing what would assist his body in making friends Spongebob stated elements of his

identity in that "I am in charge of making friends and my brain helps my body decide who are good friends". Conversing about the head that was depicted as a "strong" rock which was "hard to break", Spongebob stated that "It is not easy to change my mind when I know I am right". In introducing the earth that would be added to his construction, Spongebob said that the earth was "there to grow things, your roots are there, your roots hold you together". After introducing the earth, Spongebob mentioned that some of his construction was hidden. Our conversation led us to talk about the "hidden parts of ourselves". Spongebob commented that "sometimes my strong bits are hidden, people can't see them but it doesn't mean they are not there". As we concluded our wonderfulness inquiry (Epston, Marsten and Markham, 2016) Spongebob stated "Spongebob has grown, he can now make decisions easily".

Spongebob's significant statement of self research document

Spongebob's research document consisted of the following statements:

- My brain knows how to keep me safe
- My brain can also protect my heart by thinking happy instead of sad
- I decide if I think happy or sad
- My head can also make me happy if I think excited thoughts
- I would like my brain to think more happy.
- Sunshine makes me happy.
- My head and thinking keeps me safe
- My arms and legs make me do stuff that helps me.
- Even when things happen that you don't want, you can think where to go and move there to stay happy.
- I do more floating than sinking.
- I do a good job at school, at home and being a friend.
- My brain is strong and thinks well
- If there is a problem, my brain can think how to fix it.
- Rules keep me safe– I like rules.
- My mind decides what my life will look like.
- Only Spongebob decides when his mind changes
- I decide what I think.
- My favourite thing is to run and play cricket
- My head helps me do the right thing at the right time and have fun.

- Choices keep us safe– My brain is good at making choices.
- As long as I breathe I can make good decisions and keep myself safe.
- My body helps me make friends and be part of a team!
- Sometimes my strong bits are hidden – people can't see them but it doesn't mean they are not there.
- Spongebob has grown– I can make decisions easily now.
- I'm in charge of making friends– my brain helps my body decide who are good friends.

Spongebob's document is presented in Figure 12:
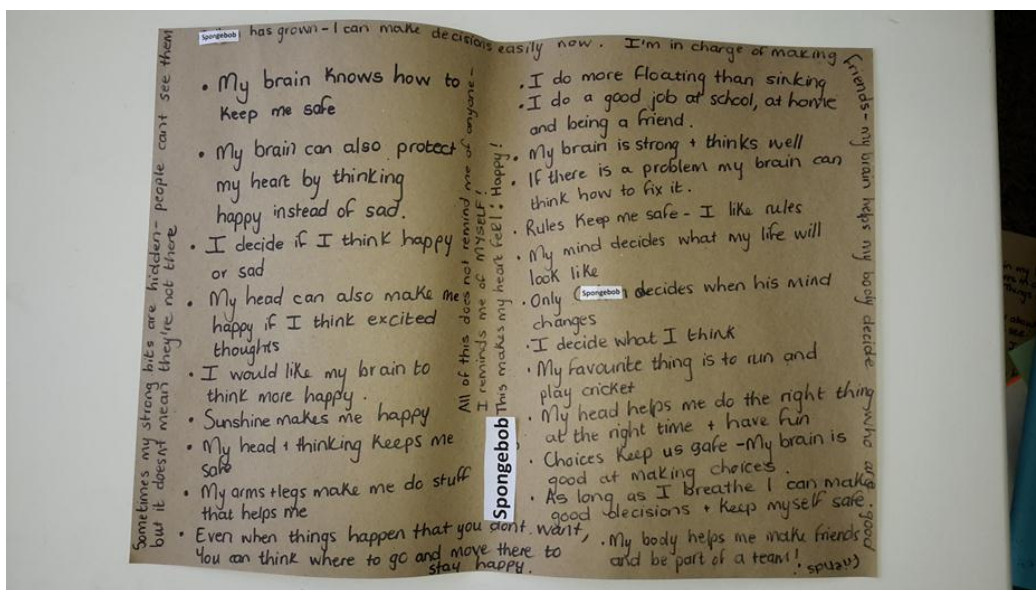
Figure 12: Spongebob's document. A photo of Spongebob's significant statement of self document.

When asked the first question: "Does the information you have learnt about yourself remind you of anything?"

Spongebob responded "All of this does not remind me of anyone– It reminds me of myself!"

When asked the second question: "What does this information make you feel?"

Spongebob responded "This makes my heart feel: happy!"

Spongebob's story of developing identity included the *knowledge* of what he *can* do. He discovered that his brain can protect his heart and that his head can make him happy.

Spongebob intentionally stated that his brain *knows* how to keep him safe and that his body does stuff to help him. He asserted that his brain is strong and that sometimes these strong bits may be hidden, but they are still there. Spongebob embraced his ability to decide what he thinks and when his mind changes. He became aware that he does more "floating" than "sinking". He acknowledged that he does a good job at school, home and being a friend. He stated that he can make *decisions* easily now and he is in charge of making friends. His reflection on the process led him to conclude "It reminds me of myself...This makes my heart feel happy".

Revisiting Spongebob

Spongebob's mother reported that since the end of the research process "he is a far happier child overall". His teacher reported that he was a "champ" in personal development aspects and academic performance. His teacher had recognised that he was a hard worker who treated people with respect and tried his best. Spongebob was described by his mother as loving school and enjoying cricket and swimming. He had good friends and completed his homework independently. His most recent school report was marked with "Excellent achievement".

Peter's Journey

Peter's mom brought him to the practice due to his experience of difficulties at school and within his relationships. Ten year old Peter told stories of his struggles at school. He described himself in limiting terms as "not being clever enough" to meet the demands expected of him. Stories were told of teachers "not liking" him and he explained how they would be "happy" if he was "not there". Peter felt that he would be in trouble every day at school and that his teachers would "find something" to punish him for. His story spoke of everyday putting his best efforts forward, only to find the day ending "badly". Peter struggled socially. He had no friends and described stories of the influence of "bullying" in his life where he would sometimes be the one subjected to "bullying" and sometimes would be the one engaging in "bullying". Peter's feelings toward school and more importantly toward himself, were very negative. Peter is an honest child but his honest accounts were limited to his negative self– perception.

Peter constructed his first representation with ease. He constructed his head out of rocks and was able to engage in conversation regarding his prior experience of throwing rocks "but don't harm people". Peter appeared to have difficulty in externalising and did not want to engage in the task any further but told me "I will do it next time", offering to attempt a technique at his following visit.

Peter constructed himself with ease in his second session. He went on to unpack his construction. Grass was put down for his hair and a leaf was his face. Peter went on to explain that leaves "make oxygen" and that we "need it to live". This lead to a conversation about the things we need in our lives and how we invite our needs to be part of our lives. Peter asserted agency over his needs and said "my face, mouth and voice help people be a part of me". Times when this had happened were discussed as part of a landscape of action. These landscape of action questions assisted Peter to imbue these events as a foundation for identity conclusions (Russel & Carey, 2004). Peter had depicted his body as a rock which he said would normally be found underground. In a discussion about the unseen elements of ourselves, Peter said "some things I know about myself that others can't see". He also remarked that "I decide how much I let others see of me, my body, myself". Peter also revealed that one of his secrets was that "I hate school". Peter's feet and hands were made from sand. Peter stated that sand was used to bury precious things found in the ground. Peter was able to spontaneously acknowledge precious things he did, "I do precious things like making tea for my Nanny". Peter also acknowledged that "my feet can take me where I want and no one else can, that's precious". Peter then engaged in the activity of putting the water onto his construction and he remarked that he was "watering the grass". As the sand moved Peter stated that "even when we grow ourselves the precious things we do don't stop but they can move and change". In exploring Peter's relationship with change, Peter stated that "whatever happens in my life, no matter what moves in or out or stays the same, things will still change". A pivotal moment for Peter was the recognition of "the one thing I would like to change is to keep up with school work".

Peter constructed his third picture of himself using a leaf as his head. He explained that the leaf "holds on to branches". Peter's arms and legs were sticks which were described as "helping to hold onto leaves". Stones were used for Peter's construction of his body, which he mentioned can be used for "throwing and having fun". Sand was used in the construction of the feet, hands and hair. In discussing Peter's previous experience and knowledge of sand

he explained that it "covers bare ground". A conversation around "bare ground" continued into a discussion about sand and ourselves "missing precious things". As these elements of Peter's construction were added to the bowl of water, the first element to move off his page was the sand. Peter then spoke of that being his "hands wanting to move all the time make him miss precious things". We explored the moments when his hands wanted to move and experiences of his hands holding precious things in a landscape of action. In discussing the sticks which were the arms that remained floating on the heart–shaped leaf, Peter remarked that "my arms help me hold onto people I love". Holding on was discussed as a preference and grounded in real experiences. Peter discussed his intention to hold onto his family and the good things they say about him during times when others challenge him. The heart shaped leaf which was his head was discussed as "my head holds onto people that my arms can't touch, I hold onto them in my memory". A story of Peter's ability within relationships emerged as a unique outcome. When discussing the change in the way the elements were on the page and in the bowl, Peter experienced a pivotal moment. Peter shared this in saying "when we change places, my head and heart think different things. I don't always think about what I do, I just do it. If I can learn to think before I do things I can make better decisions, using my head and my heart to make decisions". "Since an aim of narrative therapy is to shift the balance of power away from the problem, individuals can be helped to find the resources to move in the direction of their choosing" (Harper & Spellman, 2006, p. 114). Peter had begun to unpack his personal resources which could assist the development of his preferred reality and identity.

Peter constructed himself, in the fourth session, with his head being a leaf which "makes oxygen", we "can't live without them" and then he personalised this in saying "I can't live without my head". It was also said that his head "helps me do the right thing at the right time". Peter's body was a rock to which he attached an experience of "throwing them when we mad, helps me feel better". Peter acknowledged his unique ability here that "my body helps me do things that help me feel good". Peter used sand to construct his hands and feet which he claimed "make stuff". Peter asserted a preferred sense of identity in claiming that "I can make or do anything that I want if I put my mind to it". Peter's arms and legs were constructed from sticks and Peter stated as he was constructing them that "my head keeps my arms and legs in check and helps decide if I do things well or not, go to good places or not . As we introduced the air element, Peter described wind as "cools us down" and "blows stuff off". He also relayed past experience of "play with kites". As the air was moving a few things

in his construction Peter asserted an identity conclusion when saying "things from outside can't destroy the way I think or feel if I protect them". This unique outcome addressed a goal "to collaborate on alternative stories that emphasise examples of resourcefulness or constructive action rather than only focussing on what has been going wrong" (Kottler, 2015, p.215). Peter had introduced the idea of protection before the bowl was introduced and as the bowl was introduced he expanded the detail of the conversation around "protection". His wonderfulness inquiry, which is defined as an inquiry leading to "the revelation of moral character in young people who then accordingly engage their 'virtues'" (Epston, personal communication, March 7, 2016), continued as he stated "I can protect them [in reference to parts of himself] by defending myself, fighting back, standing up for myself". When discussing times when "protection" didn't seem to be strong enough in his life, Peter discussed that he would engage in other resources. "Things from outside can protect us, mom, school. Sometimes rules are there to protect us, even if we don't like them".

During his fifth visit, Peter placed grass on his construction to resemble hair. He stated that it "covers his bald head". He also maintained that it "keeps his head warm, warms my brain". His head was depicted by a leaf which was described as being used "to breathe". His body was a rock which is described as "hard, can't break them easily". Peter designed his arms and legs as sticks which he described "hold onto the leaves". His hands and feet were made of soil, along with some soil added to the hair. Peter described soil as "growing stuff, plant and trees". He personalised his creation by saying that his hands and feet "helped me go to new places but made me tired". He also stated that "I like to sleep to rest". In a conversation of "rest" and the actions supporting rest, Peter informed me that "food and water help me feel rested. I need my mouth to rest [but] using my words helps me get what I need". As we introduced the element of fire to the construction, Peter relayed his experience with fire as being "bad" he described fire as it being able to "burn trees, destroy stuff". The good element of fire was then discussed as its ability to "keep us warm". As the fire was introduced to Peter's construction he noted that the "green stuff doesn't burn, water inside protects it". Peter then further engaged his revelation of character (Epston, personal communication, March 7, 2016) as he said "My head protects me by making plans to keep me safe. Arms and legs protect me by running away from danger." Peter expanded his identity conclusions by stating "my head is very important. Helps me think to protect me and do the right things". Peter also acknowledged that "my heart and brain can't break, these are most important". Peter's personal agency was verbalised as he said "I can get what I need to

survive". Peter also stated his intentional state of understanding in life by claiming that "I can protect my heart by moving away from people that hurt me. I only be with people that help me not hurt me".

In his last session, Peter once again chose the leaf to represent his head and clarified that it "makes oxygen". His body was depicted as a rock which "belong outside" and he attached the previous experience of "throw them" in his description. Peter clarified his identity: "I am an inside person". Peter's legs and arms were sticks and his hands and feet were made of sand. As I was transcribing the session, Peter stated "I prefer working on the iPad to writing in a book". As we allowed the element of earth to be introduced to the construction, Peter referred to it as a "disaster". In conversation around Peter's experience with disaster, Peter said "no matter how disastrous things may seem, my heart and head can still help me survive". A conversation around "survival" emerged. We discussed the things that assist survival and Peter informed me that "my brain makes thoughts and ideas come alive in my head". A "significant statement of self" arose when Peter claimed "I am creative". Peter added that "my brain keeps me alive cause it helps me be careful around dangerous things." When discussing what this information said about Peter, he claimed "I am a lifesaver". Peter further discussed how he was able to become creative in his decision-making to save himself from consequences at school. He also explored the possibility of being creative in decision-making to create the kinds of relationships that he wished for at school in making and facilitating new friendships and connections. Peter appeared confident with his bold identity conclusion. When we conversed around the things that were covered or hidden by the earth, Peter explained that in his life "hiding is my way for people to pay attention to me when I come out".

Peter's significant statement of self research document

Peter asked me to scribe his statements of self and the following was written:

- Whatever happens in my life no matter what moves in or out or stays the same– things will still change
- Some things I know about myself that others can't see: I decide how much I let others see of me.
- My face, voice and mouth help people be a part of me.
- My feet can take me where I want and no one else can take me there – that's precious.

- I can do precious things like making tea for my Nanny.

- I can protect myself by defending myself...standing up for myself.

- My body helps me do things that help me feel good

- Hiding is my way for people to pay attention to me when I come out.

- I am an inside person.

- My head holds onto people that my arms can't touch – I hold them in my memory.

- My arms help me hold onto people that I love

- If I can learn to think before I do things I can make better decisions.

- My hands wanting to move all the time makes me miss precious things.

- My body helps me have fun.

- Things from outside can't destroy the way I think or feel if I protect them.

- Things from outside can protect us even if we don't like them. Rules can protect us.

- My head helps decide if I do things well or not, go to good places or not.

- My head helps me do the right thing at the right time.

- My heart and brain can't break, these are the most important.

- I can get what I need to survive.

- Using my words helps me get what I need

- I can protect my heart by moving away from people that hurt me.

- My brain makes thoughts and ideas come alive – I am creative.

- My brain helps me be careful around dangerous things – I am a lifesaver.

His significant statements of self are presented in Figure 13:
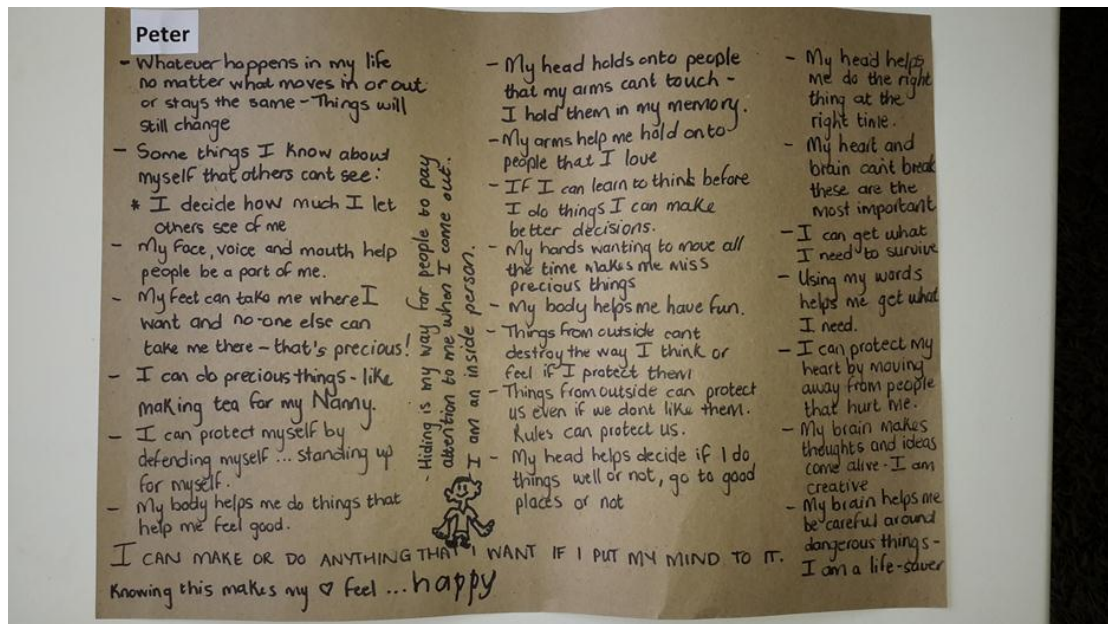
Figure 13: Peter's document. A photo of Peter's significant statement of self document.

When asked the first question: "Does the information you have learnt about yourself remind you of anything?"

Peter responded "I can make or do anything that I want if I put my mind to it".

When asked the second question: "What does this information make you feel?"

Peter responded "Knowing this makes my heart feel...happy".

Peter's identity conclusions included the *knowledge* that he can do precious things and *can* protect himself. He became aware that if he could learn to think before doing, he could make better *decisions*. Peter became aware that he *can* get what he needs to survive and he could protect his heart. Peter *acknowledged* that there were things that he knows about himself that others cannot see. He stated that his body helps do things that feel good and have fun. He knows that his body *can* help him hold onto important people and his head helps him do the right thing. He asserted that he *knows* he is creative and he is a lifesaver. Peter exercised agency in stating that his head *decides* if he does things well or not. His reflection on the journey yielded the identity conclusion of "I *can* make or do anything I want if I put my mind to it...*Knowing* this makes me happy".

Revisiting Peter

Upon establishing contact with Peter's mother, she reported that he was very confident following the research process. Peter had reportedly found the courage to become a dancer and had performed in theatre. Peter's mother reported that he was a team player within his action soccer team. Peter had moved to a new school and he enjoyed going to school. He had made friends within his new environment and although some academic challenges had been present, his teachers were willing to assist him and work as a team to help him reach his potential.

<p style="text-align:center;">**Whisperer's Journey**</p>

Eight year old Whisperer visited the practice with many stories to tell. His parents are both deceased and Whisperer was living in a shared custody situation between his grandparents. Conflict between his grandparents was constant and his home situation had invited strong feelings of uncertainty. Constant legal involvement, court cases and social worker assessments became part of Whisperer's daily experience. His schooling journey became a struggle where anxiety as self–doubt influenced his performance. Socially, Whisperer's grandmother described him as "overly–dependant" on his best friend and he found himself alone when his friend was not at school. Whisperer narrowly described himself as not knowing how to make friends. Whisperer engaged in behaviours such as biting his nails, chewing his shirts until they were broken through, and struggled to make eye contact as a result of his relationship with anxiety. Whisperer told wonderful stories about his puppy. His puppy was the only one that understood him as he explained it to me. When he was with his puppy, he could forget about everyone else. Through our initial sessions, I became aware that the influence of self–doubt in Whisperer's life had been powerful enough to create thin descriptions of his abilities and identity.

Whisperer was very excited to be working in the garden and outside of the therapy room and remarked that "we should do this more often". Whisperer had no problem locating his materials and assembling materials into constructions. Whisperer used sand to construct his head. Through discussion of his knowledge and experiences with sand, Whisperer mentioned that sand was what kept the flower still and stable. Whisperer remarked that it "turns to water, changes into mud and the sun dries it to sand again". When discussing the ability to change Whisperer said "can change mind about how you see problem". He also

remarked that "thoughts can be messy like mud and cause problems". When examining possibilities for settling the mess of mud, Whisperer added "bathing helps settle messy thoughts so they can be what they should again". Whisperer had contributed a landscape of action around one of the practices that helped settle his thoughts (White, 2007). Whisperer had used broken sticks to depict his eyes and as we spoke of the breaking of the sticks, Whisperer disclosed that he was "broken–hearted" due to "someone calling me stupid". We further explored the possibility of branches to bend in the wind "they don't just break" and "the wind decides which way it bends but can stay still if it wants". Whisperer acknowledged that he could deaden the branches to listen or see things. Thus harnessing his ability to perceive what he would like to perceive. This emerging landscape of identity marked the beginning of personal agency. When examining the leaf that Whisperer had placed as his mouth, he explained to me that leaves were soft and broke easily. Whisperer said that his mouth however, was strong and it was able to be quiet when it wanted to say something. He also explained that leaves store water helping the plant to live. I had never thought of leaves in this way and through our discussion Whisperer likened the leaf to himself as he stated "when my mouth talks it makes people come alive, so what is wrong". We discussed the decision to be quiet as opposed to the decision to bring life. When unpacking the nose which was a stick, Whisperer mentioned that it helped "make leaves grow". Whisperer discussed the things he would love to grown in his life, and "love" emerged as a preference, creating a pivotal moment. Whisperer concluded our visit by stating that "breathing" and "calming" helped love to grow. Situating his preference within a landscape of action, allowed the renegotiation of personal identity.

Within his second session, Whisperer constructed his head and hair out of a leaf. His legs were created from sticks that were described as being "used to do fun things". As our conversation explored the nature of "fun things", Whisperer stated that "saying what I want is fun". His body was created from sand, which when exposed to the water, moved. Whisperer remarked "this part splosh, this part stayed". When discussing different reactions, Whisperer reached an intentional state of understanding when stating that "I can decide what I listen to or see".

In the third session, Whisperer excitedly linked the bowl of water in this activity to swimming which is "fun" and where he has a "great time". As he added the elements of his construction to the water, Whisperer commented on how it had made "coffee" and not mud.

He remarked that he would not have minded if it made mud as he likes mud it enables him to "make stuff". His ability to "make stuff" was revisited through a landscape of action. Whisperer noticed how his leaf and sticks, depicting his mouth, body and arms all floated. Whisperer likened this with the experience of "stops fun". He explained that it was much more fun to sink to the bottom as that's where the mud was. Those elements of himself that "stops fun" were described by Whisperer according to his construction. His mouth "stops fun" when it doesn't "say the things I want to". Whisperer explained that the floating sticks of his arms, body and legs were "careful about actions" which "stops fun". As the elements of 'stopping fun' were externalised in conversation, Whisperer explained that over–thinking can cause caution over actions and words which were not helpful for Whisperer to be who he wanted to be. This marked a pivotal moment in acknowledging a preferred way of being for Whisperer. These pivotal moments or "unique outcomes are surprising exceptions to the problem as described in the client's usual narrative" (Meir, 2012, p.144). When looking at Whisperer's head, which was constructed from sand, Whisperer remarked that it had "sunk to the bottom to have the most fun". A unique outcome was stated as Whisperer stated that "imagination helps Whisperer have the most fun". Whisperer acknowledged that "some things [about me] go right to the bottom and have so much fun and some stay at the top, a bit of fun but not too much". Whisperer discussed how he needed to be more intentional about when he decided to have fun and that although home was a stressful place, perhaps that's where he most needed to introduce fun.

Whisperer constructed himself, in the fourth session, with a head and end of legs made of mud, eyes of leaves, nose as stick, mouth as grass, and arms, legs and body as sticks. Not much discussion of these materials specifically was engaged in as Whisperer was eager to see what we would "do" with them that today. The element of air was discussed and how the movement of air could be called wind. Whisperer mentioned how the wind could make things "wobble around". In relation to his construction, Whisperer mentioned that his "head would wobble the most". We discussed different types of wind and Whisperer identified different wind temperatures. He mentioned that in a cold wind his "head would freeze easily and leaves". Whisperer said that in a hot wind his "head would dry quickest". We discussed the experience of things 'wobbling' in life. The conversation led to Whisperer expressing how in life his "heart gets most affected" then his "head starts to think" and that these thoughts are "usually bad things". In a unique outcome, Whisperer stated that he "thinks good things when I see something happy". When introducing the bowl over Whisperer's

construction, he appeared intrigued by the agency that he had exercised in "doing" something in the presence of the element of wind. As we discussed the effect of this action and examined Whisperer's relationship with "doing stuff". Whisperer voiced a conclusion of identity by saying that "I decide what my head thinks". This identity conclusion was supported by a landscape of action in which this was experienced. He also went on to explain a pivotal moment of awareness when he said "doing stuff differently helps my head think differently". Whisperer also acknowledged that "doing stuff helps change how my head thinks...This helps make my heart happy". This preferred narrative and identity conclusion "allows individuals to not accept the societal definition of their identity and start to reclaim their own narratives, voices and meaningful identities" (Gale, Ross & McCoy, 2016, p. 293).

Whisperer started his fifth construction by forming his head out of sand. Whisperer spoke of sand being used to "help plants grow" and to "feed plants". Whisperer told me that "my brain also feeds my arms and legs [through] instructions of what to do". Our conversation turned to different choices of food, healthy and unhealthy and how that fed our brain. Whisperer then stated that "sometimes my brain says unhealthy things about myself. Unhealthy food makes us sick but unhealthy thoughts make us sad". Whisperer eyes and mouth were constructed from leaves and said to be important as they "give us air". Whisperer's arms, legs, body and nose were constructed from sticks and were described as things that could "be broken, can be fixed" and "help us to walk". As we introduced the element of fire, Whisperer described fire as being able to "burn you" and being used for "food" and to "get warm". Whisperer explained that fire was "more dangerous than helpful". He clarified that "fire something that is so dangerous...in the beginning is so easy, to destroy in the end". As we discussed the presence of danger in his life and what danger would mean to his construction of himself, Whisperer stated an identity conclusion that "others can break sticks and leaves [but] can't break sand, "others can't break my most important part". When discussing the changes that "danger" or "breaking" can bring in our lives, Whisperer added to our wonderfulness inquiry by saying "changing the way I think changes the way I feel. I change the way I feel by what I do". Whisperer stated "nothing, no matter how dangerous can kill what is most important to me, my head and my heart"

In the sixth session, Whisperer constructed his body, legs and arms from a stick which was described as "holding leaves" and "keep it strong". Whisperer's eyes and mouth were leaves which "have veins in them". Whisperer's head was mud which he described as "keeps

plants growing and standing still" and "wet when it rains". Whisperer shared an experience with mud as he recalled "spraying mud balls with my friends". When engaging in the element of sand over the construction, Whisperer remarked that it "covered everything except the stick" in relating to the sticks as his arms he said "My arms and legs could keep me surviving even in a sand storm. They could run, walk to get somewhere safe or get help. They have to move and do something to help". He added "in real life they can help you feel better or help call someone to help" like "teachers, friends (Gabriel, Owethu) or family (brother)". Whisperer stated "sandstorms change the way things look but life doesn't end because of them".

Whisperer's significant statement of self research document

Whisperer wrote his own document in which the following was present:

How I think:

- I decide what I think
- Doing stuff differently helps me think differently
- Changing what I think makes my hart[heart] happy

What I can do for myself:

- I can calm myself
- I can help my hart [heart] grow
- When my mouth talks it makes peole [people] came ulive [alive]
- I can settle messy thought
- I can decide what I listen to ore [or] see

How I have fun:

- Imagimatiom [imagination] helps me have fun
- Being careful stops my future
- Saying what I want is fun

How I use help:

- I've just got to tell them when I need help
- I can move and do somithing [something] to get help

- I can call someone to help
- Proplems [problems] change thinks [things] but life dosen't [doesn't] end because of them

Who I am:

- Changing the way I think changes the way I fill [feel]
- I change the way I feel by what I do
- No one can break my most important parts.

Nothing, no matter how dangerous can kill my hend [head] and my hart [heart].

Whisperer's research document is presented in Figure 14:
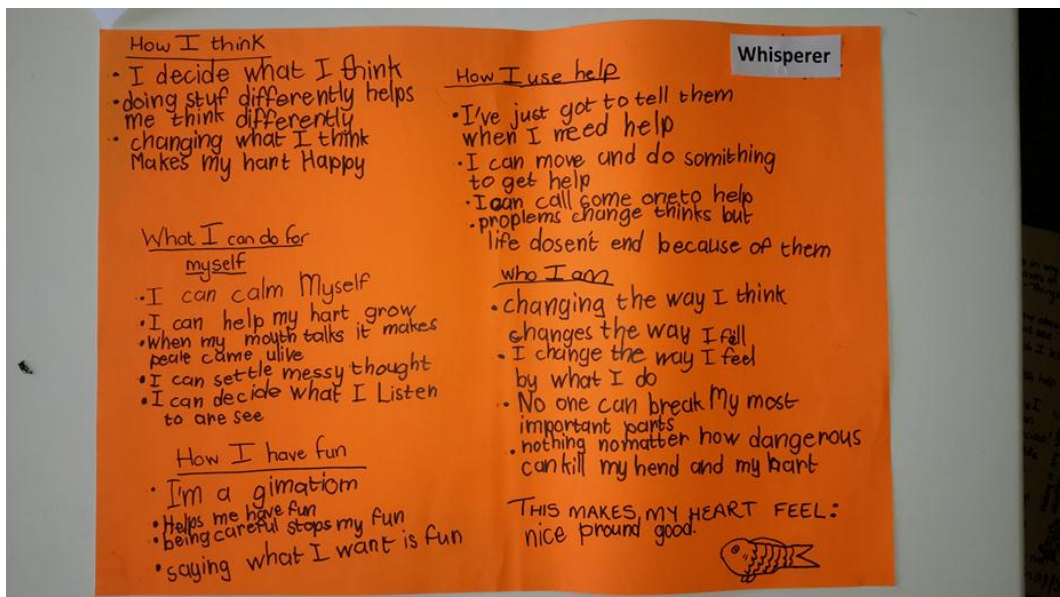
Figure 14: Whisperer's document. A photo of Whisperer's significant statement of self document.

When asked the first question: "Does the information you have learnt about yourself remind you of anything?"

Whisperer responded by drawing a fish. When asked to say more about the fish, Whisperer responded "fish have ultimate freedom".

When asked the second question: "What does this information make you feel?"

Whisperer responded "This makes my heart feel: nice, pround [proud], good.

Whisperer's research journey revealed that he *can* calm himself, settle messy thoughts and he can help his heart grow. He stated that he *can* do something to get help and he *can* change the way he feels. Whisperer's knowledge revealed that he *knows* that changing what he thinks makes him happy and saying what he wants is fun. He recognised that his imagination helps him have fun and that being careful stops his future. Whisperer stated his awareness that he *decides* what he thinks, listens to or sees. He also *decided* that life does not end because of problems and that no one can break the most important parts of himself. In reflecting on the journey, a metaphor was created of what he learnt about himself, this was related to freedom. Whisperer acknowledged that this makes his heart feel proud and good.

Revisiting Whisperer

In contact with Whisperer's grandmother, I was made aware that legal processes were still in place and that Whisperer had been placed under significant pressure regarding this. Despite these circumstances, Whisperer's teacher had reported that he had "done well, given the circumstances". The highest mark on his school report was above 70%. Whisperer's grandmother reported that when his environment was stable, he was "great".

Conclusion

These significant statements of self documents were copied and a copy given to each participant. When presented to Harper she stated "I will remember this anyway every time I look into the garden". These significant statements of self that can be referred to as documents of knowledge and affirmation (Fox, 2003), processes of self–discovery (Eichas, Mecca, Montgomery & Kurtines, 2104), documents of intentional states of understanding (White, 2007), documents of wonderfulness inquiries (Epston, Personal communication, March 7, 2016) and statements of landscapes of identity (White, 2005) were generated through the therapeutic use of natural materials.

The participants in the research process were all able to harness the potential of the materials to co–create significant statements of self. The research process emerged as an extension of the therapy as the participants were able to document their journey of identity development. All the participants involved appeared to engage and interact freely with material, even if there were difficulties initially. Identity conclusions were reached by every participant and the knowledge that was co–created resulted in rich feelings across all

participants. When engaging in revisiting conversations with their caregivers, it was evident that each participant had experienced changes that enriched their daily life experiences following the research.

This research process has created numerous possibilities, not only for the participants involved but for myself as researcher and for the field of psychology and child therapy. The next chapter offers a personal reflection on the research process and offers various possibilities for future research and future engagements with natural materials therapeutically.

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This journey of narrative collaboration set out to explore possibilities in co–creating identity through the use of natural material. The study focussed on a developmentally appropriate means to create opportunities to express identity. Playing with natural material as a means to facilitate conversation, is supported by neuroscience and narrative therapy, as they recognise the ability of concrete experiences being used as metaphors in discovering emotional skill and harnessing memory (Cattanach, 2008; Siegel, 2012; Zimmerman, 2015). Within the therapeutic process preceding the research, concrete natural material was utilised to this end. The research process invited a reflection on the therapeutic work with concrete natural material to co–create a document of identity statements (White, 2007). The children's perceptions and beliefs were the basis of research documents in this multi–sensorial approach. The sustainability of therapeutic outcomes was an important factor in the exploration of material that is affordable, accessible and readily available. This addresses a need, within the field of play therapy, to create diverse means to provide therapy in multiple settings, at minimal cost, with lasting impact (Levitt, Butler & Hill, 2006; Watermeyer, 2006; Willis, Walters & Crane, 2013; Woody, 2009). Drawing on fields of occupational therapy, impact therapy and urban planning, this narrative study aimed to address the need for the development of narrative nature based therapeutic processes that explore the development of identity conclusions and intentional states of being.

This chapter revisits the possibilities created within the research to facilitate agency within the participants to co–create identities. Reflexivity on my own research journey is included from a relational and research view point. Reflections on the participants' identity conclusions are included in order to support the development that these materials have facilitated. Lastly, possibilities for future research and therapeutic application are presented.

Reflections on the research journey

Including the reflection of my personal journey within this chapter, allows for a thick description (White, 1997) of the co–created meaning of the research process. This meaning had a personal and professional impact on my story and identity. Presenting this reflection contributes to the research as it "emphasises the life shaping nature of this work...takes the responsibility to identify, to acknowledge, and to articulate...the real and the potential contribution that this work makes to his/her life" (White, 1997, p. 130). Exploring both the

impact of the research participants' journey and the study itself allows a comprehensive reflexive practice. As Reissman (2015) states, "thinking about the thinking that runs through a research project and making that explicit is, of course, essential to reflexivity" (p.222). There are two facets to my personal reflections which are included, reflections on the relationships with participants within the research and reflections on the research process itself. Without the relationship with participants, the research would not have been possible and therefore the relational reflections will be presented first as they take precedence.

Relational reflections

The research documents co–created within this study gifted me with the eyes to see the participants in a unique light and share spaces of their journeys that no one else is privy to. Epston (personal communication, June 2, 2016) reminded me that "the people we meet form our lives". Engaging in respectful practice with these children has created a deep appreciation for their skills and abilities. This appreciation led me to reflect on my own skills and abilities and to commit to engaging them with more vigour in my life. There were certain aspects of the children that emerged that I honoured within them.

Willingness

The willingness of the children to engage as researchers took me by surprise. Without reservation, the excitement of undertaking such an adventure was not quelled by self–doubt or anxiety in any of the participants. Adventure became their ally in engaging with this journey. Willingness to become teachers to the profession created the possibility of engaging with a new experience that put them in a strong position to present opportunities to others, specifically adults. The willingness to self–reflect (Fonagy, Gyorgy, Jurist &Target, 2004), as discussed in Chapter two: Literature Review, was recognised as a skill which inspired identity development. Their unique ability to harness their sense of adventure and willingness, while engaging with materials, created an opportunity for my own reflection on my willingness and adventure in personal and professional life.

Engagement

Of the children who engaged with the material without reservation, their spontaneity and inspiration was a joy to experience. Their creative potential gave me the gift of witnessing their engagement with initiative. Those who experienced difficulty in selecting

materials or those who requested to participate at another stage, engaged me in their cautious approach to selection and involvement. Their thoughtful manner in exercising agency in their decisions and actions resonated with me personally. This variation in engagement allowed me the opportunity to reflect on the cautious approach to undertaking this research journey, along with the creative element required to bring it to fruition. The inspiration it will continue to speak into my life is evident. This creativity brought with it a flexibility in their approach to exploring possibilities.

Exploration

Conducting the sessions outside of the office and in the garden provided the space to incorporate an exploration of options. Personally, flexibility was introduced into practice. The change of environment appeared to bring about new energy and excitement over possibilities. The search for material and their potential, yielded a rich journey of co–creation. Their ability to age–appropriately direct their lives (Gemelli, 2009), as addressed in Chapter two: Literature Review, allowed for choices and decision making, contributing to rich accounts (White, 1997). Decision–making and recognition of their abilities inspired pride in their achievements.

Pride

Witnessing the sense of achievement and pride when documents were compiled was an absolute delight for me. The creation of self–defining memories (Singer & Blagor, 2004), discussed in Chapter two: Literature Review, was witnessed within the process. The respectfulness the children appeared to have realised for themselves, indicated an acknowledgement of worth. This by far was the highlight of the process for me. I celebrated the sense of achievement of our co–created process. These moments "provide the opportunity for therapists to join with these persons' in celebrating the significance of these events and acts...In doing so contributes directly to their experience of their work, and invariably flows into other domains of their lives" (White, 1997, p. 142). An achievement for them and an achievement for me. An achievement rich in possibility. These achievements in the study are given an audience through this dissertation providing an acknowledgment of their process and giving status to the journey.

Character status

The outcome of the study, being a dissertation or 'book', excited the children. I am reminded of their excitement as they have continued to enquire over the years of its readiness. "Narrative therapy is often referred to as a therapy of acknowledgement. We try to make viable the way that people would prefer to see themselves and would prefer to be seen by others" (Walther & Fox, 2012, p.9). Their "significant statement of self" documents and this dissertation appeared to provide status to their journey of character revelation through narrative inquiry (Epston, personal communication, June 2, 2016). Within the creation of this document, the narrative inquiry itself has created opportunities for personal and professional experience. These reflections, situated within the research experience, shape and transform our knowledge and create further possibilities, as are presented below.

Research reflections

Narrative inquiries shape our understanding of how we may live alongside each other and how we situate our knowing (Huber, Caine, Huber, & Steve, 2013). This research process has revealed possibilities to create transformation through the very act of exploring possibilities.

Possibility

This research study has transformed my view of research into a transformative process that encompasses adventure. The creation of "significant statements of self" has reinforced, for me, the potential of research to be the culmination of fun exploration and playful engagement to yield the co–creation of meaningful documents for the personal and professional. I embrace the possibility of this dissertation providing a sense of authenticity to the children involved. "It is necessary for us to experience a degree of authenticity in our knowledge claims" (White, 1997, p.13). This process of authenticity is discussed by White (1997) as being achieved by finding a forum in which to express knowledge claims to an audience which allows for thick descriptions of personal identities. The research has also opened pathways for me to engage in forums connecting colleagues and discussions of possibilities arising from this research.

Connection

This research study inspired and assisted in my meeting with David Epston, co–constructer and colleague in narrative therapy. This meeting reinforced my commitment to revealing and valuing character within people. The privilege of conversing in ways that "express honour to the other" (Epston, personal communication, June 2, 2016) have inspired my professional practices from here on forward. David Epston and the story of our meeting has rendered his influence and words, part of the "conversations that you will never forget" (Epston, personal communication, June 3, 2016). These connections have contributed and become members of my professional identity.

Re–membering

My re–membering practice as a professional is forever etched in this dissertation. The development of my professional identity has been inspired by the participants of this study. Through our journey with willingness and engagement, I have developed into a therapist that embraces flexibility and adventure in conversation. Creating rich dialogue that assists me in exploring aspects of conversation that I may previously have missed or disregarded. The energy inspired through exploration allows me to resist the commonplace conversation and to celebrate achievements personally and professionally. Giving voice to professional development and giving audience to my professional voice has been marked by the starting of professional training. These professional developments are seated in the co–generation of these possibilities. This renders the participants part of the preferred memberships of my professional life (White, 1997). White (1997) also asserts that "therapists often carry with them the images of the persons who consult with them...This contributes sustenance to the lives and work of therapists, and can assist them to more fully acknowledge the voices of others" (p.136). It is my hope that this study will continue to enrich my practice for the duration of my career. As I revision the future career possibilities arising from the study, the visual reminders of the study assist in sustaining this possibility.

Visual engagement and reminders

As I am a visual learner, it has been refreshing to conduct a therapy and research process with a visual aid and reminder of the meanings co–constructed. Natural materials will never again just be 'pretty' things to look at, but now provide connections to meaningful conversations and metaphors. This sensorial concrete experience, as outlined in Chapter two:

Literature Review, constructed a foundation for the development of identity (Jennings, 2005). The use of these material as metaphors (Payne, 2006), as outlined in Chapter three: The narrative assumptions of the study, now provide possibilities for future journeys in a myriad of ways, personally and professionally.

The potential of these sensorial visual therapeutic reminders are not just seated in the memory of the physical process, but in the memory of the co–created meanings and identity conclusions they inspired. An accurate reflection on the research demands a reflection on the development of identity as a primary factor.

Alternative possibilities for the research

In reflecting on the research study, opportunities for alternative possibilities within this research are highlighted. Having been given another opportunity to conduct the research, I may have considered the introduction of culture as a stratum in formulating my sample. Although the materials have cross–cultural applicability, the inclusion of this stratum may have contributed a description of differences between cultural groups as opposed to the limited considerations of gender difference only. Within the documentation process, the inclusion of video may have offered the opportunity of the inclusion of non–verbal responses, examples of questioning and reactions to the process, further enriching the descriptions. In order to further address the element of dependability within the research, the alternative of introducing a co–psychologist to triangulate storied accounts may have been a helpful addition. This addition to the study may have provided a rich professional account of development of identity that may have been helpful in the extension of this research as a professional development tool. Unfortunately, I did not have access to learnings and exposure to materials in between sessions which may have influenced the selections and conclusions that followed each session. Conversations around this may have provided additional details and accounts of experience. Although this research document has created the opportunity for the journeys to be given an audience, the inclusion of an outsider witness group (White, 2007) may have contributed an additional element of audience and affirmation for the participants. Contact made with the parents of participants, following the research process, yielded stories of development that may have been further affirmed through an additional interview with the participants themselves. This addition to the research may have enabled a

richer description of the participants' own experiences and perceptions post–research, just as was given voice in researching their conclusions of identity.

Reflections on conclusions of identity

As outlined in Chapter three: The narrative assumptions of the study, the narrative practices (White, 1997, 2005, 2007) employed within this study allowed participants to language valued identity conclusions which create opportunities for action. When revisiting the potential of nature to create opportunities for identity conclusion, the use of the participant's language provides a story to describe this. As I reviewed the stories of identity, it became evident that the *knowledge* of identity developed was seated in a recognition of what *can* be possible. Knowing that you *can* do and feel and be, assists in *decision* making possibilities which exercise your identity (Dietz, 2016).

Through these stories of identity, the ability to come to know what you can do, awareness of what you know about yourself and decisions of what you choose to do or be are central to the development of identity. These narratives of identity were co–created through the use of accessible, affordable, available natural materials. Although the participants formed part of a quota sampling strategy, as discussed in Chapter four: The research journey, no differences between gender or age were noted in the ability of natural materials to facilitate identity conclusion. In each of the participants, the generation of alternatives (Cattanach, 1992) and preferred realities (de Faoite, 2011) were developed through a collaborative narrative process of inquiry which integrated thinking and feeling (Hadley, 2015). The multi–sensorial metaphors created a platform for the development of collaborative metaphors which inspired rich narratives. This study has presented conclusions that are consistent with the 'data' collected (Phillips, 2010) and offered a possibility of an alternative therapeutic option to facilitate change (Shaefer & Drewes, 2011) heralding the affiliation to nature (Besthorn, 2002). Reflection on this study inspires opportunities for further possibilities within psychology research and practice. Giving voice to these possibilities ensures that this narrative inquiry leads to further inquiries and storied possibilities.

Reflections on future research and therapeutic engagements

Narrative inquiry holds a power to facilitate the re–telling of stories in a way that endures and creates future possibilities for new stories in the future (Huber, Caine, Huber & Steeves, 2013). Some of the possibilities for continuing the development of the use of natural materials in therapy will be presented below.

Therapeutic possibilities

In the children's Pixar movie, "A good dinosaur", released in 2015, sticks are used to communicate family structure and belonging without using language. Death and loss are also depicted by the covering of deceased family members with sand, as shown in Figure 15. Bearing in mind that movies and media have the ability to shape everyday life experience (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 2013), this natural depiction of communicating social and personal identity has highlighted the ability to shape the way we communicate our identities differently. This study has presented one such way.

Figure 15: Disney screenshot: The scene using sticks and sand to depict family structure.

The possibility is raised of further application of nature based communication in family therapy, bereavement therapy and conversations of social identity through the use of natural materials. This creates the opportunity for natural material to provide a communication tool that can be utilised where barriers to communication are present. There is a growing need for the application of specific therapeutic activities with children (Carr, 2013). This need can be addressed through natural materials. Therapy with deaf, mute or

special needs children become possible with the use of familiar material, minimising the component of social anxiety and skill that accompanies therapy (Kendal, Setting & Cummings, 2012). Language and cultural barriers can be overcome through the use of familiar, available material (Brisset, Leanza, Rosenberg, Vissandjee, Kirmayer, Muckle, Xenocostas & Laforce, 2014). The creative possibility of the material allows for a true representation of lived experience that is not influenced through commercial material. Natural material can be applied to therapy across age groups as there is not prescribed age limit to this creative process.

As with this study, nature based therapeutic activities can be applied across presenting concerns. As diagnosis limits definitions of narrative identity (Polanco, 2014), it should not provide a limitation for therapeutic applications. Possibilities of creative Activities using alternative available material, be it waste products or other, are introduced by this study. As with the use of sand tray therapy (Homeyer & Sweeney, 2011), the benefits of stick–therapy, water–therapy, stone–therapy and the therapy of flora can be utilised narratively as specific material activities. Therapeutic activities using natural materials to explore other facets of narrative practice such as externalisation, re–membering, remoralising (Epston, 2016, personal communication), outsider and insider witnessing practices are also possible. The possibilities for therapeutic application are as vast as research possibilities.

Research possibilities

Research into these therapeutic possibilities of exploring social belonging could encompass a wide range of possible conversations including divorce, adoption, marriage, the birth of children, emigration, new schools, relocation, loss, death, violent crime, difficulties with trust, difficulties with dependency and group therapy (Kendal, Settipani & Cummings, 2012; O'Dell, McCall & Groark, 2015). This list is not exhaustive. Research into specific materials may also prove valuable. Further research into different ways to introduce natural materials within therapeutic practice would prove valuable in increasing possibilities for the application of nature for other practitioners. Cross–cultural research is needed within this scope (Berry, Poortinga, Segal & Dasen, 2002). Research of activities with special–needs children would provide a valuable platform for therapeutic application (O'Dell, McCall & Groark, 2015). Research focus also need not be limited to identity conclusions but the focus

may be on re–membering, remoralising, outsider and insider witness practices or any other therapeutic outcome (Epston, 2016, personal communication).

Conclusion

The significant statements of self documented as part of this research has, in my opinion, opened up a world of possibility within the scope of psychology research and practice. This qualitative narrative inquiry has addressed the research question through a collaborative approach to describing the development of identity conclusions through a narrative therapeutic process utilising natural materials. The research has met the objective to contribute to knowledge of accessible, affordable and sustainable therapeutic resources. The study has inspired relationship, connection, memories and possibilities. Further hopefulness and expectation is embedded in the possibility of continued research and practice within the arena of narrative play therapy.

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Appendix A – Consent Form

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA

Denkleiers • Leading Minds • Dikgopolo tša Dihlalefi
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Psychology

09/10/2015

Dear Parent,

Legal Guardian's Consent Form

This document serves as an invitation for your child _____ to participate in a Doctoral Research Study entitled: Exploring the use of natural play therapy materials in personal development. The intention of the research is to retrospectively explore personal development through the use of sustainable material in a play therapy context, in order to assist in the use of therapeutic material with sustainable outcomes on environment and self.

The study is to be conducted by Shireen Thomas-Stark (Counselling psychologist) in completion of her Doctoral Studies. The study will be conducted under the supervision of Professor Terri Bakker (University of Pretoria).

The study aims to focus on the use of natural material in play therapy practice in order to facilitate identity development. Five case studies of children between the ages of 6 years and 11 years will be utilized. Observations during therapy, as well as self-report data obtained from the participants will be included in the research report. Participants will be asked to be involved in the documentation and verification of data analysis. Names of participants will be treated as confidential and any records of the research, in form of audio-visual footage, process notes, photography of material will be archived for a period of fifteen years. Should the information be requested for any further studies informed consent will be obtained prior to usage. Information compiled from the research may be published in the form of a thesis or in professional literature. Copies of the final research report will be made available by the researcher upon written request from legal guardians. The research will contribute toward the environmental sustainability of therapeutic material and enable therapeutic principles to be reinforced with daily visual exposure to the materials used within the process.

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Should any ethical or professional concerns arise regarding the research process, legal guardians are able to contact the Health Professions Counsel of South Africa in order to initiate an investigation. Should any queries arise regarding the participants experience or participation during the process, legal guardians are encouraged to discuss such with the researcher.

Should you wish to withdrawal from the research project in future you are able to do this in writing at any time.

Signature of this document denotes your consent as legal guardians of the above-mentioned participant to the research process.

_____   _____   _____   _____

Signature   Print name   Date

Yours faithfully

Shireen Thomas-Stark
Counselling Psychologist
Telephone Number: 084 86 999 86
Email Address: ts@telkomsa.net

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Appendix B – Assent form

UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA
Denkleiers • Leading Minds • Dikgopolo tša Dihlalefi
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Psychology

09/10/2015

Dear Client,

Participant's Assent Form

Shireen Thomas-Stark (Counselling Psychologist) is doing a project for the University of Pretoria and she would like you to be a part of it.

If you chose to be a part of the project you will visit Shireen to talk about the work you have just finished with her. Your pictures, diary and the conversations you had will be taken out and we can talk about how they all followed on from each other and what they meant to you.

When Shireen does the project, your name will not be in it, but pictures and notes of your work may be. Shireen will also ask you to check the notes and pictures to be sure that they are yours and tell your story truthfully. The University will keep these pictures, videos and notes for fifteen years. If the University ever wants to use these again they will ask you first.

Shireen's project will be in the University library and might be in some psychology books. If you would like to see any of these you can ask your legal guardian or parent to write a letter to Shireen asking for these.

If you are not happy with anything that happens while you are working with Shireen, please tell her and your parents or legal guardians.

You can decide at any time to stop being a part of this project if you want to.

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Please sign this form if you would like to be part of Shireen's project.

_____   _____   _____
Signature   Print name   Date

Yours faithfully

Shireen Thomas-Stark
Counselling Psychologist
Telephone Number: 084 86 999 86
Email Address: ts@telkomsa.net

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