



BRAVE YOUNG HEARTS

Stories of resilience and gratitude



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INTRODUCTION

Collective narrative practices is a practice developed by David Denborough (2008), built upon the foundations of Narrative Therapy, which was founded by Michael White and David Epston (White & Epston, 1989). This practice seeks to respond to groups and communities who may “have experienced significant social suffering in contexts in which ‘therapy’ may not be culturally resonant” (Denborough, 2012). Collective practice seeks to identify challenges that groups of people may be experiencing in their lives, but more importantly, to identify ways that individuals within these groups have responded to these challenges and struggles. Hence the idea of creating a collective identity, where people are able to connect through their skills, knowledge and values; whilst acknowledging that they face real struggles that also need to be addressed.

“Brave Young Hearts” is a collective document of 5 young persons of the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore (CPAS) School programme, where common challenges in their lives are identified. A Re-membering process was also used to identify three groups of people who have special meaning for these young persons: their family, their teachers (and staff at CPAS), and people at workplace.

Our identities are forged through interactions with people in our lives as we make sense of our world, interweaving them into stories to share our feelings and experiences. As Desmond Tutu meaningfully puts it, “A person is a person, through other persons...”. The beauty of human interaction is something that everyone, regardless of age, race and abilities, holds dear to. Hence, engaging in such shared conversations serves as an empowering reminder of how even youth with special needs have far more strengths and insights than we could imagine, all of which are contributed by the interactions with the significant people around them.

I seek to invite readers to pause and listen to voices of these brave young hearts, and how they can also be experts in their own lives despite living with unique challenges. As you read and enjoy these relationships, we also hope that you would take time to reflect on yourself and your own relationships, and how they have contributed to you being the person that you are.

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OUR CHALLENGES

BEING BULLIED

One of us remembered being bullied in school. For example, when in primary school, "*fear* would come and bother me. It felt like I was facing another person, one hand whacking me at the back. I did not understand why I was hit and why I did not have friends".

MAKING SENSE OF NEW SCHOOL TRANSITION DUE TO MEDICAL CONDITION

Some of us struggled when making the transition into a new school. This becomes more challenging if we have a medical condition. When one of us first transferred to CPAS School, "it felt as if a spaceship brought me into a new world in 2015". Initially, it might not be easy. "There were fears if people will think I'm an alien because of my wheelchair. But now, I feel that CPAS world is a beautiful world because there are teachers like Ms. Ben, and my classmates who are friendly". For one us, when we saw how our friends did not give up practicing to walk with a quad stick, and always had a smile. It encouraged us to never give up. There is happiness here at CPAS.

DEALING WITH OTHERS' LOOKS AND THE FEAR OF BEING DIFFERENT

We struggled when dealing with the looks and stares of other people, when we were growing up. When one of us was young, "I used to not like going out and rather hide at home. I did not like other children looking at me at the playground. I just liked to hide inside my room for no reason". "Fear" would come and disturb us, the fear of being different. Going out was not as enjoyable and making friends was difficult.

DEALING WITH INCONVENIENCES

People don't see our struggles until they feel it. When other people buy shoes, it's super easy. When we want to wear nice shoes for people to see, but are not able to get the sizes we need, it makes us feel lousy. One of us used to take mum's shoes to wear, having the thoughts that maybe wearing girl stuff like high heels on school stage can be nice. One of us shared that "I can dress quite like a tom boy but it's not that I want to, it's more convenient that way. We know that when teachers asked us to wear AFO (ankle foot orthosis), it's for our own good. But sometimes I just feel like being myself and not wearing it".

DEALING WITH PHYSICAL PAIN

Some of us may need to go through operations for our hands or legs' muscles. During the operation period for one of us, "I was lying on the bed because doctors had to put me on a sleeping dosage so that they can do the operation for me. The feeling was kind of...painful during the recovery because when I had to take the cast off, it was super painful". Others may not fully understand our pain when we have to go through operation.

PLANNING MY JOURNEY, SO I CAN BE INDEPENDENT

It may be easy for other people, but some of us have to use a wheelchair. Before we go anywhere, we have to check the route, like checking if there is a sheltered walkway. We have to see whether it is raining, so I can decide whether or not to bring a poncho for my motorised wheelchair.

If we get lost, fear will also come and bother us. Some of us may get too used to adults helping us, but we are only human to feel this fear.

In spite of our challenges, there are important people that help us get through hard times; they are our family, our teachers, and our workplace friends!

APPRECIATING OUR FAMILIES

Each day of our lives, we make deposits in the memory banks of our children

– Charles R. Swindoll

Parenting may not be the easiest journey, but through these conversations with the youth, they do feel that their family members have influenced them positively in their lives. More often than not, even children with special needs do hold onto the memories of being supported by members in their club of life, but may express their appreciation and gratitude in a different way. The recalling and retelling of these youth's past stories hopefully provide an empowering platform for caregivers to realise the rewards of parenting when the going gets tough. It also allows these youth to see that they have the capacity to contribute in their own ways towards others' lives.

**“MY PARENTS’ FEELINGS MEAN 100% TO ME.
I WISH MY FEELINGS WOULD ALSO MEAN 100% TO MY PARENTS”**

SHARING SIMPLE PLEASURES IN LIFE

We enjoy the simple pleasures that we can have with our family members. For one of us, “just eating desserts with mummy makes me feel happy. Once the dessert is served, I will also take a selfie with my mummy”. It is these favourite small times with family that we enjoy.

Some of us feel loved when we hug our mummy, daddy, grandpa and grandma. Although sometimes they get angry when we don’t behave, we like it when we can tell them “I love you”.



BEING THERE FOR ME NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS

We love our family for being there for us no matter what happens. One of us told our psychologist that our mother is like a real superhero. One of our mothers had told us that “she will take care of me no matter what happens to me”. I want to say “thank you” to her, but I may not know how to do so.

TEACHING US TO BE CONFIDENT AND INDEPENDENT

Our family members taught us to be confident and independent. Confidence can be about being able to complete what we set out to do.

For one of us, “Mummy had taught me how to overcome complicated steps, such as making the journey for my school’s swimming activity. I had to take 3 buses. It was helpful to be able to run through the process with her. Now, I am confident to make the journey on my own. It was helpful when she accompanied me the first time, and showed me the right bus stop to alight at. She had also asked me to write down the steps on my phone, this helped me to be able to do it on my own.

I remembered her two important words 'Be alert', when I was going to travel on my own. These two words helped me to be aware of my surroundings and ensure that I don’t get lost”.

WHAT OUR FAMILIES APPRECIATE ABOUT US

BEING HELPFUL AT HOME

Some of us are appreciated by our family because of our helpfulness at home. For example, one of us would make a Vitamin C drink for Mummy, "she loves me because of the things I do for her". We do such things, because it is a way of how we show our love, and we can see how these things are helpful to our family.

For some of us, being helpful is also about being independent, and doing things fast. For example, one of us will try to change and shower quickly when we reach home, so that our family will worry less about us.

BEING A GOOD KAKAK (ELDER SISTER)

Our families may show appreciation for the roles we play as caring children and elder siblings. One of us shared that, "I help mummy to take water, and I give adik (younger brother) his baby toys to play with, and help to take the toys for him when he is not able to".

OUR HOPES OF CONTRIBUTING BACK TO OUR FAMILIES

Our family members appreciate our hopes to contribute back to our families. For one of us, being able to travel independently also means that we can eventually find work. We have dreams of wanting to help and support our families with our own pay, and be able to have our own lives.

If we can get our own jobs, we can take care of our parents when they are older. We feel that it is our responsibility as children to take care of our parents when they are older.

For some of us, our parents told us that they will be fine if we do not take care of them. At the very least, we want to make them proud, by showing them that we can be independent and pay our own bills.

APPRECIATING OUR TEACHERS

Re-membering conversations with these youth is not just about passive recollection of their past experiences within their social circle, but about bringing to life how the history of significant others in their lives have intertwined with the identity of the youth's present life. It takes a village to raise a child – an inspirational teacher or friend goes a long way in creating a positive impact on these youth's lives.

**"TEACHER IS COOL BECAUSE SHE DOESN'T JUDGE US FOR OUR QUESTIONS.
AFTER SCHOOL, SHE'S MORE OF A FRIEND"**

GIVING PERSONAL SPACE

We appreciate the personal space that our teachers give us. We do not like it when people just keep asking, asking, asking and asking, about how we are doing when sadness comes and bothers us. We appreciate teachers such as Ms. J who would say things like "if you are ready, then you come to me". Having some personal space is important. Some of us have learnt that from young, crying cannot solve the problem. However, sometimes we still feel like crying when we do not feel well and hope to have the space to do so. For us kids, we know that adults show their care by asking, but we hope that adults will understand that "we will tell you when we are ready".

MUTUAL RESPECT

We also appreciate the mutual respect that our teachers give us. One of our teachers would say, "If you don't like what I'm saying, you can also scold me". One of us was so shocked when our teacher said this, because it means that our relationship is based on mutual trust and respect.

GOING THE EXTRA MILE

We appreciate the care and dedication from our teachers. Last time, PLove¹ (work) was at Redhill, and some of us still did not know how to take public transport. There were a lot of wheelchairs, so taking public transport can be quite dangerous.

¹ Personalised Love (PLove) is a social enterprise, founded on the belief that each special needs individual is gifted and we embrace each individual's talent. PLove trains and employs people with special needs to produce beautiful leather-based personal and corporate gifts. They also conduct corporate workshops and school sessions around leather craft making and values-based workshops for learning about empathy, communication and team-bonding

"Mr. Alvin would bring us to PLove (work) by chartered bus, he will arrange everything. Sometimes after PLove, he will buy bread for us, like claim from school or even from his own pocket. Sometimes he will give us Ribena, because every time after we come back from PLove, it will be 11+am, so we do not have time for meals outside, plus we have to leave school by 8am."

IMPARTING THE "TRYING TO DO EVERYTHING BY MYSELF" SKILLS

This skill is important for us in our hopes to become independent. For example for one of us, our teacher Ms. J would let us try to do anything and everything. This gives us the feeling that *"actually I can do it!"*

Being independent can be hard to do at home, but in school, everyone washes their plates by themselves. This is useful for us, as we learnt that it is ok to do tasks slowly. For some of us, going to the toilet can take 10 minutes, for some it can take 5 minutes. Our teachers taught us that time does not matter; we can do things slowly as long as we can do it by ourselves. For one of us, "Ms. J had helped me plan my time, giving me 5 to 10 extra minutes to brush my teeth, even though the rest have finished".

IMPARTING THE 'IT'S OK TO SAY NO' SKILLS

Teachers in school have also taught us that it is ok for us to "Say No". For example, for one of us, we were able to tell our parents "No" when we felt that we did not need to undergo a certain surgery. We had initially thought that talking back to our parents was something bad, but our teachers taught us the difference between "talking bad" and "giving our own opinion". For us, this skill is an important perspective, as it helps us voice our opinions and also ensures that we do not go against our value of being disrespectful to others.

WHAT OUR TEACHERS APPRECIATE ABOUT US

BEING WILLING TO LEARN

We appreciate that our teachers would feel pride for us, especially when we show willingness to learn, and be able to learn fast. For one of us, it was shared that "teacher had taught me a method to board a non-hydraulic bus, and I was open to learn the method and was able to learn it quickly. She would have been proud of me, to see me board the bus with the new method learnt".

We try our best to be as independent as possible, and try to finish up our projects by ourselves, as we know that this will make our teachers proud of us.

OUR CONTRIBUTIONS IN SCHOOL

We adore our teachers. However it is hard to tell them directly that we really appreciate them. For one of us, "even when I appreciate someone I 'die die' won't tell the person". We struggle in saying "I love you" even to our parents.

So, we use actions to show our love, by contributing and helping out in the projects that are assigned to us. For one of us, we will prioritise these class projects. Even if we cannot finish it on time, we would even try to swap therapy time to finish, so that our teachers can be proud of us.

For some of us, we try to support our teachers by helping out in class, listening to what teacher says, and this will make it easier for her when she is conducting the class.

BEING COOPERATIVE IN CLASS

We hope that by paying attention and not making too much noise in Mr. Alvin's class, it will not make him angry. We try our best to be on best behaviors as we know teacher would be appreciative of that.

VALUES WE HOPE TO CARRY ON

CARRYING ON THE NON-JUDGMENTAL SKILLS

Our teachers have trusted us, by talking and supporting us in non-judgmental ways. We feel that they would appreciate that we are also using these skills in our lives. When others speak to us, we do not judge their opinions, even though they might be talking about others. We allow the person to share how they feel about the person, but we won't use that information to judge others. For one of us, "I just tell the person that *how you feel about the person is how you feel about the person*. I will not judge what the person says, nor will I judge the other person who is being talked about".

Feelings are just feelings, we are not against the person. Opinions are just opinions. We are sure that in life that not everyone will like you. Our teachers had not judged us with their questions. This is something we would like to carry on when we go to work

We hope to carry on all the skills that our teachers taught us such as the "trying to do everything myself" skills. We try to be more brave to plan before we do things. If we can make ourselves better, and have our own jobs, we will be able to one day live independently and take care of ourselves.

SPENDING MORE TIME WITH PEOPLE WE LOVE

Sometimes we may not be spending enough time with people we love. For one of us, it was recently learnt that time does not go back. From Mr. Alvin, we learnt that missing a person is ok. We will now try to enjoy life because we do not know what will happen tomorrow.

Now, we will appreciate more time with our parents. One of us shared the following, “I even had a dinner with mother at Chinatown, which I said I would never do. But it’s just like, time cannot go back. I still feel a little weird *lah*, I just said (to mum), “我心情好, 我想约你吃饭” (*I am in a good mood, hence I feel like having lunch with you*), which I think I would never do, but I did it anyway. We didn’t talk much, I was playing my phone but I guess I was still spending time with her”.

APPRECIATING PEOPLE AT OUR WORKPLACE

What does it mean to be independent? These youth actually take pride in being independent and value mastering life skills that we may have otherwise easily taken for granted. Community and family support are needed to integrate these youth into society. At the end of the day, they too want to add value to others' lives. A sense of agency and mutual respect goes a long way in empowering them to live dignified lives.

“I FEEL PROUD THAT I CAN GO TO SCHOOL AND WORK BY MYSELF. LAST TIME IT FELT SCARY BECAUSE I DID NOT KNOW HOW TO GO. I WAS ALSO SCARED OF PEOPLE. BUT NOW IT IS OK. NOW I KNOW THE MRT LINES. EVEN IF I AM LOST, I LEARNT FROM MY SISTER TO JUST ASK THE MRT STAFF, FOLLOW SIGNS AND STAY CALM.

THIS MEANS I AM INDEPENDENT AND CONFIDENT”

SUPPORTIVE BOSS

We are thankful for supportive bosses who show patience and support us. For instance, for one of us, Mr. Wei Jie is a boss whom we are thankful for. Mr. Wei Jie showed his patience

by teaching us about cashiering when Foreword Coffee² was at NUS. Mr. Wei Jie also gave his employee enough time when they felt unready to do something new. He would give us something familiar and things we are good at first. He will ask someone to guide, or personally show us the way.

RECEIVING WORDS OF ENCOURAGEMENTS

We are appreciative for all the encouragements we receive when we are at work. One of us shared the experience of receiving a photo and note from a work bonding event, “I was given a photo and a note. I felt very happy because I also met new friends. My note says ‘smile always’. This is the first note I received at work from a boss”. Such acts of encouragements mean a lot to us and would go a long way to keep us going when we are out working.

FEELING A SENSE OF CONTRIBUTION

We are appreciative for a workplace that allows us to contribute meaningfully. One of us shared that “I like that workplace so much that Mr. Wei Jie has created. It’s very fun, you can do a lot of things. After when you end work, you can clean up, help them to wash. The people there are nice and friendly”.

² Foreword Coffee is a specialty coffee company with the mission to empower persons with disabilities and special needs (differently-abled persons) by providing service and skills training and employment in the F&B industry. It is a social enterprise member of raiSE (Singapore Centre for Social Enterprises). Foreword Coffee believes that greater understanding of persons with disabilities and special needs can be achieved through meaningful interactions. Therefore, they place importance in positioning their crew at the frontline of service.

WHAT OUR BOSSES APPRECIATE ABOUT US

ACKNOWLEDGING OUR STRENGTHS AT WORK

Our boss and mentor guide us at work to help us be more independent. When we are able to work independently at our workplace like at a café, maybe bosses like Mr Wei Jie will feel happy and impressed. We would try to take initiatives at work, like helping to clean up work stations, or helping to wipe the table and sweep the floor after ending work. We hope that they appreciate our small gestures to help make life easier for them when they get very busy.

OUR CONTRIBUTIONS AT WORK

We hope that our boss and employer will appreciate our effort and hard work, like being punctual or cooperating with others at work. We would like people at work to also feel that coming to work is a happy thing, as happy as we are going to work.

WORK VALUES WE HOPE TO CARRY ON

“DO BETTER IN MY WORK AND TRY MY BEST” SKILLS

We are thankful to be able to learn new skills at work, such as making different drinks like green tea, chocolate, spice chai and timeless yuan yang at the café. We feel good to be able to learn new skills.

Outside of work, we would also like to do our best in other areas of our lives. One of us shared that, “I also try my best in school, like paying attention to teachers, not interrupting when teachers are talking, help others like if they cannot throw their plate and if they ask me for help, I will help them”.

At home, we all strive to be the best daughter or son we can be. For instance, it was shared that respecting parents is a way of being a good daughter – “I try not to be unhappy with them although sometimes I may feel that. I also respect my parents by trying to spend time with them, or doing some house work”.

HOW WE SHOW APPRECIATION TO OUR LOVED ONES

We feel thankful for the people in our lives who have supported us. At times, we may find it difficult to tell them directly that we really appreciate them, but we use actions to show our love. These are some of the ways that we show appreciation to others:



Helping out at home



Completing my school projects



Trying to do everything by ourselves



Being punctual for school or work



Getting our own jobs



Cleaning up after work



Having a meal with parents



Giving our full attention



Giving a hug

CONCLUDING CHAPTER

After reading the stories of these young persons, and the people who support them, we wonder whether you would be able to share your own reflections on this book, *Brave Young Hearts*.

1. What parts of this book connect with you? They can be the words being shared, the pictures in this book, or even any feelings that come to you when reading this book?
2. What does the book tell you about what the 5 young persons from CPAS value?
3. Why do these parts connect with you? How do they connect with your own life?
4. After reading this book, is there anything in your life that you would be committed to continue doing? Are there things that you have been inspired to do differently or do more of?
5. Write down your thoughts in the space below or please share them on CPAS Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/cpasingapore> 😊

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Heartfelt Gratitude

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Last but not least, to my family for supporting my endeavors and passion in life, and for always believing in me.

- Jia Hui

ABOUT CPAS PSYCHOLOGY DEPARTMENT

CPAS Psychology Department specialises in providing services that address pediatric needs. We take a developmental approach to behaviour management and intervention. We understand that every child is different and the unique needs of each child is taken into account during intervention. We specialise in educational, developmental and psycho-diagnostic assessments as well as providing psychotherapy for mood related needs. We provide highly specialised interventions such as ADHD, ASD group-based intervention. We believe that we should make treatment and intervention accessible and parent-friendly so that we can open possibilities in the child's life. Our psychologists bring experiences from different specialties and use a team approach in providing intervention for a child. We work with the child in settings where behavioural challenges occur, partnering teachers, parents and allied health professionals to give the child the support that they need.

"YOU CAN'T TEACH CHILDREN TO BEHAVE BETTER BY MAKING THEM FEEL WORSE.

WHEN CHILDREN FEEL BETTER, THEY BEHAVE BETTER"

- PAM LEO, CONNECTION PARENTING