

# Chapter 5

## **Life story books: Weaving together the strands**

**Renée Rossouw**

This chapter introduces a key aspect of counselling at Ons Plek: the girls' life story books. We discuss in broad terms the hands-on practice developed at Ons Plek in a professional residential care environment. For those who want to make a more detailed study of life story work, there is further literature available, largely related to the fields of foster care and adoption.

We are woven out of our own histories. As human beings we need to know our own life stories. How do we know what has happened in our lives, especially in our early childhood? Mostly the stories of our childhood are ones we have heard as they are remembered by our families and communities; but children who live in alternative care often find their place in the family and community disrupted. This in turn creates gaps and confusion in what they know about who they are, where they come from, what has happened to them.

In the early days at Ons Plek, I remember a childcare worker coming to me and saying that she was going dizzy trying to understand the family circumstances that a 13-year-old child was trying to explain to her. The three of us sat down together at the dining room table with a large piece of paper. The girl was intrigued by our efforts, and became very absorbed in the idea that her memories could make sense. Her story included erratic placements between four different foster families, some related to her and some not, and a biological father who never left his contact information but appeared out of the blue to drop off a gift every few months or years. She did not remember her biological mother. She had a history of running away from one foster family to another when things got tough. Eventually she landed in trouble with the law. She was placed in an industrial school, and absconded from there to the streets. Now she was starting this new journey at Ons Plek.

As the three of us were working away, the director, Pam Jackson, said, "You know, what you need is a whole life story book." This was my first introduction to the idea, which has become a cornerstone of much of our counselling work at Ons Plek.

Life story work has been around for a long time, especially in work with children in foster care. The Social Care Association in the United Kingdom describes a life story book as "a collection of information and memorabilia collected by and for a child or young person whose life has involved multiple placements and/or trauma, to enable the child or young person to make sense of their past."<sup>2</sup> In more recent times, work has been done with parents and children affected by HIV/AIDS to create memory boxes, a similar idea.

Many children in alternative care have experienced complex sets of circumstances including abuse, many moves or separations. They cannot always remember their early lives clearly, and sometimes the information they have been given is not accurate.

The life story book gives the children and their caregivers an opportunity to write about their strengths, including their gifts, survival skills, mastery of new skills and their capacity for growing and changing. In addition, the life story book can help the girl with issues of identity and help her build trust in adults. Many of the children have been separated from loved ones repeatedly. They are often anxious and confused about trust and contact with people, and try to protect themselves from further hurt in various ways. The life story book is an important springboard for resolving strong emotions linked to past events, useful in separating fact from fantasy, and a valuable source of information which can be followed up later in terms of tracing families. The positive aspects of a girl's family life can be celebrated, and the negative aspects recorded as part of her real life story.

Children experience "doing life story" as something positive that they can take pride in. While children and young people (like most of us) may well avoid sharing that we are going for counselling or therapy, they are often happy to share that they are working on their life story.

<sup>2</sup> Social Care Association. *Glossary of Terms*. [http://www.socialcaring.co.uk/glossary\\_l.asp](http://www.socialcaring.co.uk/glossary_l.asp) (Downloaded 24 August 2006.)

Life story work can be done with very young children, as well as with otherwise-abled young people. At Ons Plek the life story book has become a special treasure for the mentally challenged girls, for whom its concrete presence and constant reminders mean a great deal. The work must be done at an appropriate developmental level for each child.

### The day of the chase

Sinesipho, aged 6, stays at Siviwe, the second stage home in Woodstock. At first the Ons Plek staff were really impressed with her parents, who were apparent victims of mob justice. Their house had been destroyed after a conflict with neighbours and others in the community, so they lived on the streets for a while with their little daughter before concerned members of the public brought her to Ons Plek.

After a few weeks, the staff became familiar with another side of this seemingly sedate couple. When they were drunk, their insults to staff and their behaviour tested everyone's patience to the limit. At this stage they were living on the streets.

Because of their erratic behaviour, the staff negotiated guidelines for their visits to Sinesipho. They were encouraged to visit her at Siviwe. They could spend private time with her in a room by themselves, but they were not allowed to take her off the premises.

On a busy Thursday afternoon, while the girls at Siviwe were doing homework, and the childcare worker was supervising the cooking of supper, doing school laundry, greeting volunteers, answering the telephone, sending a child to the shop to buy tomatoes for the gravy, making an inventory of a donation of clothes, solving a misunderstanding between two girls which had ended up in copious weeping and mutual recriminations, and convincing a mentally challenged child not to eat chewing gum out of the dustbin, the parents slipped out with Sinesipho in tow.

The girls came running to the childcare worker, Lulekwa, calling "Aunty Aunty they have stolen her!" Characteristically, Lulekwa thought quickly on her feet. As she was about to phone the police, she noticed a police van parked at a house up the road. She ran towards the van, but there was no police officer in it. But she saw that the door of the house where it was parked, was open. She ran inside, expecting to find some police officers investigating a crime scene. Instead she found one policeman sitting on a couch in fond interaction with a woman who appeared to be his girlfriend. She explained that she needed his help to pursue two people who had just kidnapped a child from a children's home, against the magistrate's orders.

The policeman was gallant under the circumstances. He rushed out, but first had to clock in at the police station to get this chase authorised. The family was tracked down at a local park. The parents shouted abuse at the police and at Lulekwa. The confrontation quickly escalated into a grand spectacle with many onlookers. Finally the policeman had had enough; he explained to the parents that if they did not cooperate he would have to put them in the van so that the problem could be discussed in a more suitable venue.

Sinesipho was quiet and withdrawn when she got to her next life story counselling session...

## Sinesipho's story - continued

Sinesipho, usually a little chatterbox, does not want to talk about anything in life story time today. "It is boring to do life story," she says. "What did you do this week?" "It was a boring week, nothing happened," she reports.

I challenge her gently: "Was it a boring week because nothing happened, or a boring week because something happened?" Her little face clouds over. "Because something happened." "You look worried when you say something happened?" She nods, does not look at me, and fiddles with the box of crayons in front of her. "Do you maybe want to make a drawing of your worry?" I ask. She looks interested but unsure. "Like this," I explain. "This could be my picture of a worry (I make a grey squiggle on the page), this could be my picture of being angry (I scribble in bright red)." "Yes," she says, and immediately starts organising her paper and pens.

She becomes absorbed in drawing. She positions herself so that I can't easily see what she is drawing. I observe her quietly without trying to see what she is doing on the page. Usually a playful and easily distractible young person, she is concentrating fully on her drawing. Eventually she asks me to look at her pictures. She has drawn a few different little scenes on the page. There is a car, and next to it a little stick person clearly inert on his back. There is another scene with a car, this time one figure has a knife, one is bleeding, and a third one is running away. A third little sketch has somebody crying tears, next to a person lying on the ground.

"This is a sad worry," I say, beginning with the crying figure, and she says, "I am worried when my daddy is lying down drunk, and nobody can stop people from hurting him and hurting me. The girl is crying, she is scared and she can't help him." Pointing to the inert figure and the car, she says, "When you are a child next to the road a car can bump you. This boy was in the road and the car bumped him and they could not wake him up again. And here - this man stabbed my mother, and that is my father running away... Everybody is fighting." We gently explore these events, and as the conversation proceeds she shares more of what she remembers.

The conversation continues. Once she feels I have understood her pictures, and I feel she has integrated these memories into her life story work, I ask her in a tentative manner, "I wonder if you also felt worried when everybody was arguing in the park the other day?" She looks at me as if I am a little stupid, and says, "Yes, I was worried about my parents taking me to the streets, because I will be scared, like here," and she points at the pictures.



## Who can do life story work with young people?

Almost any caring adult can make a life story book with a child. Yet where children have been through multiple disruptions and trauma, working on a life story book inevitably raises painful issues. In that context it should be done by a trained professional who is skilled in counselling. The counsellor can also organise family and community members, colleagues and volunteers to help. A neighbour may, for instance, remember something about the child when she was younger, and there may be a friend or volunteer who will travel with the child to take photographs of her old school. Ons Plek childcare workers do home visits and family reunification work, and come back with beautiful narrative and photographic epics of their journeys with the children. In addition to being well trained in family interviewing, the additional requirement for a life story counsellor is knowing how to use the camera well.

Ideally, children write their own books. But sometimes their writing skills can simply not capture the many important details of something they want to include in their book. A counsellor who can touch-type at a good speed can negotiate with the child whether she would like help in writing up what she is talking about.

We usually discuss how important her memories are and that her life is really worth writing about. A simple device to avoid disrupting the contact between counsellor and child is for the counsellor to put the computer keyboard on her lap (which may require fitting a longer lead to the keyboard), and type unobtrusively while facing the child (and facing away from the computer screen) as she talks. It is best to type verbatim as she speaks, since this captures her own voice and way of understanding herself and her history. I do this, and then read the notes out loud to check with the girl whether we have captured everything the way she wants it. It is her story, and if she changes her mind about something she said, it gets changed on the computer. We then make it pretty and print it out. Young girls especially like decorating the page with colours or drawings. This helps each girl to incorporate the printed page as part of her own book.

LIFESTORY



## Ayanda

Ayanda is a bright little 9-year-old. "Do you just want to chat today or shall we work in your book?" I start tentatively, because it is important that the book work does not end up masking something urgent that the child really needs to talk about. Often we start by reading together and admiring the work she did in the book in the previous session. I ask, "Is there anything you specially want to do in your book today?" If she doesn't have any ideas, we get talking about the day at school, or the family visit over the weekend, and usually a theme emerges for drawing or writing about. Mostly, she comes up with enough ideas for ten life story sessions, and we have to choose one.

Today she decides on doing a drawing. She draws a beautiful house with her family sitting happily together celebrating her brother's birthday. At first she speaks as if this event happened once upon a time, but slowly she gets a bit sad and confides that it is really just a dream, and that she is really worried about her brother, aged 11, who has recently run away from home and started living on the streets. Before the end of the session we admire the drawing together, affirming that it is a beautiful and good dream to have. Then we read through our typed summary (see the description of this typing technique on the previous page) of the big news of the day as told in her own words: her brother is on the streets.

She would like to do something about this. We explore ideas together. Some we have to discard, like her going back to the streets to look for him. Finally she writes down her plan in her own writing: she will ask her childcare worker to make some phone calls to her mother's neighbour and to the Homestead (an organisation working with male street children), to see if there is any news of him.

Ayanda becomes very serious and quiet, and looks at her picture for a long time. We just sit quietly together, digesting the bad news and the beautiful dream. Then, with the renewed energy of the young, she jumps up, puts her things away and asks who she should call for the next session.



My Family

## From Lizile's book

We were happy in our village. My father had many cows. We went to school. We ate every day. Then my mother got diabetes and died. I was 12. Then the same year my father died in a work accident. He was on the mines in Johannesburg. The people said there would be money from his work. We went to this fund office but the people chased us away. This aunt Nothemba took us to Cape Town. Why did she take us to Cape Town? She never put us in school. We walked and walked until my sister found us a school in Wynberg. My aunt said she had nothing to do with going to school. We stayed in the township with her and we went to school in Wynberg. We left home every morning at 4.30 to walk to get to school on time. She would not give us food. She worked for people in Bishopscourt. She slept there Mondays to Fridays and ate at work. We would get very hungry. She would come with money and groceries on Friday night, and keep it all to take to her children on Saturday. We asked the neighbours for food, but when my aunt came from work they wanted their food back and my aunt said she never told them to give us food. Some of the people were sorry for us. One day we walked all the way to Cape Town, looking for something better. Then we found Ons Plek. My sister was already big, over 21, she left Ons Plek to get married. Now what happened, she had the baby and the baby died. And then she got so thin, and then I went to visit her in hospital. It did not look like her anymore. She could not walk. She only had bones, no meat. I could not help her. She had AIDS. Why did she not tell me?

Lizile's story was typed, since she herself could not write. But Linda, who is Xhosa-speaking, wanted to share her story with other people in the house, so she wrote it by herself in her best English. Here is an extract from her life story book.

## From Linda's book

I go to my home Friday and my home is have some work Friday to Sunday so I come to Siviwe Monday. We have the dinner for my auntie's daughter and I must help my granny we cooking and we clean the house and we make the tea for the lots of people and we going to fetch the two goats on Friday at 5 o' clock. It was be nice the whole weekend and the people say thank you to us and us say thank you to them and my granny she like to drink the tea and I must make the tea for my granny and we very busy and I am come back to Siviwe on Monday and my granny she say I must come back on next Friday and my auntie she give me the money for the ticket and for me to buy something.

Daphne wrote her book herself. Each paragraph takes up a whole page of writing in the actual life story book.

### From Daphne's book

**My mom** (she has pasted a photo of her mom on the page opposite):

This is a photo of my mom, her name is Hannah and I love her very much. My mom does not stay with me, because she is staying with another man. I really miss her a lot. I don't like the man my mom is staying with. Last Christmas my mom did not come home and I did not know where she was. My mom is making me very sad and angry. I still love my mom.

**My little brother** (she has drawn a picture of him):

His name is Simpiwe. He is six years old. He is a very naughty boy. We like shouting at each other. Simpiwe loves going to crèche. He has his own daddy, his daddy died when he was still a baby. He loves watching TV and when I am at home I teach him to write his name. He likes going to shopping with his mother. Soccer is his favourite game. He loves dogs and superman.

**My big brother** (she has a photo of a dashing young man on the page opposite): I love my brother Themba who loves playing soccer. He loved playing with me when I was a baby. My mother loved Themba very much. He is just as quiet as my daddy. My brother died a long time ago. They stabbed him. I miss Themba very much. He loved watching TV. He was a joking person who always made me laughed. Good bye my brother. I miss you very much Themba and I will never forget you. Love

**My third brother** (the photo is of a radiant young man with a bright sash denoting his position in his church):

His name is Moses. My brother likes to go to church and he don't like to be cross. He loves music. My brother loves watching TV. Moses loves my mother very much. He also wants my mother to come back home and if my mother does not come back home he gets very cross. My brother likes sport and he is playing rugby. I know that my brother loves me very much.

Daphne eventually left Ons Plek to live with her extended family.  
This is her life story about leaving her school when she moved up-country:

### Saying good bye to my school:

My favourite teacher was my class teacher. I don't like rude children in the school. I liked the principal. When we had sports I was running. I also had friends at the school and we used to play games during break. I like maths and I hate hand writing. The best thing for me at school was to meet kind friends. I won't go back to my school again next year, but I will miss my school very much. I hope that my friends will spread their wings and fly like the butterflies I choose for them on this page. Goodbye!

## Resources and ideas

Life story work can be done in a file or book. Most of the children I work with prefer a nice solid fat hardcover A4 book. Perhaps this is because they don't want anything about their 'life story' to shift any more than it already has. If they use the book, they will sometimes need a file or box as well to keep bits of memorabilia. It is also useful to have crayons, paints, brightly coloured paper, glitter and cheerful stickers.

One can make do with much less. A box decorated with magazine pictures or a handmade book of salvaged paper is fine, as long as the images and words can recall memories from which to remember and re-weave one's story. Use recycled material only if there is absolutely no other option. Children and young people in alternative care may already experience fragile self-esteem, and having to record their life story on what to them is 'rubbish' is not a good idea.

There are as many different ways of making one's life story book as there are people. Children have the capacity to be very inventive and social, and when a number of children in one place are all doing life story books, new ideas circulate fast.

The children may bring little objects from their childhood or home, a little leaf or stone, a ticket from an outing, a lock of hair, magazine pictures of their current heroines and heroes - a list to which we can keep adding.

Family and community members are often happy to share memories and family history. Childcare workers who spend time visiting and interviewing families play a key role in getting valuable information, facilitating communication between the child and her family members and observing important dynamics in the home environment.

When working in the book it is best to let the young person decide who he or she wants to write about first. For instance, when a relationship with parents is fraught with pain, he or she may first want to write about other people until it feels safe to include the tough things.

It is wonderful to have photos, and important to write the date, place and names of people in a photo on the back of the photo as soon as it is developed. If family members loan valuable old photos and items, it is very important to keep them safe and make copies for the children.

The book can be in chronological order, but what often happens is that the young person prefers to start with the things that are important here and now, or even with future dreams, before delving into the past. It is very important to write the date of each entry, and to indicate when the actual events happened. Once the overall picture becomes clearer, the young person may enjoy doing a year-by-year time-line at the back of the book so that they can keep adding to it.

## Letters

Letter-writing is very important. If the letters are actually given or sent, it is good to keep a copy in the book (depending on available resources it could be a photocopy, computer printout, carbon page or just the rough version). Letters can be to teachers, parents, caregivers. They can be for special occasions, to apologise when there has been a quarrel, to express feelings directly when somebody has let down the writer, and even to put on a grave to help process grief and loss.

### Matilda's letter

"Dear Mommy,

I am so sad that you did not come on Saturday. I also feel sad that you always drink with your friends. I am your only child now that my baby sister has died. I cry and worry for my little sister. Please do not forget me. I love you. You are a star."



Matilda gave her letter to her mother together with a pretty little bracelet she was keeping to put on her sister's grave. Her mother was shocked at how deeply her 8-year-old child feels and thinks. The letter helped them grieve together, a sad but healing moment for both of them. Although her mother still drinks, the copy of the letter in her life story book helps the child to remember that healing moment with her mother.

**"When I gave my mommy this letter she cried, and I also cried.  
We miss our little baby."**

### Where to keep a life story book

The life story book is often a custodian of many ambivalent feelings and events. It is very important to keep it locked in a safe place where other children cannot lay eyes on it. Some of the younger girls like to make additional little albums or show books to carry around with them, and some teenagers may also want to keep an entirely private diary.

Children often want to share their books with others, such as project staff, school teachers, peers and family members. The child and the counsellor need to arrange the conditions of the book's outing carefully so as to make sure that it comes back unharmed, having been shared appropriately.

There is so much more to say about this work. One girl wrote "The End" in her book, when her counsellor at that time left. Recently she went to show her school teacher her book, and was excited to show that her life story book didn't end there, it still goes on. The same is true of learning about our work, and the many creative ways in which we can enrich our work in the lives of children, young people, and ultimately also our own lives. The story goes on.

