# Unravelling Trauma and Weaving resilience with Systemic and Narrative Therapy. Playful collaborations with Children, Families and their Networks: by Sabine Vermeire.

**Reviewed by Suzy MacKechnie**

I am reviewing this book from the position of a white, 51-year-old, English woman, parent, clinical psychologist and family therapist, trainer and supervisor with a strong commitment to narrative practice and values, working with children and families within public services.

We set off with a vivid and engaging introductory chapter, meeting three of the authors ‘many teachers’- David, Yana and Esma, their stories brought to life with transcripts, which immediately demonstrate the commitment to bring ‘the voices of children, their experiences and stories to the foreground’. We hear more of the author’s hopes- that we can fill our ‘backpacks’ from a rich systemic and narrative traditions, and find an inspiration of ‘multicoloured mosaic of travel routes’ which might be ‘meandering, zig-zaggy and back-and-forth’ with ‘transformation happening over time rather than overnight.’ I felt in the company of an experienced traveller who would guide the reader ‘to find their own courage’ and ‘make choices on the spot whilst immersed in here and now of the embodied dialogues.’ I immediately felt newly invigorated to notice and resist the pressure for manuals or ‘quick fixes’ within stretched public services, that can so easily pathologize and demoralise children, families and workers.

Chapter 1 explores the ‘web of complexities’ arising from ‘voices’ in the child’s family and network when adverse life experiences are present. Hazards for the worker, of stepping into ‘the urge to act’, or being tempted into ‘unhelpful dances’ that reproduce oppression, or falling into ‘single view points’ are carefully mapped out. This is a meticulous guide to often un-noticed discourses within child development, attachment, socialisation and trauma theories and medical/psychiatric, judicial and educational contexts. It invites us to spot these ‘voices’ as they pop up and nudge us off our preferred therapeutic position. Aspects of theory that avoid individualising suffering or ‘singular or frozen stories of causation or identity,’ such as Vygotsky’s emphasis on child’s agency in developmental psychology, and Crittenden’s notions of ‘attachment’ as a characteristic of a context, are given space in the author’s backpack. Nothing is left unexamined, and the thoughtful consideration all positions/voices gave me a renewed sense of the importance of humility and finding common ground in multi-disciplinary and multi-agency work.

Chapter 2 defines a ‘collaborative therapeutic journey’ and chapter 3 outlines ideas for first meetings. Systemic and narrative theory and research on resilience/wellbeing that support collaboration are explored and key concepts introduced -i.e., how a sense of agency, belonging and coherence, can support ‘a life worth living’ despite trauma and adversity. The examples show how painstaking attention is paid to establishing ‘safe grounds’ for young people and ‘to not repeat something that has already been done’. Playfulness paves the way for ‘joining children’s activities and local practices’ and harnessing their creativity and imagination in tackling problems in and out of the therapy room. Difficult experiences are gently acknowledged and honoured by negotiating a name, externalising them via drawings, sculpts, objects and clay models. Conversational safety is negotiated via a ‘red card’ and where problems are metaphorically put into a box, cupboard or corner. Young people’s voices are continually prioritised over institutional norms, for example, Rinske’s story of maintaining connections in a context of profound loss, is elicited and honoured in a carefully structured interview, witnessed by other professionals and family members (in place of a usual problem focussed ‘intake’ or assessment process). This moving story is ‘nestled’ in my heart as a light to shine on and question habits of agencies and institutions that can alienate young people and families.

Chapter 4 introduces the potent image of ‘tentacles’ to explore how trauma and adversity can become ‘individualised and decontextualised,’ for example, when young people are overwhelmed by painful emotions or bodily reactions, engage in self-harm, are caught in ‘solidified meanings of worthlessness’ or gripped by shame and guilt. Unhelpful effects, such as hopelessness, silence and temptation for workers/carers to ‘correct’ children’s ‘behaviour’ are outlined. By unpicking the social and political context of the ‘tentacles’ and using ‘double listening’ to notice the child’s agency and ‘keeping going’ skills, many creative, child-friendly ideas to loosen them emerge. I was quite spellbound reading how 11-year-old Iris directs her own powerful and moving puppet show of trauma and resistance, and then as ‘quizmaster’ of the carefully orchestrated audience, hears a re-telling of her skills in a ‘context of acknowledgement.’ For me, the scaffolding of performances of the child’s voice, built moment by moment through sensitive questions was a beautiful and vivid illustration of a ‘decentred but influential’ therapist position.

Chapters 5 addresses ‘relational complexity’ and ways to tackle difficulties in a collective rather than individualising way. A key concept, ‘relational agency,’ meaning a sense that people still matter and can meaningfully contribute to each other, is brought to life. For example, a family session is initially dominated by a ‘list of complaints’ about the child but moves towards curiosity and hope as they refocus on ‘shared concerns/common ground and questions about family history. The young person is positioned as researcher and interviewer to discover the ‘polyphony’ of other’s similar experiences, creating a ‘community of solidarity’ and a sense of belonging. Chapter 6 goes on to address complexities that arise when children have experienced harm within their families. Practical and visual ways to articulate these situations are demonstrated, such as sculpting figures or objects to ‘put family constellations on the table’ and using Russian dolls, to explore contradictory and mixed feelings. I was drawn to the therapist’s skilful balanced tight-rope walk between ensuring ‘accountability’ for harm and ‘contextualising’ often hidden social issues that contributed to it. This careful balancing act seemed to allow everyone to matter and enabled ‘small actions’ of repair and re-connection.

In chapter 7, engagement with parents and carers is addressed and some common ‘social instructions’ that ‘sit heavily on the shoulders of parents and carers’ are outlined with compassion and rigour (such as expectations for them to be educators or instruments of healing). The therapeutic position is clear, ‘the problem is the problem not the parent,’ with refusal to ‘put them on examination table’ or ‘advise.’ Instead, parent’s and carer’s cherished values and beliefs, that have been ‘put under pressure’ by contexts of disadvantage are explored and attention is paid to ‘moments where what they do matters.’ This unrelenting search for ways parents/carers ‘matter,’ for me was a strong and brightly coloured thread woven throughout the book. It seemed to honour children’s ability to hold onto love for parents in the most challenging situations, and I thought could weave children, families, carers, communities and workers closer together in preventing burn out and placement breakdown.

The final chapter- ‘laying down a path in walking’ explores visual, practical techniques for constructing more ‘coherent stories of young people’s history, lives, families, relationships and values’ and more ‘liveable pathways’ to travel beyond the therapy. Outcome is conceived as an ‘never ending process of becoming’ in continuous dialogues with networks and society. Timelines are drawn out and beads are gathered and sometimes strung together to represent treasured moments and skills uncovered in the work. Life review interviews, and performances are carefully created within networks of acknowledgement. Making stories ‘public’ for example, via a theatre play, a documentary and rap all create opportunities for on-going experiences of agency, belonging and coherence. This ‘social action’ also hopes to create ‘ripples in the stubborn beliefs of societies and communities’ about young people and families caught in adversity.

Overall, I feel this book has narrative practice and ethics at its heart, with openness and appreciation for multiple ideas and theories that connect with narrative. I felt within its pages, both a sense of coming home and being taken somewhere new, as the author walks us through the ups and downs of her uniquely playful, creative and rigorous work. Those less familiar with narrative therapy will encounter multiple accessible, captivating and moving examples of practice that create hope and dignity in the most complex of circumstances. This seems a precious gift from the author and families whose stories are included, to the community of professionals who work with children and families. I hope it will nurture and encourage many workers in navigating the hazards and joys of the work and weave together a stronger, more resilient professional community.