**Rewriting Family Stories During Successful Transition From an Alternative School: One Student's Story of “Violent Female” to “Phenomenal Woman”.**

**Images**

 

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**Abstract:**

The case described in this article reflects a young woman's story of her personal struggle to stay in school and to participate in her family. Experiences of the student, reflecting serious personal and family problems, were limiting her ability to attend school and creating educational barriers. As a result, she was assigned to the alternative school where she re-scripted her story to make sense and give meaning to the assignment and her own identity and worth. Through interviews, family meetings, personal writings, poetry, and literature, she created a portfolio of school work, letters, and poems that told her story, past and present. With the help of the school social worker using the process of questioning in the narrative approach, the student was able to rewrite her story of violence and abuse and transform it into school and personal success. A year later, she found herself reflected in the mirror of Maya Angelou's poem “Phenomenal Woman.” [ABSTRACT FROM AUTHOR]

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The case described in this article reflects a young woman's story of her personal struggle to stay in school and to participate in her family. Experiences of the student, reflecting serious personal and family problems, were limiting her ability to attend school and creating educational barriers. As a result, she was assigned to the alternative school where she re-scripted her story to make sense and give meaning to the assignment and her own identity and worth. Through interviews, family meetings, personal writings, poetry, and literature, she created a portfolio of school work, letters, and poems that told her story, past and present. With the help of the school social worker using the process of questioning in the narrative approach, the student was able to rewrite her story of violence and abuse and transform it into school and personal success. A year later, she found herself reflected in the mirror of Maya Angelou's poem "Phenomenal Woman."

Keywords: student strengths; re-storying; alternative schools; Female violence

[**Introduction**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Students were assigned to an alternative school for disciplinary reasons and to receive intensive educational and social services. These assignments were made as the result of a due process hearing by the disciplinary hearings officer for one of four assignments of fewer than 45, 90, or 180 school days. Between 100 and 200 students were assigned to the alternative school each year. Figure 1 shows how the transition process incorporated a four-step process: assessment, intervention development, exit, and follow-up ([ [4](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#bib4)]). During this process, the student, his or her family, and the school social worker discuss issues that resulted in the assignment to the alternative school in the referral letter, identified educational strengths and barriers, and developed a program of study to address both strengths and needs.

The school system was concerned primarily with educational outcomes such as academic achievement, absences, and school dropout whereas the students and families experienced unexpected dividends. Re-scripting individual and family stories changed student and family perceptions about themselves, which in turn changed how others perceived them. This assumption guided the design of data collection instruments, the choice of analysis procedures, and the interpretation and presentation of results. Another assumption that framed this approach was that perspectives and meanings are individual, relative and actively constructed by the participants ([ [7](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#bib7)]). The traditional-home schools and families interpreted the students' educational needs differently. These differences built barriers to students' educational success. The transition process was designed to slow down the alternative school experiences to facilitate a common understanding of the students' needs and to develop collaborative plans to meet those needs.

Graph: FIGURE 1 Family—School—Community Collaboration Model (FSCC) for the Delivery of School—Based Mental Health Services in an Alternative School

This article unfolds a typical, though remarkable, case study to examine the process of school transition in an alternative school program for chronically disruptive students. For most students and their families, the assignment to the alternative school was the first (and sometimes only) opportunity to tell a family story that has been, in most cases, written for them by the school system, juvenile court, and community agencies. Assignment to the alternative school allowed them to rewrite their stories with the school social worker using the constructionist approach. The re-scripting of the family stories gave meaning to students and revealed changes in attitude, behavior, grades, attendance, and participation. The purposes of this article are to describe a typical student who experienced a successful assignment and transition from an alternative school, to identify how the school social worker used the constructivist approach to help the student identify student and family strengths to maximize educational potential, and to provide a guide for social work practice when using this approach.

[**SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND PRACTICE**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Social construction views human behavior as an analogy of a story that the person is creating and telling about what he/she is doing and how the events and experiences are organized into a complete story.

Persons make sense out of events and experiences in their lives by connecting them to some personal narrative account. Human behavior and relationships are viewed as organized efforts to create meaning out of personal experiences. Persons organize and give meaning to their experience through the storying of experience, and (that) in the performance of these stories they express selected aspects of their lived experience ... it is these stories that are constructive—shaping lives and relationships. ([16])

The constructivist form links the past, present, and future; it links their involvement toward or away from goals ([ [5](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#bib5)]).

The fundamental assumption in the social constructionist approach is that all reality is constructed or created by the participants rather than being objective or external. All constructed meanings have value. No one's beliefs or values are more "real" than another's. Everyone participates in editing, revising, and sustaining the stories of meaning that they share. Family functioning is dependent upon coherent and integrated patterns of meanings common to all members. Each family generation transmits themes through telling stories about other family members. This story-telling socialized the children into themes and interpretations of experiences ([ [6](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#bib6)]). Conflicts and inconsistencies develop when family members have divergent themes and realities are not controlled externally. Participants must observe their own patterns and may permit outsiders (particularly social workers) to offer observations and reflections. Ultimately, it is only within the power of the participant to alter his or her themes and actions. Family issues result from the conflict of shared family meanings with traditional school and community mores and call for reconstruction of those meanings ([10]).

[**FRAMEWORK FOR PRACTICE**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Using Michael White's 1989 model of narrative therapy, the school social worker attempts to assist the student into making sense of experience by applying this framework in three steps: ( [1](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#bib1)) Develop the dominant story, ( [2](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#bib2)) discuss problem formation, and ( [3](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#bib3)) begin problem resolution. First, the school social worker listens to what the student believes the current story about the alternative school is. What incident has led to the assignment to the alternative school? How are these beliefs different from how the school and/or juvenile court define the *story* about him- or herself and his or her relationships?

Second, in addition to questions, written instruments, metaphor, and portfolio development, the school social worker and student examine systems of beliefs that compose the family's dominant story and the vicious cycles that prohibit change to begin *problem formation*. Third, *problem resolution* can begin once the problem has been externalized. Then the student and social worker can begin developing an alternative story by examining the exceptions to the dominant length of assignment to the alternative school and into follow-up services.

[**CASE STUDY**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Although the facts were accurate, the client's name has been fictionalized to protect her identity. Octavia "Tavie" Stone was a 16-year-old junior at a local high school in a moderately sized college town in the southeast. She was assigned to the alternative school as a result of being found guilty of what the disciplinary hearing officer called "assault and battery" at a due process hearing. In juvenile court, she was accused of what the police report called "punching" a police officer and "pushing" and "slapping" a teacher during the last month of school of her sophomore year.

[ [8](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#bib8)] outlined alternative ideas about how therapists can join with women survivors of childhood sexual abuse to enable them to break through the subjugation of the damaging, oppressive stories they have about themselves so that they may begin to rewrite empowering stories that honor their resilience and survival. The school social worker applied these techniques to both the students who were assigned to the alternative school and to their families, to explore the pathologizing stories that the school and community had imposed on these students analogous to the problematic cultural stories of the sexual abuse survivor. Just as in Kamler's example (p. 11), "the act of helping clients to understand the meaning of repressed conflicts is said to produce change." Therefore, the social worker began with the student's own perception of the reason for the student's referral to the alternative school. The following story was one example revealed at the intake interview.

*It was the last week of school. My mom came home ... she was high on crack cocaine around 8:00 [pm]. I was in the shower when she came home. I heard somebody screaming. It sounded like my sister. I guess she did not cook the rice long enough. I came out to check it [the noise] out. My mamma was hitting on my sister [14 years old]. Sister was covered in blood on the couch. There was blood everywhere, red everywhere. I could hardly look. I tried to break it up but I couldn't. Nothing could stop her [the mother]. I just couldn't stand to see my sister like that. I didn't know if she as alive or dead so I had to do something. I hit 911. The cops came and arrested my mama [for child abuse and possession of cocaine]. The ambulance took my sister to the hospital. The manager of the public housing project said we had to get out cause mama had cocaine and that broke rules at public housing. I didn't know what to do so I cleaned up. It took me most of the night. I went to bed for a few minutes. The next day I got up like usual and wore my green skirt and a t-shirt with my green bows in my hair and went to school. Third period some teacher got smart with me and I didn't feel like putting up with no stuff. I got so mad when she grabbed me I guess I forgot myself. The police officer came. All I could see was the blood last night and the police taking away mama. I just "nutted up." They said I hit the police officer. They [the school officials] sent me to alternative school. So I'm here*.

[**Assessment**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Typically, the school has a one-dimensional view of a student. For a student exhibiting behavior problems, the school often is concerned with stopping the disruption so that the classroom is safe and the learning environment is accessible to the majority of the students. The alternative school social worker conducted a multidimensional assessment to better understand the student's behavior within the student's context. Data sources included intake and exit interviews, individual and family therapy sessions, observations, written instruments (self-esteem, depression, locus of control, temperament sorter, artifacts), school work, poetry, essays, school files, juvenile court records, special education records, medical records, and the portfolio: letter of application, résumé, student inventory groups work ([ [2](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#bib2)]; [ [9](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#bib9)]; [11]; [13]; [15]).

During the intake interview, the student's multiple stories were examined using assessments, interviews, reports, letters, and phone calls and external sources such as the traditional-home school, the courts, community agencies, and family members. Tavie had high self-esteem although she reported symptoms of depression. She was able to take responsibility for her choices and actions and showed few signs of impulsivity. Tavie enjoyed school and learning, particularly subjects with practical application. She exhibited signs of leadership, self-determination, intense drive, and loyalty. Tavie also exemplified characteristics of a child of abusive and addictive families such as caretaking, parentification, problem solving, seemingly defiant, little respect for authority or rules, misplaced loyalty, and violent survival techniques.

Her careful attention to detail, obvious in her complicated hair braids and skillful makeup, and her poised, soft-spoken manner contradicted the reports from the school, juvenile court, and community agencies. The school reported that she could be "violent, out of control with little or no regard for authority once she is set off." Likewise, juvenile court found her guilty of assault and battery. She was referred to mental health for "being crazy" and "nutting up" according to her Aunt Annette. Her family called her a "snitch" for calling 911 when her mother was beating her younger sister. The Department of Family and Children services declared Tavie "homeless" when her grandmother "kicked her out" for calling 911. In many ways, although unknown to Tavie at this time, Tavie's school situation paralleled her home life. The school had rejected her just as some members of her family had rejected her.

[**Alternative School Intervention**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Assignment to the alternative school offered the opportunity to lay the foundation for change through intervention development and delivery of social services. A marriage and family therapist and a social worker provided many services onsite. The alternative school offered 14 social services including intake/assessment, group work, individual counseling, family meetings, family-teacher conferences, family therapy, phone conferences, staffing, referrals, assessments, evaluations, exit interviews, transition meetings, and home visits. Social services were calculated monthly by number of hours. Typically, students averaged 50 hours of social services during a 45-day assignment to the alternative school. As shown in Table 1, Tavie received 61 hours of social services, with the majority falling into the following categories: 16 in group work, 15 in individual counseling, and 12 in referral to agencies external to the school system (juvenile court, mental health, Department of Family and Children Services; see Table 1).

TABLE 1 Student Social Services Hours at the Alternative School

| Social services | Month | Total hours |
| --- | --- | --- |
| August | September | October |
| Intake | 1 | — | — | 1 |
| Group | — | 10 | 6 | 16 |
| Individual counseling | — | 12 | 3 | 15 |
| Family meetings | 1 | — | — | 1 |
| Family-teacher conferences | — | — | 1 | 1 |
| Phone conferences | — | 6 | — | 6 |
| Family therapy | 1 | — | 1 | 2 |
| Staffings | 1 | — | — | 1 |
| Referrals | — | 12 | — | 12 |
| Assessment | 1 | — | — | 1 |
| Evaluation | 1 | — | — | 1 |
| Exit interview | — | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Transition meeting | — | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Home visits | — | 1 | — | 1 |
| Total by month | 6 | 43 | 13 | 62 |

Each student has a unique story that often does not reflect the same story that the school system or the family knows. Often the stories conflict with each other; however, central to the student's changing behavior was the understanding of the meaning of such stories. The process of therapy used in the treatment of sexual abuse that facilitated the re-authoring of lives and relationships paralleled the therapeutic relationship between the social worker and the students at the alternative school ([12]). The framework used at the alternative school in individual counseling was White's 1989 narrative approach. It assumes that "persons organize and give meaning to their experiences through the storying of an experience, and [that] in the performance of these stories they express selected aspects of their lived experience ... it is these stories that are constitutive—shaping lives and relationships" ([16], p. 20).

[**Sessions 1–5: Identify dominant story**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

During the intake interview, Tavie and her aunt identified a recurring problem, the dominant problem, as Tavie's "nutting up" at school and at home. Tavie defined herself as the others had: "I'm just a thug ... it was all my fault ... I'm the one with all the problems. I'm the bad one." Offering an alternative story, her aunt, Annette, described Tavie's "problem" as

her behavior ... I think that Octavia is a very great person. She just needs to control her temper towards others. She just 'nuts up.' That's it—she goes off. But she is a great person who loves school and values her education. Her best quality is how she speaks out.

Social Worker (SW): What purpose does your "nutting up" serve in your family?

Tavie (T): People don't care about me. They won't listen to me. I have to shout so somebody can hear me.

SW: Can you remember a time when "nutting up" has worked for you?

T: It saved my sister's life when I had to go crazy to get mama way from sister so I could call 911. It was real hard cause nobody wanted to help me. I had to be strong for myself.

SW: Can you tell me about a time when you could have used it to get people to listen but you didn't have to or chose not to?

T: When I was in the Miss Black Teenager Pageant. I was the first runner-up and got a prize for it. I was scared at first but I did it. And people thought that I was pretty and smart and talented. It was great being on that stage with people clapping.

SW: So being good and strong paid off for you in this case, didn't it?

T: Yeah. I had forgotten that. It was like I was a different person. I mean I was the same person. I mean I was the same person but it was different. People looked at me different.

[**Sessions 6–12: Problem formation**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Individual counseling sessions and family therapy focused on identifying strengths and resources to discuss problem formation and explore problem resolution in order to re-story future life events. In this example, the social worker collaborated with the family to draw on previous strengths and positive trends in the family to reform and empower new realities to the current problem ([14]). The session was conducted on a home visit with Tavie's grandmother, Ms. Daniels, to discuss Tavie's educational program. Tavie requested to sign out of special education and to change her diploma from college preparatory to vocational. Ms. Daniels was able to participate in rewriting the dominant story by identifying family strengths and themes.

Ms. Daniels (MD): I don't know what's wrong with that stupid girl, always getting' into trouble, always "nuttin' up." Nobody ever comes calling except to tell me all the bad things she's done. So what's she done this time?

SW: Nothing, Ms. Daniels. I have come to let you know about the progress she's been making and to ask you to sign some papers about her educational program of study.

Tavie: I want to get out of special ed. I'm not retarded. I don't belong with those retarded boys. I want to get a vocational diploma so I can do hair at my own shop. You know I can do hair.

MD: That's all you want to do.

SW: She wants to get an education so that she can get paid to do it. I know you must be proud of Tavie doing so well and having solid goals. She is representing your family so well at school. She's been working hard on her behavior and making a lot of adjustments. Where in the family does she get her drive?

MD: She gets that from me. And good looks run in our family. Our women have always been good looking and we get things done. We're the ones who do what needs to be done.

Ms. Daniels reinstated Tavie in the family (if not physically, emotionally). When Ms. Daniels reviewed her hopes for her family and some positive characteristics about the family, she was better able to accept Tavie's attempts to change her behavior. The identification of family strengths also reinforced her belief that the family was "okay."

[**Sessions 11–15: Problem resolution**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Tavie's mother's trial was a painful reminder of living with the drug and alcohol problems and violence in their family. A reluctant witness, Tavie desperately wanted to be loyal to her family. Even so, she was able to continue rewriting her family stories:

SW: How can you be strong and loyal to your family without "nutting up?"

Tavie: When I testified, I told them I just couldn't stand it [the beating] any more. You know she's not like this when she's not high. That crack makes her crazy. I love my mother, I really do. But I don't know how much more I can take. It doesn't have to be this way. If I get my own place, I can just leave when it gets rough. I love my family but I am different than they are. The same with the alternative school. I'm different than these other kids. I don't really belong here. It's helped me, but I want something better for myself.

[**Follow-up**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Tavie had several opportunities to make choices that reflected her desires to be the kind of person that she had discovered through the process at the alternative school. At the transition meeting with administrators from the traditional-home school, Tavie presented the portfolio of her work at the alternative school. She concluded by saying, "This is my story. I'm not perfect, but I am human. I'll work hard and give it my best. I have a lot to give to this school."

One month later, the principle, Mr. Jones, bumped into Tavie at the homecoming dance outside the gym. He said she was dressed like a fashion model, but she was obviously upset. When he asked her what happened, she told him that she got mad at her boyfriend and rather than "sinking to his level to fight with him, I walked away. I just left. I didn't have to stay in there. I just came out to get some air to cool off. Nobody can make me fight. And I'm not going to let him make me mad and make a scene and embarrass myself. I'm better than that. I'm smarter than that." The principle called to let the staff to know how she put into practice what she had learned at the alternative school.

Approximately a year later, Tavie was elected to do a dramatic oration before the student body for African-American Awareness Week. Tavie had been nominated for the oration by the Mr. Jones, who was impressed with her portfolio presentation. Tavie chose a poem that expressed "her own identity." Before she began, Tavie announced to the school "this poem is me." She received a standing ovation. The powerful words of Maya Angelou's 1993 poem reflected the empowered echoes of her own voice on her journey to re-story her own life during her assignment at the alternative school and her subsequent return to her traditional-home school.

**Phenomenal Woman**

Pretty women wonder where my secret lies.

I'm not cute or built to suit a fashion model's size

But when I start to tell them,

They think I'm telling lies.

I say,

It's in the reach of my arms,

The span of my hips,

The stride of my step,

The curl of my lips.

I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

I walk into a room

Just as cool as you please,

And to a man,

The fellows stand or

Fall down on their knees.

Then they swarm around me,

A hive of honey bees.

I say,

It's the fire in my eyes,

And the flash of my teeth,

The swing in my waist,

And the joy in my feet.

I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

Men themselves have wondered

What they see in me.

They try so much

But they can't touch

My inner mystery.

When I try to show them

They say they still can't see.

I say,

It's in the arch of my back,

The sun of my smile,

The ride of my breasts,

The grace of my style.

I'm a woman Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

Now you understand

Just why my head's not bowed.

I don't shout or jump about

Or have to talk real loud.

When you see me passing

It ought to make you proud.

I say,

It's in the click of my heels,

The bend of my hair,

the palm of my hand,

The need of my care,

'Cause I'm a woman

Phenomenally.

Phenomenal woman,

That's me.

*Maya Angelou*

**Echoes of Her Voice**

"I am just a thug. ...

It was all my fault ...

I'm the one with all the problems."

"I'm the bad one."

"People thought I was pretty and

smart and talented. It was great to be out on stage with

people clapping."

"People looked at me different."

"It was real hard 'cause nobody

wanted to help me. I had to be

strong for myself."

"It's [the portfolio] the best thing

I've ever done for myself. I didn't

really know who I was until I did

this."

"I've been through a lot and made

a lot of changes. I have learned about

myself and about my anger. I have

feelings, I don't know where they

come from, not good or bad but

just there. I still get mad but I'm not

going to hurt anybody. I want you to

notice that I'm different and I want you to

treat me different. A person

deserves respect until they mess up.

And I'm not plannin' on messin' up."

"I want my mother to see how I've

changed. I want her to be as proud

of me as I am."

"I'm not going to let him make me

mad and make a scene and embarrass

myself. I'm better than that. I'm

smarter than that.

"This is my story. I'm not perfect,

but I am human."

"This poem is me."

*Tavie Stone*

[**OUTCOMES OF INTERVENTION**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

[**Individual**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Tavie was a young woman struggling to stay in school in spite of her disruptive, violent behaviors. By identifying her academic strengths and barriers, she was better prepared to establish realistic goals for herself and to begin to separate herself as a person from the abusive, substance-abusing cycle of her family. Her primary accomplishment while at the alternative school was, in her own words, "learning to be myself and respect myself and take care of myself."

[**Assignment**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Tavie worked to stabilize herself and refocus her academic goals while at the alternative school. She attended school regularly at the alternative school and completed her assignments. As a result, her grades improved during her assignment (pre-assignment grade point average = 74; alternative school assignment grade point average = 90). Tavie changed the type of diploma that she was seeking (from college preparatory to vocational) based on her identification and recognition of her post-graduation goals to own and operate a beauty shop. She worked with the special education staff to develop a plan to "earn her way out of" special education to maximize the number of academic classes she took every day.

She also learned to set limits with her family, her friends, and the school teachers and administrators without victimizing others or compromising her personal goals. In addition to improvement in her interpersonal and communication skills, Tavie's self-esteem remained high, and her symptoms of depression lifted. Her locus of control became more internal. During her assignment to the alternative school, she was able to reformulate her goals, both psychosocial and academic.

[**Post-assignment**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Tavie continued her self-discipline and hard work. She maintained a "B" average (grade point average = 82) for the remainder of the year. When she reentered the traditional-home school, Tavie was able to articulate her changes when she said,

I've been through a lot of changes. I have learned about myself and about my anger. I have feelings, sometimes I don't know where they come from, not good or bad but just there. I still get mad but I'm not going to hurt anybody. I want you to notice that I am different and I want you to treat me different. A person deserves respect until they mess up. And I'm not plannin' on messin' up.

At the school dance, Tavie had an opportunity to put her new philosophy to work when she and her date had an argument. She chose to use her new skills.

[**Follow-up**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Approximately 180 days later, Tavie was still in school and had maintained a 74 grade point average. In recognition of her contributions to her school as a leader and a role model, Tavie was selected by the principal to do a dramatic oration before the student body during an assembly celebrating Black History Month. Tavie chose Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman," the poem that expressed as she put it "my own identity." Tavie had been able to change her life story through her awareness and personal choices.

[**Family**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

[**Assignment**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

During most of the 45-day assignment, Tavie's mother was in jail, and Tavie was preparing to testify against her mother. Tavie's grandmother was informally granted guardianship temporarily because Tavie was technically homeless. However, the strain of the trial and mounting stress eventually gave way so that Tavie was moved in with her cousin Sydney. The family experienced a point of decompensation when family members divided their loyalties between Tavie or her mother. Parallel to this division of loyalty, the family and the school were also in conflict. In valuing the family members' positions and by informing the traditional-home school, the school social worker was able to assist Tavie in bridging communication gaps within the family and with the school. Though the underlying theme of violence and abuse was woven throughout the story, two family members, her cousin Sydney and her aunt Annette, showed another path. They valued education, as evidenced by their high school diplomas and attendance at a local technical school. Each had a "good" job. They had emotional ties to the family but maintained strict physical distance. Tavie admired the alternatives that Sydney and Annette represented to her own story of entrapment and oppression.

Annette admired Tavie's best quality as "the way she speaks out. Not everybody appreciates that but I think it's great." Although she did not judge the way Tavie handled her mother's situation, she observed that "it takes a strong person to try to work things out. Octavia's stuck with this school thing. She's handled it all by herself. It takes a big person to admit you're wrong and try to do better." Annette gave Tavie support to change her story by serving as a role model and by accompanying her to the alternative school. The alternative school process gave Tavie the opportunity to slow down the crises in her family long enough to contemplate problems in her life story and reflect on rewriting those stories to change her future.

[**Post-assignment**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Tavie invited her mother to the transition meeting because she wanted her mother to be a part of her return to her traditional-home school. Tavie revealed the importance of her mother's presence by announcing, "I wanted my mother to see how I've changed. I wanted her to be as proud of me as I am." About the completion of her portfolio, she said "It's [the portfolio] the best thing I've ever done for myself. I didn't know who I was until I did this." Although the reunion with her mother was not permanent because her mother returned to a rehabilitation center by court order, they did stay in close communication. Tavie returned to living with Sydney and maintained limited contact with her extended family (sisters, father, maternal grandmother, uncles, and aunts).

[**Follow-up**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Tavie applied for and was granted independent living guardianship so that she could continue the physical distance from her family and choose her family participation. Following Sydney's and Annette's examples as role models, Tavie was particularly concerned with the welfare of her two younger sisters. She did not want to isolate herself from them and wanted to as she put it "look out for them and help them whenever I can."

[**School**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

[**Assignment**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

The traditional-home school knew Octavia only as an honor student, a model, a track star, a basketball player, and Miss Black Teenager. The school had no knowledge that Tavie's mother had been arrested the night before for beating up her sister. Nor did the school know she was "technically homeless" because her grandmother (her temporary legal guardian) had refused to allow her back into the home. Nor did the school know that Tavie's mother had been sent to jail for 30 days to await her trial at which she was expected to testify. After this incident, the student became violent at school according to the school officials who said her behavior was "out of the blue." As a result, charges in juvenile court where filed and, after her due process hearing, she was assigned to the alternative school to receive intensive social services for 45 days instead of expulsion or long-term suspension.

[**Post-assignment**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

The information from the assessment, exit interviews, and portfolio was discussed at the transition meeting with the traditional-home school administrators. As a result, the traditional-home school staff were better able to support the continuation of community services by working with probation officers and mental health workers and to the student as a person.

[**Follow-up**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

The school began to recognize Tavie's complex, difficult home life, her struggles, and her resiliency by allowing her to be on sports teams and by promoting her as a leader and a role model.

[**Community**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

[**Assignment**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

The Department of Family and Children Services (DFCS), juvenile court, social security, and mental health were all involved with the student during her assignment.

[**Post-assignment**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

After her assignment to the alternative school, DFCS allowed Tavie to move in with her cousin Sydney. She continued mental health counseling to aid the adjustment to traditional-home school. A social security case worker closed her case once the questions regarding placement and payment were resolved. Three months after her assignment, Tavie completed her time on probation without additional problems.

[**Follow-up**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

One year later, Tavie was completing her senior year, employed, and living independently from her family. Although she was familiar with community agencies, Tavie used them only when, as she told it, she "really needed them."

[**IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**](https://web-b-ebscohost-com.ezp.waldenulibrary.org/ehost/detail/detail?vid=0&sid=fd7933b9-34d0-4455-a3dc-a3fca1c6bec8%40pdc-v-sessmgr01&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZSZzY29wZT1zaXRl#toc)

Even though individual stories vary depending on specific characteristics, this story represents the change process that all students assigned to the alternative school experience. This case study describes the process of rewriting personal stories that one student assigned to an alternative school experienced. There were several observations that are unique to this case. First, the individual characteristics of the student contributed to her success. Tavie was resilient. Though she experienced depression and an occasional "blue mood," she remained optimistic and determined. She is a survivor of the most precious kind. Tavie is capable of great empathy, particularly for those she loves, her mother and sister. Her unwillingness to blame others, thus taking more responsibility than a child should, can be self-destructive and may contribute to her depression. Some of her strengths can be harmful if not balanced.

Tavie is above average in intellectual ability. This may be the reason why intellectualizing, reading, and analyzing are coping skills and defenses for her. Her intuition and insight are highly refined, allowing her to analyze and intellectualize easily. In addition, her intellect explains how she was able to "find herself" in poetry. Another important attribute is her determination. She is also a natural athlete and an eager student. Tavie has good control over her mind and body even though "nutting up" serves as an important purpose for her in attracting attention and distracting from painful issues. For her intensive intervention plan, Tavie was motivated to identify her problems and correct them quickly during her 45-day assignment. Echoes of her own voice were mirrored in the Angelou poem as she rewrote her story of "violent female" to "phenomenal woman" as a result of her assignment to the alternative school.

White's narrative approach helped the student make sense of the experience and to ultimately rewrite individual and family stories to prevent school dropout. Although this student had multi-systemic, multi-faceted problems, the alternative school provided the location, services, and means to deliver intensive social services to maximize educational potential. The social worker played an integral role as consultant, confidante, networker, counselor, advisor, and advocate to the student and his or her family during the assignment to the alternative school. Using social constructionist theory and White's narrative approach, the social worker assisted the student and her family in identifying the dominant story, discussing problem formation, exploring problem resolution, and rewriting family stories to be successful in school.

School social workers should use this process of self-examination and reflection to create meaning in life experience to intervene in traditional schools. This process is ideal for crisis intervention where school social workers serve as the communication liaison among the school, family, and community agencies. School social workers bridge communication, cultural, and systemic gaps for involved parties. Moreover, the school social worker has a global vantage point to understand the whole student as a complex human being and to interpret this view among the families, schools, and community agencies. School social workers should assist the school and agencies to recognize students' complex psychosocial and education barriers and needs and to facilitate effective changes in students' behaviors and, ultimately, in educational potential. In helping students communicate their feelings and needs, social workers are the vital ink for complex, problem-saturated students to be heard in a system that, at times, can hear only one voice at a time.

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