Chapter One

FROM DISEMPOWERMENT TO SELF-BELIEF

A Center of Hope for Vulnerable Youth in Cape Town

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In 2012, the courts sent two twelve-year-old boys, Bulelani and Liam, for protection to the last remaining education-managed youth care and education center (YCEC) in Cape Town, South Africa (SA). This chapter shares their stories of five years at the residential male state institution, where they both were enabled to heal dramatically from abusive and neglectful backgrounds. At the YCEC the boys developed self-belief—a trust in their own abilities—thanks to restorative care practices. One such practice is the "circle of courage" (Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Van Brokern 2002), which provides a behavioral support pathway toward belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity. These qualities were fostered by the boys' faith and effort, culminating in positive outcomes (Pickhardt 2013).

Restorative care practices are increasingly recognized for their effectiveness in building strength and self-confidence in children and adolescents, encouraging them to become motivated and to develop life goals. As an emerging social science, these practices focus on restoring and building relationships between individuals by encouraging the expression of feelings, as well as strengthening community social connections (International Institute for Restorative Practices 2016). The systemic use of informal restorative practices creates a positive milieu, an environment described by Wachtel (2013) as fostering responsibility, awareness, and empathy, rather than relying on punishment and sanctions. Initially focused on delinquents and

at-risk adolescents, this practice area has broadened and developed scholarship, research, graduate education programs, and professional development courses for families and communities. Restorative justice, providing tertiary prevention after a harm has occurred, is related to this emerging modality.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood is a key period for the nurturing of a sense of self and an identity (Erikson 1980), and both Bulelani and Liam were at this sensitive developmental stage when they were helped to overcome violent and addictive elements in their lives. Growing up in a rural village, Bulelani described his new self-belief as "wak[ing] up my mind." Liam, who was from the violent gangland of the Cape Flats, also found a belief in himself: "God helps me and you must also help yourself." Along their paths, both boys encountered difficulties, but they experienced the benefits of care through personal connection, encouragement, love, and respect not only from staff and teachers but also from their peers. This care helped them overcome the distrust they had in their own abilities, which was fostered by the disempowering core beliefs of their traumatic childhoods. They learned to have faith in themselves, to remain committed, to persevere and try hard, and to focus on their futures.

Analysis of the narratives of adolescents is a process that not only reveals the past but also considers the future (Cohler 1982). In examining adolescents' life stories, professionals are challenged in conducting social research to go beyond the typical structure of a research paper: the problem statement, literature review, method, results, and discussion (Witkin 2000). They are encouraged to explore social and cultural contexts to describe the implications of meaningful life experiences and to present coherent outputs. And so I integrated the powerful experience of working with vulnerable youths, while collaboratively making sense of narratives within their specific contexts. In this collaborative process of meaning-making, I was caught up in a hermeneutic circle.[1] I listened to Bulelani and Liam interpret their lives, trying to make sense of their stories as a researcher, transforming them into a study received, applied, and interpreted by you, the reader. At times I added the voices of others to provide new perspectives; the exploration of the transformation of the boys' disempowering core beliefs, for example, was triangulated by interpretations of YCEC 's educational psychologist.

MY RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

My research in high-risk schools in the Cape Flats as I pursued my master's (Johnson 2010; Johnson and Naidoo 2013, 2017b) and doctoral degrees (Johnson 2013, 2015; Johnson and Naidoo 2017a) measured the efficacy of interventions to prevent teacher stress and burnout. Educators were struggling with violent, disruptive learner behaviors and children suffering from HIV/AIDS. During three years of participatory action research (PAR) with YCEC teachers and staff, a dated punitive discipline approach was replaced by contextually appropriate restorative care practices (see figure 1.1; Johnson 2019, in review).

I was both a consultant and participant researcher at the center. For the seventy to eighty boys (aged eleven to eighteen) housed in hostels there, I was a mother figure; for the forty teachers and staff (aged twenty to seventy), I was a peer. The YCEC, formerly classified as "colored," is now multiracial: a melting pot of cultures, traditions, religions, races, and ages. Conscious of power dynamics, I tried to model humility and compassion by recognizing the strengths and abilities of others, while being acutely aware that my whiteness reflected an abusive racist history.

FIGURE 1.1 Prison-like security at a Cape Flats School, Cape Town.

I came to know Bulelani and Liam as they turned eighteen and were about to leave their institutional home. Bulelani was a rural Xhosa from the Eastern Cape, a handsome, charismatic, well-built youth. Liam seemed more vulnerable; tall and slender, he was of Dutch and African descent, bilingual in English and Afrikaans, and came from the urban Cape Flats. Narrative perspectives give an intimate view of the participant's world, and perhaps the ideal setting for Bulelani's interview would have been sitting around a fire under the African stars, in the heart of a rural village. For Liam, it would have been the vibrant sprawling suburb of the District Six urban setting, where colored communities used to live in close proximity to the city center before being removed by harsh separate development legislation. This land is still largely unoccupied, a barren testament to inhumane past policies. Now, in postapartheid SA, both had found a safe space at YCEC.

After obtaining multilevel ethical approvals, I proceeded to conduct individual interviews with both young men. Each in turn settled confidently next to me on the lumpy, bizarrely bright orange and red couch in the therapeutic center's quiet counseling room. It was a darkened intimate space; there was only one small window covered by a flimsy curtain flapping in the breeze. Both were willingly engaged and reflective throughout, speaking fluently with little interruption.

The interview had three focus areas: The first was: "What brought you to the center?"; The second was: " What care have you received?"; and the third was: "What are your future goals?" Within these topics various questions were asked to encourage further insights or clarify points. They first solemnly described their difficult experiences before coming to YCEC, philosophically acknowledging their remarkable achievements at the center and reflecting on their mentors and surrogate parents, as well as difficult relationships and struggles. Finally, they contemplated life ahead as independent young adults. I met them several times, checking and rechecking their narratives, trying to ensure that the text accurately reflected their life stories. Knowledge is greatly shaped by changing sociocultural and historical factors (Schiff 2017): their narratives helped contextualize their experiences and gave shared meaning to the care practices that prepared them for independent living after adverse childhood experiences.

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THE CONTEXT OF CHILDHOOD IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa is burdened by increasing violence and abuse against children (Optimus Study SA Technical 2016). Every year between 18,000 and 20,000 child sexual abuse cases are reported to the police; statistics from 2013/2014 reveal 18,524 cases: that is 51 incidents reported daily. One in three children have had some experience of sexual abuse, persistent over the lifetime and present in their daily lives. Boys and girls are equally vulnerable to sexual abuse. By the time they are fifteen years old, many children have suffered sexual, physical, or emotional abuse; neglect; and high levels of family and community violence.

The communities surrounding the YCEC have suffered a long history of colonial and racist exploitation that culminated in apartheid, a pernicious political system that entrenched white minority privilege. Sixty percent of all gang activity in the country occurs in Cape Flats, with its community members turning to crime and drug trafficking in the face of high unemployment and poverty (Plato 2012). An inhumane past and violent present provide a challenging context for children, who continue to suffer from the effects of intergenerational trauma and suffering.

In the 1970s, vulnerable children became heroes by marching for their human rights, demanding an equitable education. The June 16, 1976, uprising in Soweto—when students protested against the enforcement of the Bantu Education Act, which mandated learning Afrikaans in schools—changed the political landscape. The uprising's terrible toll was 69 children killed and 186 wounded, marking a turning point in apartheid resistance. This event is commemorated each year as a public holiday, Youth Day. Although SA has experienced more than two decades of democracy, racial tensions still run high: the black majority still suffers from historical injustices, with children being especially vulnerable.

Child care for abused and neglected children is currently provided in community foster homes, child and youth care centers, and temporary shelters; these children are also incarcerated in secure care centers alongside juvenile offenders (Bosman-Sadie and Corrie 2010). The phased-out YCEC model of care and education had its origins in colonial industrial schools and reform schools for juvenile offenders. As late as the mid-1990s, YCEC staff described discipline at the center as coming from the "dark ages" and being enforced by corporal punishment, with the children housed in

detention cells and lockup facilities. The transformation of the care system began postapartheid around 1996, following the release from prison of more than one thousand children; many were transferred to unprepared places with inadequate facilities, exacerbating weaknesses in the residential care system and creating a national crisis. The system continued to improve, with the Children's Act of 2005 being implemented in 2010, when provision was made for alternate forms of care. Youth care facilities were transferred from the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) to the Department of Social Development (DSD) (Johnson, in press b), and the service delivery model changed to conform more to international best practices and regulations. As YCEC's educational psychologist explained, "In 2009 staff were trained in the 'circle of courage' to shift the mind, but I realized that we also needed to shift the heart."

INTERNATIONAL RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

Since 1994, all SA laws addressing child care have been governed by local and international conventions. Along with 196 other countries, but excluding the United States, SA ratified an international human rights treaty, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), that sets out the economic, social, health, civil, political, and cultural rights of children (United Nations Children's Fund 1989). Providing global ethical guidelines for child care, this convention considers developmental issues, but has been criticized for not including children's voices: it gives adults the responsibility to make child care decisions(McNamee 2016).

The South African Children's Act (38 of 2005) consolidates and reforms the law on matters related to children. Although a Bill of Rights is enshrined in SA's Constitution, its implementation at the community level is often inadequate. For example, children in SA have the right to be raised by their own parents in their own culture and with a relationship to both parents, but this right was not available to Bulelani and Liam. In addition, although the law states that no child should be deprived of liberty unlawfully or arbitrarily, current lockup facilities in SA for behaviorally challenged vulnerable children may be in violation. In gradually moving from punishment to care since democracy in 1994, a new ethos of care began to emerge at YCEC, which can suggest a way forward for youth care throughout the country.

ETHOS OF CARE

The "circle of courage" ethos of care originated from research with Native Americans (Brendtro et al. 2002). This theoretical circle has four quadrants—belonging, mastery, independence, and generosity—which are part of a pathway to healing. These universal values are believed to develop resilience and self-worth. The YCEC manages violent and disruptive behavior through a focus on children as symptom carriers of family and community intergenerational trauma. A YCEC educational psychologist explained,

> Our youth need to feel close to someone. They need to feel proud of something, like school achievement, athletic skill, peer acceptance, and good behavior. They need adults to be present, attentive, attuned, and responsive in their interactions. In short, youth at the extreme end of behavioral breakdown have survived social ills and need a place to recover. Young people who find themselves at the end of suspension and expulsion, despite intensive proactive and preventative interventions, need specialized care to enable them to access a school curriculum responding to their needs. We propose a behavior support pathway of multiple practices.

This pathway to healing includes elements such as narrative meaning-making, outdoor activities, substance abuse education, animal therapy, and goal setting. Within the PAR self-care research program, teachers were assisted to normalize the boys' behaviors. They came to understand that these youths are survivors, which means that the boys, in fact, were adapting to their traumatic contexts with appropriate responses: anxiety, hyperalertness, emotional volatility, and physical agitation (Courtois 2009). Both Bulelani and Liam benefited from this pathway of support, which helped them recover from their traumatic childhoods.

BULELANI AND LIAM: EXPERIENCES OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Liam survived on the streets among drug merchants in a community that grew, as a result of apartheid-forced removals, on barren, sandy tracts of land far from the city. Gangsterism soon took root in his life. He shared,

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> I grew up in a gangster family. I traveled from place to place as my parents did not care about me. They let me sleep on the streets. My mother, Samantha, was two months pregnant with me [when] my father died—he was a "26" gang leader, shot in the back. . . . When I was about two years old, I was in an accident. That guy did pay the money out [but] my mother didn't tell me about it. I found out . . . six years afterwards how she was using my money for drugs—almost like a merchant—to make her own money. When I was three years old I stayed with my grandmother, Charmaine. . . . She was going out with Matthew, a Rasta guy, and so I had to stay with him [with] my sister. But he didn't treat us like he treated his own child. He was . . . a merchant selling marijuana. He forced us out at 12 at night, walking 10–20 km to buy marijuana because he wanted to sell it. We didn't want to go because it was too dangerous—we could get killed. He hit us every time. . . . So I ran away. . . . I went to stay with Sandra, [who was] like a grandmother to me. . . . One day my mother came to me and tell me I must stay with Charmaine. And I said: "Why must I stay with them? They treat me like a dog and never bring me food. If you give me money they take it off to buy drugs, to smuggle it to other people. Look at me. I am thin. I have to go from door-to-door to ask for food. Sometimes people say they don't have and I accept it.

While Liam's life of neglect and poverty reveals the breakdown of societal structures that should protect its most vulnerable members, Bulelani's village life was initially peaceful. He had a supportive mother, but was separated from her when she moved with his stepfather to Cape Town to seek employment. His grandmother then cared for him and his younger siblings. He had to travel long distances to school, and this created the circumstances that made it possible for tragedy to strike:

> My mother and stepfather looked after us until I was six, when they left to work in Cape Town to support us better. . . . I went to a Xhosa/English school with two friends of seven and nine. Transport fetched us and brought us home. One day a guy called us. I thought it was our transport. They had a gun and wanted to shoot us. They kidnapped and raped two of us and afterwards we walked home. Every time they saw us they would threaten to shoot us, threatening us all the time: "Don't tell." I felt scared and wee'd [sic] in my bed, even during the day. I tried to protect myself and fought with anyone who was a big person; I had anger. The . . . threats happened for a year. My grandmother could see I was sick

> and asked why I was getting home so late, but I said I was cleaning the class. She got diabetes, and became blind and after that my aunty looked after me in East London, while my brother and sister moved to Cape Town to be with my mother. My aunty looked for a school for me. I was eight. The teacher saw that I was not working, would do my own drawings and I liked to fight a lot—I had quick anger.

Bulelani's aunt was a social worker and sought help for him. After staying in various institutions, including a lockup facility where his anger and violent behavior increased, he was sent to the YCEC. There he met Liam, and together they found an environment where they could begin to heal from abuse and neglect by developing faith in themselves.

Bulelani and Liam's narratives reveal the impact of abuse and neglect at interpersonal, familial, and societal levels in a country torn apart by colonial and apartheid policies. They were exposed to domestic and community violence, crime, substance abuse, unemployment, little to no family support, poverty, homelessness, and illiteracy.

GROWING FAITH: "I BELIEVE I CAN"

A belief in one's capacity is the foundation of self-confidence (Pickhardt 2013). In African psychology, faith in oneself is not only personal but also communal—*ubuntu*—and spiritual, drawing on a relationship with God. Ubuntu, an African Nguni word, focuses on the relational and inclusive nature of "being" (Nwoye 2006): "I am because we are" (Mbiti 1970). It calls on us to mirror our humanity for each other and to base our individual self-belief on a sense of ubuntu. Although originally cared for by neighbors, Liam found it hard to develop faith, being largely alienated from his family and surrounded by a violent community. Bulelani shared in the communal ubuntu spirit in the village, but his experiences of sexual abuse and violence shattered his faith in the community and in himself.

Both Liam and Bulelani bonded with peers and were cared for by teachers and staff in relational ubuntu at YCEC. Bulelani explained, "Here they don't *toyi-toyi* [a traditional dance for group cohesion], but they don't put you down. Also, Mr. M supports me. . . . I needed gym shoes—he bought them for me and supported me. I didn't ask; he just saw." One-on-one relationships with adults allowed the boys to develop personal and community

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faith, supported by relational bonds with peers. Ties with family members were strengthened at gatherings like sports and family days, which kept boys connected to their community structures. Ultimately, personal and communal faith strengthened their faith in God. Effort followed faith, as the boys were encouraged to find interests and hobbies.

EFFORT: "I WILL KEEP TRYING"

Adolescents need encouragement to keep trying, especially when their efforts do not yield immediate results (Pickhardt 2013). Encouragement, whose importance was first recognized by the humanist psychologist Alfred Adler (1956), is an act of interpersonal communication, a character strength, and an ecological group norm (Wong 2015). At YCEC, encouragement is reinforced both formally and informally. It is integrated into a variety of group activities, highlighted as a character strength in personal recognition and academic efforts, and is an integral part of interpersonal communication between boys and adults. While a few staff who continued with negative attitudes had an impact, Bulelani and Liam were mostly encouraged to confront and overcome disempowering beliefs that caused them to lack confidence in themselves. For example, Liam was told by a misguided teacher that he would amount to nothing; he would end up pushing a trolley in the garbage dump. He challenged this statement, questioning this belief and praying to God that this would not be the case.

At the center, Liam experienced the love and care of a family for the first time. Enjoying simple pleasures gave him a feeling of richness. He felt like he belonged, as he connected with the teachers, his counselor, and peers. He also developed an interest in cooking. With support, adversity made him stronger. He gained a generosity of spirit, reaching out to others, and resisting drugs. He explained,

> What I can tell you about this place is that it's wonderful. It's almost like, how can I say, you grow up in a rich family. You get everything you want. If you want to go to the beach, they take you to the beach, and on weekends you have a braai [barbeque], and [on] Sunday you have a decent plate [of food]. You go to school here. Sometimes the boys don't want to go into class, but the Sirs [teachers] encourage them to go in. Sometimes they go into class, but they don't want to write and Sir says, "Do your work; there is a benefit for you outside." Like

Nelson Mandela said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

Liam also felt love and care:

The Sirs are like fathers and teachers like mothers. My mother has five children and lives with a Black man. He doesn't know about me. She has gone to jail for trying to sell drugs overseas. Sometimes the female teachers make you feel like they are your mother—it makes me tearful, but I don't want to talk about it. They show they love you. . . . I never had a father before. If people come into your life they will never be a father, but Mr. B. [his counselor] is like a real father. This is home.

However, it took time for Liam to build these relationships:

When I came to this school, I did not listen to the Sirs. They talked to me, talked to me: "You must change your life." One Sir cursed me: "You will become nothing, you will push a trolley and scratch in the bins, you will never succeed, you will never achieve these goals." It hurt my heart. Why do you say these things to me? You talk about my background; you say I will never succeed in life. Most of the people make me believe that you can become something in life. Get on your knees and pray that you will become something. Sometimes the people encourage me to do things in a positive way; then I do it. Others say: "No, don't do it, don't give [your] full cooperation." Some boys who smoke marijuana don't give their full cooperation. They run away.

The center also gave Bulelani a sense of worth, and he felt loved and cared for. He developed a special bond with the manager, Mr. M., who offered support during difficult times. They would sit for hours in comfortable chairs in his office, always with a bountiful bowl of fruit, seemingly limitless cups of fresh coffee, and a rescue cat curled up in the chair, giving a sense of safety and peace. Bulelani developed mastery in sports and karate, and woodworking gave him independent skills. His new confidence helped him excel and cope with challenges like controlling his anger outbursts. His generosity of spirit inspired newcomers as he became a role model:

I am an open person and talk to the other boys and I hear the teachers' stories. I start to help myself to listen and to work on issues. The stories make me feel

proud of myself, not to feel down. I also have faith in God, who brought me here to the center to be right. First, I was the stupid boy. I brought myself down. Now I hear boys say if you say something, your tongue is powerful. I would tell myself I am stupid, but now I believe in myself and can work and have a family and a big house. . . . I speak a lot to Mr. M.—I told him everything; what I want to do. . . . He is like my father. . . . I must take things in two [both] hands; otherwise I am not right on top [pointing to his head]. A lot of things I have learnt for outside [are] what I have learnt here. They are my family. They took me as a child. I did not know them, and they did not know me; they took me in, helping me.

Even negative experiences encouraged Bulelani to try harder:

Not all teachers were positive; [some] put me down. I went to Mr. M. [He said] you need someone to push you down to learn. Outside it will be difficult. Be glad when you are told you will not come right; it will make me stronger and stronger. . . . I got a lot of support; they started to believe in me, although I did not believe in myself. [It] started to wake up my mind.

By excelling in sports, Bulelani was able to develop a positive identity. Learning karate, after focusing on kickboxing, taught him respect:

If I started to fight, I ran to the gym. . . . I punched and punched [the bags] and I helped myself, with the anger leaving my mind. [Last year] I joined karate . . . which has a lot of rules and respect and I started to see the difference. . . . I am proud of myself. . . . Karate teaches you to be calm.

While Bulelani benefited from his physical strength and talent, learning important qualities like respect, pride, and calmness, Liam found encouragement from the sense of family that he developed at the center. In the process, they were both able to develop skills to enable them to achieve positive outcomes in the future.

OUTCOME: "I WILL AFFIRM MY APPROACH DEPENDING ON RESULTS"

According to Pickhardt (2013), an adolescent's ability to cope with disappointment and failure depends on how well he or she is able to apply faith

and effort. Faith is the foundation for self-confidence; effort in turn powers self-belief. Outcomes, unlike faith and effort, are not at a person's command and depend on trust (Pickhardt 2013). At the center, the ability to see the positive outcomes of negative experiences is a key factor in building self-belief. Liam, for example, struggled with overcoming substance abuse and addiction in order to realize his dream of becoming a chef:

> I want to do something with my life. . . . This place is like the future. What you ask them for, they give to you. It was very slow, very hard for me to change my life. My friends would come, and it was like the devil was playing with my mind. I am finished with drugs—tik [methamphetamine] and mandrax [methaqualone] for a year and a half. [For] five months I have finished with dagga [marijuana], and two months ago I stopped sniffing glue [Steelbon/Genkem]. The Sirs talk to me and encourage me and say: "Don't do that, don't do that." I see boys smoking and I want to join them, but something is pulling me back.

Faith and effort can translate into many different beliefs, actions, and outcomes, as demonstrated by Bulelani's and Liam's responses to their experiences at the center. Both boys developed self-belief as they formed a positive identity and discovered their talents. Liam shared his thoughts: "God helps me and you must also help yourself. . . . I don't want to become a drug addict. My dream is to be a chef on a cruise ship." Bulelani also had dreams: "I am leaving next month . . . to live with my family. I would love to open my own karate dojo gym—I am a yellow belt. Karate places are very far [from community facilities]. [My family] told me they will support me."

LEARNING FROM LIAM AND BULELANI

These narratives give glimpses into the multiple ways that a restorative care ethos in state care can positively affect vulnerable youths. I was deeply touched by my encounters with Liam and Bulelani. They willingly shared the tragedies and triumphs of their lives, reflecting eloquently and insightfully on poignant experiences. We talked often about the meaning of their lives—the importance of God and the power of stories, sharing, connection, and freedom. Despite all their difficulties, they were aware of their triumphs and understood that they were not failures.

With children worldwide so often failed by inadequate institutional parenting and then leaving care (McNamee 2016), let us consider what makes the YCEC's powerful restorative care model so effective. It takes only one positive role model to turn the life of a child around (Goleman and Lantieri 2008; Ray 2007), and the teacher/carer is well placed to be this change agent (Van der Heijden et al. 2015). Similarly, it takes only one restorative care center to turn a youth's life around (Johnson 2019, in press a). This study suggests that institutional care—based on strengthening connections, encouragement, love, and respect along the behavioral support pathway—*can* indeed transform the disempowering core beliefs of adolescents such as Bulelani and Liam.

YCEC's institutional pathway of behavior support relies on restorative care. Staff and teachers enable this transformation in youths by forming caring attachments. This care can take many forms. It can be a coffee break in the manager's office when emotionally volatile boys are invited for a chat, or responding to a boy's needs—like providing a pair of shoes—without him having to ask. With the development of self-belief through restorative care,

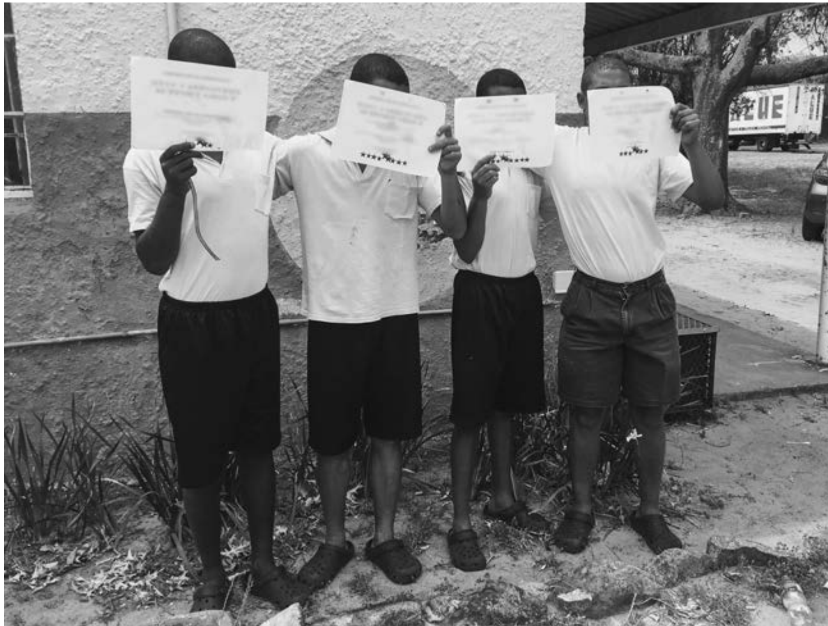

FIGURE 1.2 Youth with peace certificates, standing outside the YCC's therapeutic hostel.

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adolescents become active agents in their own social worlds, confidently building on elements of faith, effort, and positive outcomes and remaining flexible and open in the face of unexpected opportunities (figure 1.2).

Despite threatened closure and change from an education-managed WCED center to a DSD care facility, the YCEC remains a high-level support institution for behaviorally challenged children, including those who have suffered abuse and neglect. Liam has returned to his community to seek work in local restaurants; perhaps one day he will realize his dream of becoming a chef on a cruise ship. Although Bulelani was offered a free facility to start a karate center, he is training to be a chef with an international hotel group. Mr. M., the mentor and manager, was hit by a car and has recuperated from serious injuries. Everyone at the center prayed for his full recovery.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Describe the conditions that culminated in negative circumstances for Bulelani in his African village and for Liam in the Cape Flats.
2. Elaborate on some of the practices at the youth care center that helped both boys in change in different ways.
3. What were the processes that helped them move from disempowerment to self-belief?

NOTES

1. Brian Schiff (2017) suggests three aspects to the interpretive action, with movement going back and forth between who, where, and when in order to begin an argument for why. Text and context mutually produce one another, with psychological phenomena understood as personal and social processes.

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