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"Hope is that fiery feeling": Using Poetry as Data to Explore the Meanings of Hope for Young People

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Abstract: Poetic inquiry is a contentious area of qualitative research. In this article, we discuss some of the issues plaguing this field of inquiry. We then analyse a collection of poems about hope written by a sample of young people from Tasmania, Australia. The poems were written as part of the 2011 *Tree of Hope* project, which utilised multiple, arts-based methods to provide insights into what young people hope for in the future and the role of hope in their lives. Participants utilised one of three poetic structures. While each structure produced distinct themes, a connection between "hope and happiness" overlapped the two structured types of poetry—the acrostic and sense poetry. However, when writing free verse poetry, the expression of additional dimensions of hope, including the flipside of both having hope and losing hope was evident. We conclude that hope is particularly important to young people and that inviting participant-voiced poetry is an effective technique for investigating conceptual topics such as young people and hope.

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1. Introduction

While the experience of youth is often presented as being "the time of our lives" as a time of fun and freedom from responsibility and concerns about the future consequences of actions, the reality is that the experience of youth is diverse. Increasing numbers of young people experience anxiety and depression (McCANN, LUBMAN & CLARK, 2012) and are concerned about social and environmental problems (HICKS, 1996a; OJALA, 2007, 2011). While it remains largely taken for granted that young people have hope, we know very little about young people and hope; about the meanings they attribute to having hope, the role of hope in their lives, or the specific nature of their hopes for the future. This dearth also in part reflects the fact that "hope" is an abstract concept and an emotion which is difficult to define unambiguously and therefore to research (NILSEN, 1999). The 2011 *Tree of Hope* project (a follow-up of the 2006 *Tree of Hope* project, see discussion below) responded to the need to address this. [1]

The main aim of the project was to gain an in-depth, holistic understanding of the nature and role of hope in young people's lives. Specifically, we aimed first, to provide participants with an opportunity to publically express and document their hopes for their future; second, to explore the ways in which young people conceptualise and give meaning to hope, and third to examine the role that hope can play in young people's lives. Our research employed multiple methods, combining both traditional techniques such as focus groups, with arts-based methods such as body sculpting and poetry writing. In this article we first provide a background to the study of hope and young people. We then discuss the ways that poetry has been used in research, before presenting our use of poetry in the project. [2]

2. Background: What Do We Know About Young People's Hopes?

Rarely is research conducted into young people's hopes *per se*. More often, "transitions" from school to work (see TE RIELE, 2004 for a critique) are the focus as young people are questioned about their preferred futures (ECKERSLEY, 1999; HICKS, 1996b), primarily, their career plans (e.g., SENIOR & CHENHALL, 2012; THREADGOLD, 2012). Some of this research finds a correlation between social factors such as socio-economic status and gender and the types of aspirations young people hold (e.g. ANDERSON et al., 2005; PATTERSON & FORBES, 2012). Where young people's hopes are examined, another variable is frequently included: fear and/or worry (e.g., HICKS, 1996a). Here, it is often concluded that many young people, including children, are fearful and pessimistic about the future (ECKERSLEY, 1997; GIDLEY, 1998). In particular, they are worried about environmental risks and destruction (ECKERSLEY, 1999; HICKS & BORD, 2001; HICKS & HOLDEN, 2007; OJALA, 2006, 2007, 2011; TUCCI, MITCHELL & GODDARD, 2007). [3]

By taking an explicit focus on hope, our previous research (WILLIS, CRAFT, VOGT & WEST, 2006) found that young people do have positive and hopeful understandings of their personal future and the future of the world. While they

discuss global issues such as the environment, war and poverty, many have hope in, and believe that we will find, various (often technological) solutions to these problems in the future. [4]

Hope—or confidence and optimism about a positive future unfolding— also has a clear relationship with mental health, well-being and quality of life (BLAND, RENOUF & TULLGREN, 2009; ELLIOT, MULRONEY & O'NEIL, 2000; SWINTON, 2009). Hopeful thinking is an important factor in the development of a positive and secure sense of self-identity and can be a source of motivation and determination (SYNDER, RAND & SIGMON, 2001). Having hope facilitates people's agency, enhancing their self-belief and their ability to trust in the various life decisions they must make. Hope may indeed function as an antidote to the anxiety and melancholy that can be generated through the current "risk society" (see BECK, 1992, 1999). What is needed is a better understanding of the meanings that young people attribute to hope, the affective dimensions of hope, and how optimism and hope shape young people's view of the future. The poems discussed below enabled an innovative entry point into these affective dimensions. [5]

3. The *Tree of Hope* Projects

The two *Tree of Hope* projects (the first in 2006 and the second in 2011) have provided students with the opportunity to think about hope and to document their hopes for the future. In 2006 we asked primary school children to write down their hopes for the future on a paper leaf template, which they also decorated. Over 1,000 children in primary schools in the local region participated in the project. The project was informed by strengths based approaches which focus on young people's skills, assets and knowledges, not on deficits (see SALEEBY, 1996; SHARRY, 2004). Their contributions were publically exhibited, published in a book (WILLIS et al., 2006) and disseminated on a website. [6]

In 2011 we conducted a follow-up project. The aims of this project were twofold, first, to reconnect with initial participants to see whether and how their hopes for the future may have changed. Second, to move beyond examining the content of young people's hopes, to investigate the emotions and meanings that young people associate with hope, and to uncover the importance they place in having hope. To achieve this more holistic understanding of the role of hope in young people's lives, a qualitative (and again strengths based) approach was required. To encourage young people to think deeply about hope and to tap into their emotions we utilised multiple, arts-based activities to engage them (see LEAVY, 2009). [7]

3.1 Sample and recruitment

In the 2011 project we aimed to recruit a sample comprised of young people who had been involved in the 2006 project conducted five years earlier (now either completing primary school or in high school) but did not exclude new participants at those schools who wished to participate. We attempted to ensure that the

sample was diverse in terms of age, gender, and that there was socio-economic diversity between the schools, but as we were limited to self-selection by those who had participated in the original project, this sample can best be described as a convenience sample (PATTON, 2002). To recruit participants we liaised with both the primary schools where they had been attending previously and with local high schools. A total of 171 young people (105 girls, 66 boys), aged between 11 and 16 participated. Primary school participants (Grades 5 and 6) took part within their whole class groupings. High school students (Grades 7-11) attended 1-2 hour workshops. The number of participants in the workshops ranged from 2 to 16. [8]

3.2 Data collection

The aim within the workshops was to utilise a range of creative means to assist the participants to express their ideas about hope. Methodologically, and using a strengths based perspective, we wanted to develop strategies that would engage young people and produce data that reflected their thoughts and feelings. In doing so we drew on work by ECKERSLEY, CAHILL, WIERENGA and WYN (2007) who used workshop activities and drama techniques to explore young people's perceptions about the future. Similarly, LEAVY (2009) points to the ways in which multiple, arts-based activities can be used to engage young people, and encourage deep thinking about a topic. While limited to written expression in the primary schools, in the workshops conducted with high school students, we selected strategies based on different types of expression (writing, talking, body sculptures). Doing so meant that we ensured that the workshops were inclusive of all abilities, and that participants had choices about the activities in which they participated. [9]

Thus, the workshops differed between primary and high schools, primarily due to the large group setting and timetabling constraints within the various schools. The workshops held with the primary school students (three classes in one school and one class in the other school) were task-based and involved three key activities. First, we instigated a group discussion about what a hope for the future might look like (it might relate to themselves, their families, their local communities and/or beyond). Second, participants were given a paper leaf template and invited to express their hopes through writing, drawing and/or decoration. Third, they were asked to complete the sentence: "I think hope is important because ...", on a separate piece of paper. In the second primary school, students also had time to write poems about hope. [10]

For the high schools workshops we aimed to accommodate the young people's ideas and wishes as much as possible. They nonetheless followed a similar structure: an ice-breaking exercise; a group discussion about the concept of hope (including asking each participant about what colour they thought of when the word hope was mentioned); the paper leaf template activity, followed by their completion of the sentence: "I think hope is important because ...". The participants then rotated through small group activities, with most doing two of the three available activities: 1. a socio-drama, where they used body sculpture to think about hope; 2. writing about hope, where they were invited to write a poem

or a story about hope (with a number of poetic styles and alternatives presented, see Section 4.3) and 3. talking about hope, where in groups of three they role-played being a journalist and interviewed each other in turn. Finally, a wrap-up session was held, where participants were invited to share their thoughts and creations. As for the 2006 project, a public exhibition of the young people's work was held, with samples of all the varying forms of expression about hope included, along with photos of students engaging in the workshops. [11]

3.3 Data analysis

Analysis of this multi-method and complex data set draws primarily on an inductive approach using the principles of thematic analysis—coding text, examining the data for similarities and differences, creating categories of similar codes, and generating themes (GREEN et al., 2007). We did however identify the use (and analyse the effect of) particular creative writing techniques such as metaphor, imagery, syntax and tone. To adhere to qualitative principles of rigorous and trustworthy analysis, a number of the project's researchers were involved in the analysis (SHAPIRO, 2004, p.176). [12]

4. Choosing Poetry to Investigate Hope

In using poetry to gain knowledge about young people and hope we felt that poetry offered the participants an opportunity for reflection which was distinct from the other verbal communication techniques we were using, such as group activities and interviews and that it would provide a unique entry point into their subjective experiences. We were also particularly interested in investigating the affective dimensions of hope and understood poetry as an effective means of entry into these dimensions. We found these assumptions supported within the literature (e.g., CAMPO, 2003; SHAPIRO, 2004). Specifically, we found that poetic methods are often adopted to investigate participant's feelings about certain topics, for example FINLEY's (2003) work on a young homeless person (see also PRENDERGAST, 2009 for further examples). However, we had also assumed that inviting participants to create poems—and then providing an analysis of these—was a relatively common (and straightforward) approach. As discussed below, we did not find this assumption supported in the literature. Rather, we found that poetic inquiry is more diverse and controversial than we envisaged. [13]

4.1 Poetic inquiry

It is suggested that a limitation of traditional qualitative research forms and techniques is that they struggle to provoke an emotional engagement and response from the reader. A number of expressive or arts-based methods of research and data representation are increasingly advocated as a creative alternative (see DENZIN & LINCOLN, 2003, 2005; LEGGO, 2008; SPARKES, 2008). These range from collage to digital media and photography and from quilting and macramé to drama and poetry. While manifestations of poetry inquiry are surprisingly broad we identified three key approaches. [14]

The first is poetic transcription, also known as found poems and data poems (among other terms, see e.g., BUTLER-KISBER, 2002; PARSONS EMMETT, DOBBS, WILLIAMS & DAALEMAN, 2011; RAPPORT, 2008). This refers to the way in which researchers transform their participants' interview transcripts into poetry. The poems are created by extracting and often juxtaposing selected phrases from the transcripts and creative presentation and punctuation use is employed. In some instances only the participants' (and not the researchers) words are utilised. In other forms of poetic transcription, researchers combine their own words with the participants' words. LAFRENIERE and COX (2013) describe an art-based workshop process where participants themselves transformed transcripts into poetry. Some transcription poems are in free verse (e.g. GLESNE, 1997; POINDEXTER, 2002) and others utilise formal structures such as elegies. Occasionally these poems are complemented by the addition of some prose or discussion. However, rarely do researchers present a "traditional" analysis by utilising, for example, a combination of thematic and poetry analysis techniques that link identified themes to existing research and theory. Rather, the poems are left to stand alone, enabling the readers to respond to, and interpret their meaning, themselves (e.g., CHAN, 2003; KOELSCH & KNUDSON, 2009). RICHARDSON is known as a particular advocate for this approach:

> "By settling words together into new configurations, the relations created through echo repetition, rhythm, rhyme let us see and hear the world in a new dimension. Poetry is thus a practical and powerful means for reconstitution of worlds. It suggests a way out of the numbing and deadening, disaffective, disembodied, schizoid sensibilities characteristic of phallocentristic social science" (1993, p.705). [15]

Research poems, also known as "poems from the field" and auto-ethnographic poetry (e.g., LAHMAN et al., 2010; RICHARDSON, 1992, 1994) form the second category. Here researchers use poetry primarily as a means of making sense of, and presenting, particular personal experiences, such as parental illness (on this FURMAN, 2006 is considered seminal), the experience of conducting research *per se* (e.g., FURMAN, LANGER, DAVIS, GALLARDO & KULKARNI, 2007; LAHMAN et al., 2010; LAPUM, 2008; PIIRTO, 2002). For example, the evocative work of CHAWLA (2008) shows how such poetry can be used in ethnographic research to convey meanings about fieldwork findings. These poems are often written from field notes and journal entries. They take various forms, but most are written in free style. [16]

A third approach is to select and analyse existing, relevant pieces of poetry. HATEM and FERRARA (2001), RUCKER and SHAPIRO (2003) and SHAPIRO and STEIN (2005) for example, select poetry written by medical students as part of the formal requirements of their studies and provide a thematic/content analysis of these. HENDERSON (2002) selects just three poems—written by medical students and published in a student-edited journal—and provides a sophisticated (albeit chiefly literary rather than theoretical) line-by-line deconstruction of the identifiable poetic devices and their effects. [17]

4.2 Poetry as data

Most researchers in the field adopt one of the approaches above. However, there is another, surprisingly under-utilised method—taken for the *Tree of Hope* project—where participants are invited to write poetry in response to a particular research topic, which is then examined in a similar way to traditional forms of qualitative data (e.g., LATHER & SMITHIES, 1997). We suggest that one of the reasons this approach is employed infrequently is because poetic inquiry *per se* is yet to be fully established and accepted by the mainstream qualitative research community as a legitimate approach. Paradoxically, researchers who are actually utilising poetic techniques may be contributing to this in one of two ways: first, by questioning the notion of "poetry as data" and second, by spending a significant amount of time in their publications justifying their chosen method (see FURMAN, 2004a, 2004b; SHAPIRO, 2004; SHAPIRO & STEIN, 2005). [18]

Discussing whether poetry is data, SHAPIRO (2004, p.172) argues that "there is something vaguely jarring about the juxtaposition of these two words. Finding them together in the same sentence may seem bold to some, oxymoronic to others, or perhaps even just moronic". There exist other concomitant debates about "whether research of this kind [is] *art* or merely '*art-like*' " (PRENDERGAST, 2009, p.540), and whether poetic inquiry should be conducted by researchers with no specific arts-based training and skills (PIIRTO, 2002; PRENDERGAST, 2009). Contributing to these debates, PIIRTO (2002) discusses the issue of "inferior" poems (written by untrained/unpublished "poets" who are researchers and/or participants), versus (presumably) "superior" poems, written by established poets, who are also researchers. The latter are not only considered superior but as "art" rather than data. [19]

On the question of poetry as data, we take SHAPIRO's (2004) point that a common-sense definition of data is of something empirical, objective, replicable, whereas poetry is considered creative; a unique, artistic expression of subjective thought and/or emotion. However, the limitations of this conceptualisation of data are well established in the qualitative research literature, where the necessarily interpretive and constructionist nature of the research endeavour is acknowledged and multiple forms of subjective (and creative) expression are recognised as legitimate forms of knowledge and data (DENZIN & LINCOLN 2003, 2005). Furthermore, even while it is recognised that participants' interview transcripts—their often rambling and tangential responses and "stories"—are not necessarily "windows to their subjective truth" (RIESSMAN, 1991, p.45) but constructed representations, their status as data is unquestioned. Other types of qualitative data are manifold, including completed sentences, traditional sculpture, body sculpture, and even finger painting. Suffice to say, participants' poetry can also be classified and analysed in this way. [20]

Qualitative researchers are expected to explain their choice of method within their publications. However, because the above has been previously established within the literature, rarely do they provide overly lengthy justifications of the legitimacy of their approach. We suggest that it is possible that discussions about whether

"poetry is data" have created a climate in which poetic researchers perceive the need to both justify their approach and (perhaps over-) emphasise the virtues of poetry. SHAPIRO and STEIN (2005, p.286), for example, argue that examining poetry was a "legitimate method for learning more about how students attempt to make sense of the different relational systems". On the merits of poetry research, we find for example, "[w]hile poetry may not commonly be thought of as a source of knowledge, poems are powerful documents that possess the capacity to capture the contextual and psychological worlds of both poet and subject" (FURMAN et al., 2007, p.302). According to SHAPIRO, in poetry we are able to access "additional layers of nuance and ambivalence not as easily found in prose" (2004, p.175). From CARR (2003) and RAPPORT (2008) we hear about poetry's particular capacity for evoking an emotional response in the reader; for showing the reader how to really "feel" other people's experiences—rather than simply reading about these in an unattached manner. [21]

4.3 Inviting "earthy" data

We perceive poetry as both art and data. Before entering the field we were conscious of the way in which (as reflected in the debates above) poetry is often placed on a pedestal (LEGGO, 2008, p.170)—portrayed as particularly nuanced and as requiring a sophisticated and specific knowledge, vocabulary and intellect to write well. We realised that as a result some participants would struggle with the idea of writing a free verse poem in a short space of time. We communicated to students that we were not looking for perfectly crafted "works of art" and that we do not necessarily see poetry as highbrow or complex; anyone can write it as it is "earthy [and] rooted in everyday experience" (ibid.). Nevertheless, to encourage the students we offered the option of either writing a free style poem or utilising a formal poetry structure. Acrostic poems, where the first letter of each line spells out a word, was one structure provided. Students were helped to begin their poem by using the letters H.O.P.E. The second formal structure provided to students was a "sense poem" where students constructed their poem by completing the phrases: Hope tastes like ... Hope sounds like ..., Hope smells like ..., Hope looks like ..., Hope makes me feel ... each on a separate line. The majority of participants who completed this activity chose to utilise a formal structure. Ten students wrote a free verse poem. [22]

Throughout the presentation of the analysis, we have opted to provide a number of examples of the student's poetry. There are two main reasons for this. First, we are upholding our promise to the participants to disseminate their work in multiple ways (an exhibition in a prominent space at the local university was also held). Second, we are responding to claims made within the poetic inquiry literature that too often qualitative researchers provide only small fragments of data to support their interpretations and leave the reader to simply accept these (FURMAN et al., 2007, p.313). To provide the reader with the opportunity to develop their own emotional responses and interpretations of the poems, rather than be constrained by "the researchers limited conclusions" (ibid.), the publication of research poetry is encouraged. [23]

5. Research Findings: Young Peoples' Poems of Hope

Below we discuss the key findings from our analysis of the acrostic poems and the sense poems as well as the implications of these for our understandings of the meanings young people attribute to hope. We follow this with a discussion of the more nuanced free verse poetry. Reflecting principles of poetry inquiry, we hope that the poems we have selected to represent the data will stimulate a response in the reader—encouraging them to feel, see, even taste what the participants describe. [24]

5.1 The acrostic poems

The simple acrostic structure provided students with a stimulus in the form of the letters H-O-P-E and responses are necessarily restricted to these stimulus letters. While the key words utilised in these poems by the young participants are indicative of their broad conceptualisations of hope, there are also common themes in the words chosen. Introducing the most dominant theme throughout this anthology, "H" was most associated with being "happy" or the significance of "happiness" in people's lives, and presumably the role that hope can play in facilitating happiness. Participants most often linked "O" to either the important attribute of being "open-minded" or to having "open options" for the future. "P" was most frequently employed to articulate their belief that hope has a role to play in the process of working to achieve "peace"; and "E" is drawn on to express the importance of inclusivity despite diversity, through the words "everybody" or "equality". This language indicated that young people think about hope within a societal or global context, directing us away from an individualistic conception of self, which is often claimed in the literature about young people and can be seen as indicative of their concern with about how they want the world to be for all.

> **H**appiness
> **O**pen minded
> **P**resent not past
> **E**veryone accepting others (Kade, Grade 9)
>
> **H**appiness
> **O**pen opinions
> **P**eace
> **E**veryone being equal (Anonymous, Grade 9/10) [25]

5.2 The sense poems

5.2.1 Hope and happiness

To identify key themes we first analysed the sense poems as a whole and then line-by-line, examining each creative response to the stimulus "sense statements". This poetic form, in particular, invited metaphor. According to FURMAN (2004b, p.163), metaphor is a particular strength of poetry data as

often its impact is "more powerful and succinct than if one were merely to describe the dynamics of an experience". The sense poems also encouraged participants to tap into the affective dimensions of hope. Reflecting research which shows that hope increases feelings of happiness and well-being (BLAND et al., 2009; SWINTON, 2009), the concept of hope was frequently associated with feelings of happiness. To express this, participants often referenced various images and sounds of happy people. The most common response to "Hope looks like ...", for example, were "Happy/laughing/smiling people", and to "Hope sounds like ...", were "Laughter/happy voices/people cheering". Chloe's poem both illustrates this theme and the power of poetry to "synthesize experience in a direct and affective way" (PRENDERGAST 2009, p.545).

> Hope is bright colours
> Hope tastes like apples
> Hope sounds like happy people
> Hope smells like flowers
> Hope looks like happy people
> Hope makes me feel nice (Chloe, Grade 7). [26]

While many participants included the fundamental idea that "Hope makes me *feel* happy" (Jayden, Grade 7) in their poem, the diversity and intensity of emotions that hope evoked in these young people surprised us. Hope enables them to "feel motivated" (Eloise, Grade 10); "feel peaceful" (Miriam, Grade 10) and to "feel myself" (Anonymous, Grade 9). When expressing their responses to the "Hope feels like ..." phrase, a particular syntax was more often employed. Specifically, more adjectives and superlatives were utilised to express this affective dimension. The young people articulated, for example, the ways in which hope: "makes me explode with happy emotions" (Michaelya, Grade 8); "makes me feel fuzzy and happy inside" (Amber, Grade 8); and "is the greatest feeling in the world" (Cade, Grade 7). Jade's poem below exhibits the power of hope to stimulate the important emotion of positive self-belief:

> Hope is bright
> It tastes like sprite
> It sounds like joy
> It looks like a toy
> It makes me feel like I can achieve anything (Jade, Grade 9/10). [27]

5.2.2 Hope, home and family

When expressing poetically how hope makes them feel, a number of participants also described it as like: "a warm hug from mum" (Bailey, Grade 8). This introduces the theme of "hope, home and family". For these participants, the notion of hope invokes images of various positive aspects of their lives, and their home and family life is one of these. They express this theme in multiple ways: through smells, sights, tastes and sensations. Hope, for example, "tastes like a

nice meal with a loving family" (Taleah, Grade 8); "tastes like homemade cooking" (Jennifer-Anne Grade 9/10); "smells like a baking cake" (Rianna, Grade 8); "smells like a Roast Turkey" (Jayden, Grade 7/8); "looks like family" (Anonymous, Grade 9) and "[Hope] makes me feel loved" (Nikita, Grade 9). This notion of home and family as a positive resource for hope is effectively conveyed through Charley's and Lexi's poems below.

> Hope is like the sun coming up each morning.
>
> Hope tastes like a sweet apple rehydrating your mouth.
>
> Hope sounds like a car's engine roaring down the road when you've stuck in the woods.
>
> Hope smells like a Sunday roast after being out all day and coming home starving.
>
> Hope looks like a man carrying a big pot of rice in a poverty stricken country.
>
> Hope makes me feel happy because you don't need anything to get it and if it is reached the result is unmeasurable (Charley, Grade 10).
>
> Hope is colourful and
>
> It tastes like watermelon on a hot summers day.
>
> Hope sounds like laughter and
>
> Smells like your house after being away.
>
> Hope feels like a hug from your mum and finally finishing something you tried your hardest at (Lexi, Grade 11). [28]

5.2.3 Hope and the natural world

Positive conceptualisations of hope are also expressed through the next theme identified—the way in which participants associate the concept of hope with the beauty of the natural world. As discussed earlier, some research finds that young people are particularly worried about, and pessimistic about our ability to limit, environmental damage (HICKS & HOLDEN, 2007; OJALA, 2011). However, in these poems, the natural environment is conceptualised as something vital, enduring and thus comforting; something which they connect to a sense of hope, rather than fear. [29]

Participants portray this theme in various ways, drawing on many of the five senses. Hope, for example, "looks like a beautiful sunset" (Tiamie, Grade 10), "tastes like Pure Water" (Rory, Grade 10); "smells like freshly mown grass" (Kade, Grade 9); "looks like the sea" (Matilda, Grade 7/8), and "sounds like water" (Chevonne, Grade 9). This illustrates the way in which poetic methods call for a particularly self-conscious engagement with the research topic (BRADY, 2009) and can tap into embodied thoughts and emotions which might be difficult to access through other research methods. The poems below, created by Scott and Chevonne, best demonstrate this relationship between hope and the natural environment, both depicting a redolent connection between hope and the "smell of rain".

Hope is a brilliant white
Hope tastes sweet
Hope sounds powerful, but still peaceful
Hope smells like rain
Hope looks like the sun
Hope makes you feel purposeful (Scott, Grade 10).
Hope is a rainbow
Hope sounds like water
Hope is cheerful
Hope smells like rain
Hope is colourful
Hope makes me happy and cheerful (Chevonne, Grade 9). [30]

5.3 Free verse poetry: Different dimensions of hope

The participants who utilised the free verse approach often spent more time on the activity. This might indicate a closer engagement with, and deeper consideration of, the concept under scrutiny. Perhaps these poems therefore provide greater insight into the lived experience of the author. Regardless, they were characterised by a greater use of imagery and a more complex syntax and structure which produced more nuanced, and less consistently positive themes than the acrostic and sense poems. [31]

5.3.1 Losing hope

As evidenced above, participants writing the sense poems frequently articulated positive conceptualisations of hope, linking hope to affirming features of their lives. However the participants writing the free verse poetry were more likely to tap into other dimensions of hope. That is, to convey their knowledge (and presumably their experiences) of the fact that life is not necessarily full of happy and hopeful people and that hope can sometimes become lost. Below Louise expresses this theme. Rather than conceiving of losing hope as a rational response to difficult external circumstances, she individualises this, and suggests that sometimes we lose "faith in ourselves" and our abilities. While this could be interpreted as a type of self-blame and thus as quite a negative conceptualisation, there is an upshot. She views the capacity for regaining lost hope as something located within the individual; something which can be agentically achieved, despite the circumstances.

What is hope?
Understood by many;
Misunderstood by some.
Hope is an emotion, an emotion
Many would feel.

Whether its hope for the present or
Hope for the future;
We all have dreams we'd love to come true ...
But sometime sour hope turns blue
because we've simply lost faith in ourselves.
Never underestimate yourself, simply believe, have faith &
You will find hope (Louise, Grade 9). [32]

5.3.2 Hope as an important resource

A second theme identified through our analysis of the free verse *Tree of Hope* poetry data is that of hope as an important resource. These participants use their poetry to both convey their awareness of the vicissitudes of life and to express a particular meaning they attribute to hope. That is, their understanding of hope as a powerful resource; as something which can greatly assist them during times of trouble or sorrow. Below, Dylan initially adopts quite a bleak tone and uses rhyme, alongside condensed sentences and stanzas to convey his ideas. Dylan highlights that while life for young Australians is not as difficult as life for those in war-torn countries, it can nonetheless be hard and there are times when you "don't think you can cope". He presents his conception of hope as a particularly valuable and meaningful resource for helping people to cope during these difficult times and reminds the reader of its import.

In this world
We always fight
We live in our land
Under the same light.
We love for what others want.
We always feel insecure.
We need to control our lives on our terms
It's not like we're being tortured
Some are better treated.
Some are mislead.
If we don't start loving each other.
We'll all end up dead
If life seems hard
And you don't think you can cope
Just remember to always have hope (Dylan, Grade 9). [33]

Using eloquent word choice, evocative imagery and one strong stanza, Athena speaks of how other people can be destructive to hope and to people's self-confidence. A similar theme was identified during an analysis of other forms of data collected through the 2011 *Tree of Hope* project, namely the peer to peer

interviews and "complete the sentence" activities. Athena then expresses her view of hope as a resource that has the capacity to withstand and arise even amid this "darkness", to help people to move through difficult times and to feel positively about the future.

> From shadowed darkness we elope into false hope,
> With voices of the grudging type
> whispering false pretences.
> But with the glowing golden hearts
> the shadows evaporate and in the
> clearing horizons a blinding
> white light is a child's hope,
> their hope for their lives (Athena, Grade 10). [34]

We leave the reader with a final poem written by Alex, which inspired the title of this article. Her poem, like all the poetry examined here, is not written by a trained or established poet. It is nonetheless beautiful and artfully illustrates the way in which poetry methods are useful when seeking answers to questions relating to affective domains (PRENDERGAST, 2009, p.545), namely: What does hope feel like to young people?

> Hope is that fiery
> Feeling you get inside,
> When your whole heart
> Is tingling, and you
> Feel as if everything you
> Do next is destiny.
> It soars from your heart
> And into the world
> To touch the hearts of all (Alex, Grade 8). [35]

6. Conclusion

Much research is conducted into young people lives: their risky behaviours, their transitions into the world of work (see TE RIELE, 2004), their varied subcultures (WILSON & ATKINSON, 2005). Often this research is couched in a concern for young people's future. However, little is known about young people's hopes for the future or the meanings they place in having hope. To explore this in depth and in detail the *Tree of Hope* 2011 project utilised multiple methods and produced multiple sets of data. This approach reflects BRADY's sentiments: "Sometimes it is better to have more than a hammer in your toolkit ...There is more than one way to see things, to say things, and therefore to know things, each inviting different points of entry into the research equation" (2009, p.xiii). While overlapping themes were identified throughout the different data sets, the

poetry data was particularly useful for accessing the positive meanings that young people attribute to hope, for identifying that hope can be an important resource for young people, and for gaining entry to the affective domains of hope. [36]

Despite claims that "poetry should not be put up on a pedestal" (LAHMAN et al., 2011, p.894), our reading of much of the poetic inquiry literature suggests that this is nonetheless often the case. Much of the discussion in PRENDERGAST's (2009) large scale analysis, for example, focuses on the work of learned adult researchers/academics and promulgates the idea that only poetically trained and/or published researchers can legitimately accomplish this type of research. For the *Tree of Hope* 2011 project we collated and analysed a large sample of young people's poetry and demonstrated that there is nonetheless great value in the unpolished nature of their work. Many of the poems have been thoughtfully constructed and whether intentional or not are replete with beautiful imagery and powerful language, which is effective at conveying emotion. SHAPIRO's insights are particularly relevant here: "because of its predilection for imagery and metaphor, meanings may emerge in poetry which the author herself is not always completely aware of and which may not be entirely intentional, yet which have their own inherent validity and significance" (2004, p.175). [37]

When analysed explicitly for their sophisticated use of formal poetic devices, these young people's poems may not be considered "good poems in and of themselves" (PRENDERGAST, 2009, p.545). However, according to FURMAN et al., despite the diversity of approaches outlined earlier, poetic inquiry shares a key aim: creating data that is "highly consumable and emotionally evocative" (2007, p.304). As evidenced above, these poems fulfil this aim. The participants frequently utilise metaphor to express the embodiment of hope—the feelings, tastes and smells that the concept of hope arise in them. This in turn, is emotionally evocative for the reader. Perhaps more importantly however, the data fulfil the aim of qualitative social science research: to create holistic insights into people's subjective experiences and perceptions. The findings also provide insights into a previously un-investigated area: how young people make meaning around the role of hope in their lives—revealing that it has particular, albeit diverse meaning and value in their lives. [38]

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