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Mapping: A Resource-oriented Approach for Adolescent Clients

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Introduction

The working out of problems can occur at a semiconscious level with the creative process serving as a powerful driving force. Unharnessing creative energy usually serves as a useful resource for resolving counselling problems whether directly or indirectly.
(Amundson, 1998, p.141).

Fundamental to the constructivist approach is the premise that individuals are active creators of experience (Amundson, 2003; Brott, 2005); that is, individuals actively and creatively organize their experience to make sense of the world around them. In the counseling process, the counselor is a “participant with their clients in conversational dialogue” (Peavy, 1998, p. 24) in order to help clients build a preferred way of being in the future chapters of their lives. According to Peavy (1998), a co-constructivist approach provides space for both the counselor and client to make important contributions to the counseling activity. The non-authoritarian collaborative style creates opportunities for the counselor to bring a variety of problem-solving models to the counseling discussion which can be adjusted to the needs of the individual and his or her specific context. However, the client also shares responsibility with the counselor for the process and results of their work together (Mahoney, 2003).

As Peavy (1998) notes, language is “the key meaning-making tool” (p. 40) and through narratives individuals construct their interpretations of the meaning and sense of their lives. Many writers note the connection between constructivist and narrative approaches (e.g., Bujold, 2004; McIlveen & Patton, 2007; Savickas, 2005). In keeping with the tradition of constructivism, narrative therapy also focuses on the language, stories, personal reality, and social context of the client (Freedman & Combs, 1996). It is believed that people live through their stories, and that their stories describe their situations. For example, a counselor working from a narrative framework will help the client to construct alternative stories that allow room for possibilities and strengths (Payne, 2006).

In my counseling practice with youth, I take a narrative approach by viewing problems as separate from individuals and by assuming that individuals have many skills,

competencies, beliefs, values, commitments, and abilities that will assist them in changing their relationship with problems in their lives. By externalizing the problem or separating the problem from the person, externalizing conversations can challenge a negative view of self that is context bound. In examining the person's relationship to the problem, "the problem becomes more clearly defined" and "a range of possibilities become available to revise this relationship" (White, 2007, p. 26). I encourage the use of visual representations to externalize problems, to assist adolescents in exploring their problem situations, to clarify key issues, and to search for resources. In particular, I have found the use of maps to be a flexible and creative approach that increases adolescent motivation, engagement, and participation in the counseling process. Young people appear to appreciate the experiential, action-oriented, and concrete nature of the activity.

In this paper a case study will illuminate how maps can be used with adolescents in telling their stories, in identifying resources, and in taking action to resolve their key issues. Research in psychology and communication shows there are strong communication and thinking advantages for graphic representations in comparison to sole reliance on traditional language (Dansereau & Simpson, 2009; Tergan & Keller, 2005).

Mapping as a Counselling Strategy

According to Peavy (1998), it is by using one's creativity that many obstacles can be overcome as creativity enables the overcoming of limitations and paralyzing habits. In an effective counseling process, the counselor and client are able to co-create solutions, future pathways, and choices in their work together. Maps provide a creative, open-ended tool for revealing peoples' subjective beliefs in a meaningful way so that they can be examined not only by the individual for whom the map is constructed, but also by other individuals.

There are numerous types of maps that can be constructed. For example, the life-space map (Peavy, 1998) and the convoy model (Anntonucci, Akiyama, & Takahashi, 2004) focus on personal networks of social support. Eco-maps are graphical representations that show all the systems involved in an individual's life and are often used in family counseling as a way to depict the ecological system that encompasses a family or individual (Hartman, 1995). Lines and arrows indicate various relationships (e.g., thick lines mean a stronger relationship while curvy lines mean that the relationship is stressful; arrows pointing to the client mean that the system primarily influences the client while two-directional arrows depict influence in both directions). Mind maps (Buzan, 2000) are often used in educational systems to represent words, ideas, tasks, or other items linked to and arranged around a central key word or idea. Typically, mind maps are used to generate, visualize, structure, and classify ideas as a way to organize information for studying, solving problems, or making decisions. The elements of a given mind map are arranged according to the importance of the concepts, and are classified into branches or groupings. The Possible Selves Mapping Intervention has been used to access youths' dreams for the future, their sense of competence in achieving those dreams, and the behaviors they can direct towards achieving those goals (Shepard, 2005). The mapping technique presented in this paper combines many elements described in this paragraph, in particular, identifying social supports, accessing relevant systems operating in the client's life, brainstorming ideas, and taking a preferred future stance.

Case Study of Jocelyn

Client's Biographical Sketch, Relevant History, and Presenting Problem

Jocelyn was a 15-year-old girl in the tenth grade at a small high school in a rural community. She was an attractive, tall, slender girl with a pale complexion, light brown hair, and brown eyes. She was the only child of divorced parents, Alice and John. After the divorce of her parents 2 years ago, Jocelyn's living conditions worsened as her parents continued to fight whenever they met. Jocelyn described her mother as extremely depressed. Alice never turned on the house lights, kept the shades down on the windows, and rarely left the house. With her parents constantly at odds and her father frequently away on business trips, Jocelyn had no one to turn to for emotional support and would often cry herself to sleep at night. Jocelyn sought out counseling at the urging of the school principal who was concerned about Jocelyn's affective, behavioral, cognitive, and social functioning. Formerly an honors student, Jocelyn was attending school sporadically and her grades were declining.

Session 1

When Jocelyn arrived at the community agency, she was clearly upset. She had just received her report card that showed mostly Cs and Ds. The stance I took was one of seeking to help her make new meaning from her current story and working from a position of not knowing so that Jocelyn could provide meaningful explanations. I decided to encourage her to map not just the problem and its influence in her life, but the strengths she saw in herself, the opportunities she was already using or might make use of (e.g., making other connections at school through extracurricular activities), and sources of support and comfort in her life (e.g., people, pets, music, art, etc.). I encouraged her to map these on a positive/negative spectrum and to indicate the general size of the problem or strength in relation to other parts of her life (Figure 1). She was also asked to indicate how close or far from the middle "neutral" line these aspects of her life were (this allowed for components to be placed partly in the positive and partly in the negative spheres, for example). She was also instructed to indicate whether she believed that the component was "stuck" (a solid line) or whether it had room for change (broken line). Jocelyn appeared to like the activity and created a map of her key issues.

The first component on the map was "school sucks," large and rimmed in a heavy solid line and to the far left of the neutral line. Jocelyn's main concern was the lack of support from teachers and peers in coping with her living situation and the role that she had to play in her family that prevented her from engaging in academics, peer relationships, and extra-curricular activities. When asked to expand, she drew a solid circle on the left side entitled, "Mom so down." Jocelyn shared what it was like to live with someone who never smiled, who did not engage in household activities, and who wanted to be simply left alone. Jocelyn was left to do the cooking, cleaning, yardwork, and banking. She described her home environment as a big black hole and noted that her anger and frustration were leading her to swear frequently. "No friends" was added closer to the neutral line, as she noted that this situation was relatively new. She was able to keep in touch with them by Facebook even though she did not have time to just "hang out with them."

When asked to map her supports and strengths, Jocelyn paused for several minutes. She slowly picked up the felt pen and described herself as a "caring person" and "hard worker" who loved the "outdoors." All these qualities were identified with a

broken line, close to the neutral zone. To Jocelyn it felt as if these were aspects of herself that she was losing. There was a long period of silence at this point in the session as Jocelyn sat back and looked at the issues she was facing. I decided that we were becoming mired in the problem. I shifted the focus by asking her to come up with as many possibilities as she could, that is, to think about what she wanted in her life and what she wanted more of in her life. Jocelyn indicated with broken circles “seeing dad more often,” “connecting with her aunt” (her dad’s sister), and “building a relationship with the art teacher” at her high school. She felt that she was making some progress in these areas but requested some assistance in finding better ways of doing so. I was curious about the art teacher and Jocelyn showed me a couple of her drawings. I suggested that “art work” might be something to add to the map.

At this point we both sat back and reviewed the map to try to gain new perspectives on the issues. Jocelyn was surprised to note that what she had viewed as one big problem was counterbalanced by a variety of small strengths and supports. I asked her to think about what she wanted less of and what shifts she wanted to occur. This seemed a bit overwhelming to Jocelyn so I asked her to think about one problem that, if handled, would lead to some improvement in her current circumstance noting that little steps can make shifts happen. Specifically the second half of the session was guided by the following questions:

- Is there a problem or a strength that you have left out?
- What patterns of behaviour would make life better?
- What current behaviours would you eliminate?
- What would you have that you don’t have now?

After brainstorming ideas as to how to see dad and friends more often, Jocelyn made an appointment for the following week and I gave her a copy of the map to take home with her.

Reflection on the first session. I found the session to be productive in that we were able to use the map to help sort out which problem was most important, manageable, and generalizable (getting out of the house and seeing more of dad and her friends). In the past, I often tried to tackle all the major problems at once, which was overwhelming for the client and for me. Unused resources were spotted (art teacher, aunt, and art work) and we developed three steps to take action: (1) Skype her aunt and use her as a sounding board; (2) drop by and see the art teacher, and (3) arrange a lunch date with dad to discuss her living situation and to make some plans for the summer.

Session 2

Jocelyn arrived for her second session in a much more positive frame of mind. I intended to start by reviewing her map from last week; however, Jocelyn was one step ahead of me. She pulled out a sheet of paper and drew a second map (Figure 2). In the second map, two changes had occurred on the left side of the neutral line. “School sucks” was now a broken line, smaller, and closer to the neutral zone. “No friends” was also a broken line and touching the neutral zone. “Mom so down” remained the same. Obviously some changes had occurred! We discussed Mom so down and I gave her a pamphlet on depression that included a phone number of a local counselor. I was

impressed when Jocelyn stated, “I can’t change my mom. She needs to take the first step. I thought I could help, but I can’t.”

On the second half of the page, I noted little change in the personal qualities of “caring person,” “hardworker,” and “liking the outdoors.” However, “less swearing” had moved to the right of the neutral line and was now surrounded by a broken line. I was curious about this shift. “Seeing dad” and “my aunt” had become larger and had shifted to the right. Jocelyn contracted with her dad to see him at least one time per week and to take some time in the summer for a vacation together. When she Skyped her aunt, she was able to share her experience of living with her mother and her aunt volunteered to talk with dad about the mom’s depression and the impact on Jocelyn. The biggest shift was in the “art teacher” and “art work” components. The art teacher had asked Jocelyn to take part in creating the set design for the school play. Jocelyn was thrilled to be asked and was now spending part of her evenings and weekends outside of home engaging in an activity that brought her great joy. She also felt that she had permission to have her own life; that she did not always have to take care of her mother. I now understood why there was less swearing! A new component was added to the map, “new male friend” who was also involved in the theater program.

As we reviewed the map, I noted how proactive Jocelyn had been in the past week and commented on her readiness and willingness to carry out tasks outside the session. I observed how she had mobilized her resources to make positive changes in her life. In the second half of the session we reviewed the map guided by the following questions:

- What can you do more of to shrink the size of the chosen problem?
- What would you do differently with the people in your life?
- What accomplishments would you have that you don’t have now?
- Is there anything more you could do to move a component on the negative side closer to the positive side?
- What will you have if you reach your goals?

After reviewing the map, Jocelyn disclosed that since her parents separated, she felt less positive about herself. She sensed a gradual decrease in what she called “self-esteem” noting how she doubted her abilities to achieve in school and to form positive relationships with others. I asked her to think of a time when she did something well, enjoyed, it, and felt proud of it. She told the story of her involvement in rehabilitating a local creek and the sense of community and stewardship that she experienced. In rediscovering the skills and abilities that contradicted her feelings of low self-esteem, we collaboratively built plans of action to reduce the influence of low self-esteem (increase her engagement in the theater program, reconnect with the Fish and Wildlife Association) and to develop support teams that could assist in her hoped-for ways of life. Jocelyn made an appointment for the following week and I gave her a copy of the second map to take home with her.

Reflection on the second session. As is so often the case, I learned a great deal from this session. My client was quite able to act in her own best interest and I found my role to be one of supporting and respecting her capability in generating new ways of thinking about herself and her problems. Jocelyn commented that she had placed the map on her bulletin board in her bedroom. By looking at the map throughout the evening, it gave her incentive to make change. Although I had a tentative direction for our second

session, I learned that being flexible in the counseling session ensures that the goals of the client and the goals of the counselor are aligned. In this session, Jocelyn identified the goal to develop a new storyline about her personal strengths in order to challenge her feelings of low self-esteem. I clarified the issue with her and assisted her in addressing her impoverished story.

Session 3

We had our last session together about 3 weeks after Jocelyn's second session due to her now busier schedule. In the final session she created a map (Figure 3) which showed the progress she had made. On the left side, "mom so down" remained the same although mom had recently sought out counseling. "School is better" had moved to the right side of the neutral line as had "friends." What stood out on the map was the right side of the map. All components were outlined with broken lines, some with arrows indicating that the components were expanding. Most of the circles were on the far right of the page indicating a very positive position. Jocelyn was very excited with her involvement in the school theater program that had expanded to include designing the backdrop and locating props. Her relationship with the art teacher had developed and she felt that she now had a mentor with whom she could talk. The theater also gave her a place to meet her "new male friend" and to engage in shared activities. It is clear to see that Jocelyn was feeling much happier about her life. She rarely swore, saw her dad quite often, and talked with her aunt regularly via Skype. She was in the process of rejoining the Fish and Wildlife Association that provided opportunities to be outdoors and to contribute to the sustainability of local ecosystems.

In terms of her stated goal from the second session - to reduce the influence of low self-esteem - there was now a large, growing circle of personal qualities on the right side of her map. The success of the theatre production and the credit she received for painting the backdrop increased her sense of self as involved and hardworking. Her new relationship with her boyfriend showed her that she could be a good and caring friend. Her interactions with her mother were changing. With the help her mother was receiving, Jocelyn could show she cared without becoming overly involved in her mother's depression.

Reflection on the third session. In the second session, Jocelyn created a realistic goal that was challenging but congruent with her values; that is, to rediscover those aspects of herself that she felt she was losing. During this second session we identified the ways in which "low-self-esteem" entered her life. We recognized how obstacles could be self-generated as well as arise from social settings. We continued to identify unused resources that could help her facilitate action (e.g., rejoining the Fish and Wildlife Association, a re-conceptualization of her relationship with her mother). In this last session, it was evident that Jocelyn made good use of these unused resources to increase her self-esteem and sense of self.

I believe that in asking Jocelyn what she would have if she reached her goals increased her commitment to working on the issue of low self-esteem. The use of a visual served as a useful platform for further discussion and exploration. As Jocelyn noted, the map helped her to pull things together and to be much more proactive in problem solving. The image of shrinking and expanding the circles provided a visual for her to imagine what the problem would look like if she was managing it better and assisted in

identifying patterns of behavior that would make her life better (e.g., increasing art work). Jocelyn also named her art teacher as someone she looked up to and in thinking of her mentor was able to generate preferred personal qualities.

Implications

Constructivists emphasize the importance of expressing one's understanding of reality in a number of ways (Peavy, 1997). According to Gladwell (2000), one of the key factors in change is the experience of memorable and transformative experiences. As counselors design interventions they need to focus on both the relevance issue and the need to involve clients in activities that will be memorable and concrete, such as mapping.

Visual representations of the self in one's world can aid in self-reflection and make use of both visual (right brain) and verbal (left brain) processes. Additionally, maps can assist clients in picturing themselves or their situations in a concrete manner. For example, Jocelyn used the map to externalize her stressful life situation and in doing so was able to prepare for healing and recovery. In the process of mapping, clients create a visible train that assists them in sorting out their issues and prioritizing the issues they face. In doing so, clients are mobilized to problem solve and to take action.

Mapping is a visual technique that can be used to discern how individuals make meaning of their world by promoting dialogue that can uncover personal meanings and underlying assumptions, opinions, and values rooted within the relationships as displayed on the map (Peavy, 1997). Taylor, Pham, Rivkin, and Armor (1998) note that creative problem solving

... provides a window on the future by enabling people to envision possibilities and develop plans for bringing those possibilities about. In moving oneself from a current situation toward an envisioned future one, the anticipation and management of emotions and the initiation and maintenance of problem-solving activities are fundamental tasks. (p. 429)

Another benefit of using maps is that they inspire confidence that change can happen. Rubin (2000) notes that expressive arts can increase self-esteem as clients move "to a deeper level of self-acceptance and self-awareness" (p. 272). Mapping can also arouse strong feelings and at the same time, open up possibilities. According to Gladding and Newsome (2003), visual representations "serve as both a catalyst and conduit for understanding oneself in a larger world context" (p. 252).

Mapping is aligned with a strengths-based approach to counseling. Clients possess personal and/or social resources and strengths they need to change and reach their goals. As the counselor provides a supportive environment, this self-healing potential is brought to the fore in a form that encourages the client to develop new ideas to use in relating to themselves and others outside of the counseling session.

Conclusion

Mapping is flexible enough to allow young people to tell their stories in ways that make sense to them and in doing so they produce a record that allows them to return to their maps over the course of counseling to add further details and to expand on their thoughts, feelings, and experiences. Creative counseling techniques have been shown to

be developmentally appropriate and effective for working therapeutically with youth (Geldard & Geldard, 2002). The use of maps tends to not only promote an action-bias, but also prepares the client to focus on change, possibilities, and the future. Jocelyn and other young clients with whom I have worked have found that maps help them to get “unstuck” and to develop a sense of direction. Furthermore, the maps were useful in identifying resources as building blocks for the future.

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Figure 1. Jocelyn's first map.

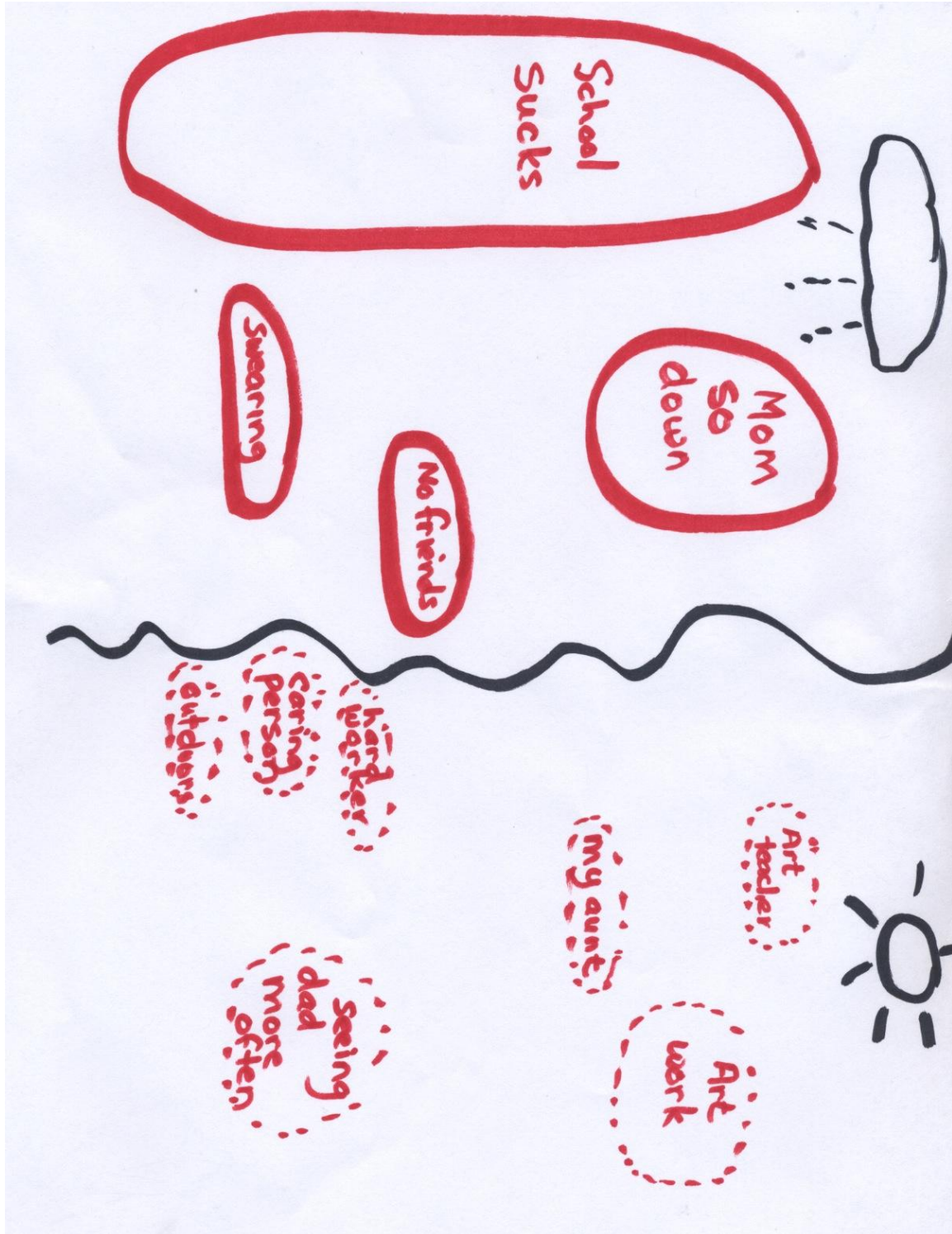


Figure 2. Jocelyn's second map.

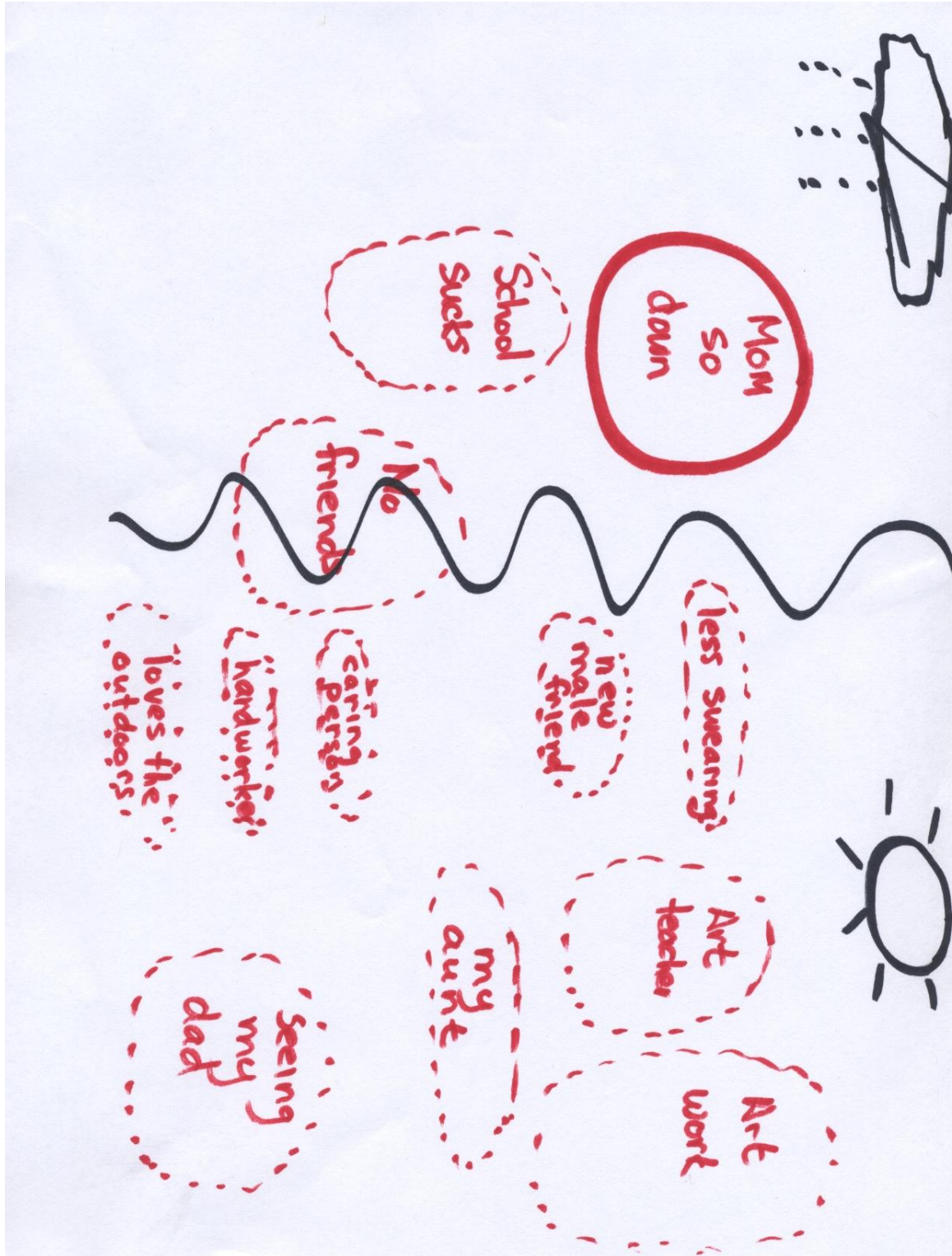


Figure 3. Jocelyn's third map.

