



Telling another Possible Story: An Interview with Dina Scherrer By Dina Scherrer and David Epston

DAVID: Dina, can you tell us how you got started?

When I trained as a coach in 2007 (after twenty years as Director of Development and Communications of a large advertisement group) my intention was to support men and women in their work lives. Because I more or less had educated myself, had been raised in difficult family circumstances and moreover was a woman, it had not always been easy for me to grow and evolve at high levels in the company. I have never been accompanied and I have lost a lot of time and energy in finding my place, understanding what is happening in relationships with people. By becoming a coach, I was going to accompany what I had sorely missed during my professional career: a space to doubt, to regain strength, to get out of isolation and to find one's way when sometimes we have the impression to remain lost.

So I started to offer my services in organizations but as I am an "activist coach" and I like the idea that coaching is not exclusively reserved for managers in companies, I decided early on to also put my practice serving other people. At the beginning I worked voluntarily to accompany women over 45 who after having stopped working for many years (divorce or others) found themselves in search of a professional project.

And then one day, in 2008, my friend Véronique, who is also a narrative practitioner, tells me about a project that she has been offered but that she does not feel like taking and in which she can imagine me. This project was aimed at a whole sensitive department of the Parisian suburbs. It was a test project. Funded by the European Social Fund and initiated by the Creteil Academy. It was a question of accompanying in all the colleges of this sensitive department of the suburbs of Paris the classes of "3rd Segpa" (the Level 3 class in France is in high school where kids are 13-14. It is the class immediately before college, meaning that a decisive step of orientation takes place in it).

These are classes where they gather young people in very great learning and social difficulty, who will not be able to go to standard high schools and who are oriented to vocation training.

These young people are 14 years old. They often accumulate difficult family problems; they are sidelined in colleges in special venues with specific teachers. They have trainings, depending from the colleges, in carpentry, plumbing, sewing. They are very unhappy to be in these classes and/or they are considered "stupid" (by their words). The other young people of the "general" classes make fun of them as if they were awkward or outcasts.





Our work with them is to help them find their professional projects, close to what interests them in life and restore their very damaged self-identities.

My reasons are simple. As I said above, I go with what I missed. I was myself abused by the school system and put very early to 12 years in a special class for children with emotional difficulties. Like these young people that I accompany, I left the school system very early at 16 with a CAP (very basic professional certificate) as a shorthand typist. An occupation that I did not choose, but as I had no idea for some other occupation, I was told “you are a girl so that should be interesting for you.” At best, I can say I endured my school years.

Things worked out for me when I started working. I learned by doing. I went back to school while working to fill in the gaps in my education. I ended up as Director of Development and Communication for the world's largest advertising group.

So my intention in going to meet these young people is to offer them a space to find hope in order to project themselves more confidently into the future. Given my career, in front of these young people, everything in me says that "it's possible to do".

DAVID: Dina, how did you go about that?

My first experience was in 2008. It was the first time in France that we offered to coaches to go within the colleges to support young people. It took a big organization to get between a math class and a French class. As far as I am concerned, I had to accompany 4 whole classes in 4 different colleges. Each class had a dozen sessions which were spread over the whole school year.

The start was very difficult for me because the teachers of these young people were against this program and they even went on strike so that I did not come. I had to understand and hear what was behind their demands. It was necessary to organize a meeting where in front of the teachers and the parents of the young people I had to defend my intervention. I started by telling them, “What I see and hear behind your demands are people who defend their honor and their utility. Maybe you think I'm doing what you cannot do. If that's what you think, I am totally wrong in the way I explained myself. We are here to do very different jobs.” And I answered all their questions and removed all misunderstandings. And then I was able to resume my mission in close collaboration with those teachers.

Regarding the young people, they immediately invested this space of accompaniment where the students had the possibility to show something else of themselves.

DAVID: Dina, would you for English readers provide a summary of your book *School Failure, Another Possible History: Coaching at the Service of Young People in Difficulty* (2011)?





It is a book where I tell my experience of this first narrative accompaniment mission with this audience of young people in the colleges. I modestly recount how I got narrative ideas back into the school environment. I tell how narrative practices can be a beautiful answer to restore damaged identities, find hope in the future and the desire to move forward. All the main narrative concepts are discussed and concretely set up with these young people, session after session. We follow these young people from the beginning to the end of the accompaniment.

DAVID: When you first were introduced to the 'practice' of Insider Witnessing Practices, what piqued your curiosity about 'translating' this to the circumstances of these young people in schools?

When I first heard about this "Insider Witness" concept it was when you presented it to us in Bordeaux in 2014. What seduced me at first (like everything that seduces me in general in my practice) is that this concept would help me to help my clients. I always watch, in my accompaniments, the moment when the person switches to the side of hope. When this hope comes, it's hard for the person to hang onto it sometimes. So I am sensitive and conscious of all concepts, methods that help people cling to their newfound strengths.

I did not immediately think of using it with young people in schools.

I first wanted to experience it as you presented it to us. I need to understand the intentions of the concept, doing it at first in a very formal way before eventually adapting it. I immediately felt the power of the concept. I am somebody who is very intuitive. I feel, I do and I think after!

In hindsight, what raised my curiosity was that you spoke to us in a way which was totally new for me. I like the idea of helping to open up new areas of support. Then, the idea of performing my client in supervision with his agreement and making him listen or read the conversation immediately appeared to me as a powerful way for my client to revisit, in a certain way, his story through me. Through what I know about him, through the image that I have of what is important for him etc ... I first experimented "the IWP" twice in supervision with Pierre as you had originally presented it. With Christine, a client who had experienced a painful history of professional harassment, and with Roxane, a 17-year-old girl who had been out of her home for two years with a story of "school phobia". In both cases, the experience was an extremely strong moment of accompaniment. It favored this famous moment of change towards hope. As if it had spared me several sessions. It has helped to anchor progress, to open new paths of help for people, to honor forces and alternative stories.

It was from these two experiences that I began to think about how I could use it in my school accompaniments.





DAVID: Can you relate how you 'translated' IWPs, which originated in 'psychotherapy contexts', to the circumstances of these young people in schools?

I have repeatedly used this concept or an inspiration of this concept in school. Below are three examples. As it has had encouraging results, I have many requests from teachers for educational guidance on different topics, but I take baby steps.

The 1st example was with an educational mediator. For several years now, I have trained and supervised the educational mediators of a whole department in the Paris suburbs. These are mediators specifically trained to intervene in so-called "very difficult colleges", where there is a lot of violence. They are not part of the National Education. They work full-time in colleges. They are trained and paid by the city hall. Their job is mediation between students, between teachers and students, between parents and teachers. They have a very difficult job. They often feel helpless in the face of young people and the French education system. They do not feel highly regarded by the educational framework of the college, since that is not part of the National Education. As part of my supervision with a mediator named Moustapha, he tells me about a young man, Serkane, whom he accompanies. Serkane is regularly abused by his father and humiliated by some young fellows from the college because he was placed in a difficult class and was not always very well dressed because low money. He has very few friends.

He likes to stay in the mediator's office, a place of well-being for him.

Moustapha has been following Serkane and his family for 2 years. He tries to get Serkane out of isolation, to honor his resistance, his strength. I trained Moustapha in narrative practices; he was seduced by ideas but has trouble putting them into practice. I have the impression that he is quite modest in fact. The exchanges between him and Serkane are not done so much by words but by the reassuring presence of Moustapha. So I had the idea to offer him this experience of a proxy conversation. I said to Moustapha: "Would you be ok to have a conversation with me like you were Serkane? I will ask you questions and you answer as if you were Serkane. We will record our conversation so you can listen later with Serkane. Of course you have to ask Serkane for his authorization before. The intention of this exercise is for Serkane."

"By listening to this conversation", I said, "Serkane will feel heard and recognized in what he lives, it will help to anchor his improvements, eventually open new avenues of work with him. You will allow him to listen to his story through you and what you know about him, what hopes you have for him. What do you think?" Moustapha was ok with this. He then found a way to address Serkane indirectly and overcome his own modesty.

We had some time after our conversation with Serkane's agreement. Then Moustapha had Serkane listen to our conversation. Moustapha told me that the young man listened masterfully





to the conversation on Moustapha's mobile phone. He asked Moustapha if he could have a copy so he could listen to it again. Moustapha did not always have the answers to my questions, so Serkane had to improvise the answer himself, and this has opened new avenues of work. But above all, Serkane was amazed because he rediscovered his story through Moustapha, a story that was much richer than he thought. As for Moustapha, he told me that it was very beneficial to him too because he had felt less helpless, and afterward this exercise made him feel useful for Serkane.

The 2nd situation was the case of a high school girl, Roxane. Roxane is 17 years old, she is an excellent student but had no longer going to class for over a year when I meet her. The accompaniment was decided by her mother and the principal of Roxane's high school. Both were looking for a way to help Roxane return to class. Roxane, however, loves school, likes to learn, likes interaction with classmates and teachers. Her head wanted to go to class, but her body could not do it, as if something had sucked all her strength. While staying at home, Roxane remained one of the best students in her class. She recovers the lessons; she created a whole network of mates and teachers who bring her lessons.

We worked a few weeks with Roxane whose goal was to get back to class. During the accompaniment she had sometimes found the strength to show up, but only sometimes. Roxane had accomplished a lot during our work, but I felt a little stuck with her as if I did not have all the data to help her. This is the moment when I suggested to Pierre to do a proxy conversation with me where I would play Roxane. When I asked Roxane if she was ok with this, she immediately said yes. Because she was a minor, her mother and teacher were also asked permission. Pierre and I filmed our session. Afterward, Pierre and I continued to talk about Roxane as part of a debrief. The camera continued to record, and this was an important part of the conversation as she mentioned it. We decided to show everything to Roxane. Roxane saw the film alone. When I saw her again, she had a leaf full of notes. It was a great meeting with Roxane. Re-listening to her life through me made her realize that she had bravely resisted her story of "school phobia" and set up an entire organization to lose nothing of what was happening in class. This opened up new avenues of work. Roxane returned to class a few weeks later.

The 3rd time was between a teacher and her student in the context of a conflict between them. I adapted it to the context. I have been working for four years in the same college to accompany a class of 4th (NB 4th means 13 years old) in difficulty. A class designed specifically to bring together young people who have noticed the loss of faith in themselves or dropout for various reasons. A specific program has been designed for these students to regain strength and confidence.

When I arrive at the college that day, the head teacher confides to me. In her own words, the teacher says one of the students in the class, Areski, had been "ruining her life" since the



beginning of the year. "He routinely messes with the class and is insolent." The teacher informs me she consistently has to "fire him from the class". She thinks that he particularly resents her because it seems that he does not have the same behavior with his other teachers. She does not know how to go about it anymore. I had actually noticed that during the classes I was shadowing, Areski often complained about this teacher, whom we will call Mrs. Martin.

I propose to Mrs. Martin a special session. I said, "Would you be willing, if Areski agrees of course, to have a meeting together, all three of us? A session where you will be invited both to answer questions in front of the other, but where everyone will respond as if they were the other. In other words, you will put yourself in the shoes of Areski and answer my questions as if it were Areski who answered, and do so in front of the real Areski. Then we will reverse and he will answer as if he were you. The intention is that you and Areski change your position to see and understand what is happening in the other. For the listener, it is a moment when they can see if the other has understood something of what is important to them. I won't hide that I have not done this kind of conversation often, and I do not guarantee the result. But I think it's worth a try."

Mrs. Martin immediately agreed. She was ready to do anything to settle the situation and find more comfort in her relationship with Areski and in her class. When I proposed this exercise to Areski, he was much less enthusiastic. He said to me, "It's weird, your stuff. I'm in, but I'm not sure I'll talk."

We were all three going to try.

I put the frame: "As you know, everyone will play the role of the other. The other remains a silent witness. You will be able to give your impressions, but afterwards. I thought it would be better to start with Mrs. Martin, but I did not want to impose that. I just started, "Whom do we start? And fortunately Areski immediately said "she" by pointing to his teacher without looking at her.

"Mrs. Martin, you tell me when you are ready."

In broad outline, this is the dialogue that followed. I remind you that it is Mrs. Martin who plays the role of Areski:

DINA: Hello Areski. Why did you agree to do this exercise with Mrs. Martin?

ARESKEI: I do not know why. I came but I do not believe it will help

DINA: Can you tell me about your relationship with Mrs. Martin?





ARESKI: She is crazy, Mrs. Martin. And she is lame. You do not know everything she can do. Since the beginning of the year she always attacks me, and for nothing most of the time.

DINA: What's wrong with what lives between you and Mrs. Martin? Can you give me some specific examples?

ARESKI: As soon as I get back into the classroom, she looks at the time to see if I'm late. As soon as someone talks, she turns to me. Once, she had corrected all the copies except mine. It is not fair.

DINA: What have you done to try to fix things with Mrs. Martin, or what ideas would you have?

ARESKI: Yes, it seems to me that at first I tried to talk with her to tell her that it was not me who was chatting, or that I did not think it was fair how she was treating me. But since I thought she was doing it regardless, then after a while I gave up. It was useless.

DINA: What is important to you that Mrs. Martin may not see or understand?

ARESKI: That I want to be treated like the others. That I make efforts. That it's not always me talking or bullshitting in the classroom.

DINA: These important things correspond to what values for you?

ARESKI: Justice, I believe. Respect.

DINA: If she was there and you had the opportunity to send her a message, what would you tell her?

ARESKI: If you want me to respect you, respect me.

DINA: Do you want to add something?

ARESKI: No, I said everything.

Needless to say, as early as Mrs. Martin's first answer, Areski began to be interested in what was going on. Little by little, his face, which I was observing from the corner of the eye, was transforming. He smiled, he laughed, I even think he was moved. His first reaction was to say, "I am too shocked. She knows me too well. It sounds like she's in my head."





From that moment, I knew it was won. That their relationship would change dramatically. It must be said that Mrs. Martin really understood the exercise. By answering as honestly as possible, she managed to forget herself a bit and improvise her pupil, look for the right answers for Areski. It's a nice gift she gave him.

Frankly, if we had not started with Mrs. Martin, I'm not sure that Areski would have had the energy and the drive to really get into this exercise. But when it was his turn, and the strength of what had just happened, he made a lot of effort to play the game himself and try to meet Mrs. Martin too.

What is powerful in this kind of exercise is to ask the questions to the actor while thinking about the listener. This requires building questions whose answers might interest the listener. As for the person being interviewed, this exercise allows them to revisit the situation where it is possible to think otherwise. It's a proxy conversation with all the protagonists in attendance. I could measure that day the power of this type of conversation that can change the color of a relationship in one session.

Mrs. Martin told me that there was a "before" and an "after" this meeting in her relationship with Areski. This unique session with the three of us allowed them to find serenity in their relationship. Mrs. Martin is more attentive to Areski, to his efforts. Areski, for his part, has no more anger, so is less in permanent reaction.

On the other hand, I supervise coaches who intervene with young people in middle and high schools. I have already, as Pierre did for me and Roxanne, had two proxy conversations between two coaches.

DAVID: How was your IWP received by these young people? How was your IWP received by the teachers and school administrators?

In the case of Roxane and Serkane, after having asked for their permission and explained the process and the intentions, the young people immediately said yes. So this concept was very well received. In both cases the companions (Moustapha for Serkane and me for Roxane) had already made a long way with the young people. The alliance and trust favored the fact that the young people accepted.

As this concept is rather new to me, I need to put all the chances on our side for the success of the exercise. I wait to get to know the young person well, and to know well the accompanist who will play the young person. To have no doubt about the positive intentions of the companion.

In the case of Areski, it was a little less obvious because he did not want to make this effort for his teacher because he did not like her too much. But as she had accepted on her side, this had





intrigued him a little, so he said yes without believing it too much. The exercise did not bother him, but doing it with this teacher he didn't like was not too appealing to him. But later I knew he had told the other kids because they told me about it and they all wanted to do the exercise with their teachers too.

So I would say overall that young people are very open and very curious about this type of concept. Nothing surprises them. They even like to be surprised. Do things a little differently.

DAVID: Dina, what were your initial impressions of how it (your IWP) was going?

I had been working on interventions for 5 years in the college when I proposed it. So I know very well all the educational supervision, and that it goes well between me and the faculty. When I propose something they make me feel confident. Alliance and trust are already there too. This allows me to have the audacity to propose this type of concept.

What they experience is not always easy, so they are open to finding solutions to help young people and to find comfort in their work. For example, in the college where I intervene some teachers cannot teach alone. They have a supervisor or mediator with them all the time to discipline while they teach. They feel a little lost and helpless. They are suffering also so anything that can help is welcomed.

The mediator and the teacher who had this experience spoke about it a lot to their colleagues. I receive feedback and requests to replicate the experience with others.

DAVID: Can you tell me, given that our readers might like to implement your practice in their circumstances, how you 'went about it' in your school context? Can you do so in as much detail as possible? Are there any stories that come to mind that might be instructive to our readers?

You must know that I do not have much perspective yet. It's pretty new to me. So for the moment, I would say that it is necessary above all:

A climate of trust and alliance with the school. For my part, they know me. I always spend two or three years in the same school. I always make sure to create a link with the management. I keep them informed of everything I do with young people before, during and after. Before: we decide together what to work. During: they are aware of everything I do, often they participate. After: I report on the progress with the young people. We discuss it...

Before starting to work with young people, I organize with all the teachers of the young people involved, and for two days we share together so I can show my posture, my methods and concepts of work. These are two resource days for them. I take this opportunity to model a



little what I do with young people. And if certain ideas seduce them, then I train them and I help them move toward application in the class.

It's important to know that everything I do in school costs nothing to the school, the kids or their families. This is paid for by the general council of the concerned city or a foundation with donations. So maybe that makes them more curious, open to new techniques.

Gather the people involved before putting in place a new concept in order to fully explain all intentions, answer all questions, and remove any misunderstandings. When I say all, it's parents included of course. Intentions and ethics. Put all people at ease. It will not harm the young people in any way, nor the accompanying adults (no repercussion around confidentiality). Make completely transparent all the steps of what we will do and why we will do it.

DAVID: Did you have difficulties that you had to resolve as you proceeded? If so, how did you resolve them?

At the beginning when I started in 2008, yes. As I said above, I met many difficulties related to teachers' suspicion of me. Primarily because I was a foreigner to the school system. The school world was a new country that I had to visit smoothly. Learn their language, their habits and customs. Now they have adopted me and know where I am going. It is them today who call me to intervene. I cannot go everywhere so I train a lot of people who duplicate this work in other schools.

Honestly, the school loves narrative ideas. For themselves, for the young people. The only difficulty for them is how to apply the ideas with 30 students in front of them and while they are in a position to deliver knowledge. We have a lot of fun to find how to apply them in their daily lives. But I no longer encounter any difficulties since I proceeded as I said above.

Regarding proxy conversations, they are surprised at first but open to experiment.

DAVID: Did you, at any time, get the sense you were now on your own and had to re-invent the more traditional or classical IWP?

I do not know if I'm on my own, but what I do know is that I feel comfortable with this kind of conversation, this way of working. I believe very strongly in its power and efficiency. I know that from now on I have this new opportunity to intervene and that makes me stronger and less helpless.

On the other hand, the young audience has no prerequisite on what can be offered to them as sometimes adults have. They are open and they like to be surprised, they like to play. They like to see adults in another role.





DAVID: Pierre, knowing Dina's practice as you do, what would you say is unique about a Dina Scherrer IWP?

Difficult question but I will try humbly to answer it.

In supervision, I think that we use this conversation fairly the same way you have taught us. I would say that what is new to me is that this conversation helps both the accompanying person and the young person or the person who is going to listen to the conversation. It may not be the initial intention, but every time I have had this conversation playing my client it has been as strong for me as it is for them. For me, it helped me to help my client by opening new tracks. It reinforced the work done with my client while I thought I was not going much forward. It was also the case for Moustapha who told me that it had made him feel more helpful for Serkane. So a sense of utility.

Regarding my work with the teacher and her student, clearly I was inspired by the proxy conversation, but I took the initiative by asking my "client" to be directly present rather than having the conversation heard afterward. And it was very powerful for the young person; I saw openness and change before my eyes during the conversation. I felt the need for both of them to be present.

I would like to quote and translate to answer this question an excerpt from the foreword I wrote for Dina's book about the Tree of Life, published earlier this year:

"From the beginning, Dina has been an instinctive activist of narrative practices, as though the mind and posture had flowed naturally in her veins long before she met the ideas of Michael White and David Epston. Her posture is a unique blend of intuition, humor, optimism and benevolence. All those who worked with her or benefited from her teaching will tell you the same thing: with Dina, everything becomes possible and under her amused gaze, the summits that seemed tragically inaccessible the minute before very quickly become "why not" punctuated by laughter."

To complete this answer, I would like to add that Dina has been from the beginning a very pragmatic practitioner, never afraid of anything, a "Maverick" walking out of the marked paths. I think it's partly due to the fact that she did not go to any "large university" and therefore she was not formatted by the French university system, which produces very knowledgeable big brains, but are totally insensitive to the poetry of the reality and its opportunities. It is thanks to this ability to constantly invent and test new possibilities that Dina has become one of the leading French-language narrative practices, and a practitioner who is unanimously acclaimed





by her clients who talk about the conversations with her with tears in their voices and in their eyes.

DAVID: Dina, while re-inventing the classic IWP, do you owe any thanks to colleagues whom you consulted or were in discussion?

I performed with Pierre in two conversations by IWP, so we talked a lot about this subject. But what I did in schools actually I did not talk to my colleagues. I talked about it after the fact.

DAVID: What were your initial outcomes? Did you do any evaluations, either informal or formal?

Since I have not taken a lot of risks in choosing schools where I have been working for a while and where I know teachers well, the results have been really great.

The young people talked about it to their classmates. The teachers talked to their colleagues. All in very positive terms. And that gave ideas to other teachers and mediators. The results are rather informal at the moment. In the 3 schools where I intervened this year, I asked them live this experience. The management of the three schools wants me to develop more next year. The experience has changed the teacher/student relationship in almost every session.

DAVID: By any chance, did the 'student's enthusiasm' for IWP exceed your own?

Yes really the results have been beyond my expectations.

The young people all showed great emotion when they heard their stories told and played by their companions (the professionals who accompany them like mediators and teachers). This gave way to beautiful and rich conversations. This helped anchor progress. This creates another form of relationship between them. Two young people said that they often listen to the audio conversation.

DAVID: By any chance, did they contribute any thoughts or ideas to your re-invention (if I can call it that) of IWP?

They have contributed by their openness and confidence in accepting this new way of proceeding. By accepting it they showed me it was possible.

Once, I could not do it because the teacher hesitated. He was afraid of losing his authority or his credibility. On the other hand, young people have always accepted.

DAVID: How long is it since you first introduced IWPs to your school contexts?





Two years.

DAVID: Do you consider that the outcomes are improving? If so, what are your grounds for believing this to be so?

Yes, considerably. In the schools where I intervene the directors wish to make the conversation more widely available to teachers, they also want to deploy these conversations to all the educational mediators of a department. I lead follow-up groups with them every month and they want to bring these conversations into their practices.

On the other hand, with my colleague Catherine Mengelle, I will be teaching a workshop with narrative practitioners who accompany young people in schools next September. I want to make them aware of IWP conversations. I was waiting to have some experience before doing trainings. So it will help them to develop a little more this kind of work within schools.

DAVID: By any chance, have you ever consulted the students about how you conduct your re-invented IWP? If so, what did they have to say?

No, but this question makes me want to do it. For the moment I always take a lot of time to present to them what we were going to do, to make clear all the intentions, and answer their questions. I make sure to open a space where they are safe to speak with me. Now that you ask me the question, I really want to speak with the students about how they see things and the new ideas they might have. Back to school!

