

CHAPTER 1



Kenny

An Introduction to What Works



Until lions have their historians, tales of hunting
will always glorify the hunter.
—AFRICAN PROVERB

Several years ago, a third-grade student named Kenny was referred to the school practitioner by his teacher for a psychological evaluation. He received a failing grade in math for the first quarter and barely passed most of his other subjects. In addition to the assessment of intellectual ability and academic skills, state regulations required the completion of a social/family history form. This form was routinely completed as the first step of the evaluation process.

When asked about his family background during the first few minutes of the meeting, Kenny reported that he witnessed his father's murder when he was 5 years old. At age 6, he was removed from his mother's custody when she was charged with child abuse. Kenny was placed with his aunt, who was caring for several children of her own at the time. One older brother was in jail for burglary, and another was on parole. It was Kenny's third different school since kindergarten, and his aunt was preparing to move again. The practitioner had heard similar stories from other students, but his reaction to this one was different.

In the midst of a routine psychological evaluation, the practitioner was stunned by the details of Kenny's family history. Although it was probably only a couple minutes, it felt like hours as Kenny and the practitioner sat there staring at the table in silence—Kenny occasionally sobbing, the practitioner wondering what to say to a third grader who had experienced more chaos in 9 short years than some people do in a lifetime. The practitioner finally broke the silence:

SCHOOL PRACTITIONER (SP): Kenny, with all the stuff that's happened in your life, how do you manage to keep hanging in there, coming to school and trying to do the schoolwork?

KENNY: My aunt always tells me to never give up because quitters don't make it.

SP: Hmm. What else does your aunt say or do that helps you hang in there and keep trying?

KENNY: She's always saying these things about "trying hard" and "doing your best" and "giving your all" and stuff like that.

SP: And it helps you hang in there and keep trying when she says these things?

KENNY: Sometimes.

SP: So she says these things and it helps you.

KENNY: Yeah. And she tells me I'll be the only one in the family to graduate from high school.

SP: Wow. Is that something you want to do?

KENNY: (*Nods head "yes."*) I want to graduate.

SP: Why is it important for you to graduate?

KENNY: If I graduate I can get a good job.

SP: What do you mean?

KENNY: If you graduate you can get a good job. They pay you a lot of money and you can buy your own house.

Kenny became more engaged as the conversation shifted from what was missing or not working to what *was* working in his life. He leaned forward in his chair, his speech became livelier, and he looked at the practitioner instead of staring at the floor. Kenny was now an active participant.

When asked what else made things better, Kenny reported that his older brother Robert occasionally helped him with homework. He added that it took him longer than others to do math, and it helped when his teacher gave him extra time. Building on these resources, the practitioner worked with Kenny, the teacher, and his aunt to amplify what had helped him persevere in school and elsewhere. His teacher gladly provided extra time in math. Robert also stepped up his efforts to help Kenny with homework. Surprised to hear of the positive effect of her homespun sayings, Kenny's aunt was delighted to continue her simple words of wisdom. The teacher incorporated similar words of support. Finally, the practitioner and Kenny collaborated to expand his aunt's sayings into self-talk strategies to cope with tough situations at school and elsewhere.

Kenny provided all of the necessary material for change. Brief intervention strategies emerged from Kenny's resources—his story of resilience—that helped him to survive and persist in school and elsewhere. The practitioner followed Kenny's lead and applied what worked in Kenny's life to the referral problem.

Kenny's heroic story inspired a watershed experience for the practitioner. Before meeting Kenny, the practitioner believed that change was about the intervention, not the individual. Change, he thought, emerged from the practitioner's competence in designing expert interventions and selling them to the client. Practitioners were the heroes of intervention. But Kenny changed all that. His story of courage and resilience, as the epigraph beginning this chapter suggests, overshadowed the hunter's tale of the hunt—the story of diagnosis and deficiencies. Kenny, the practitioner came to realize, was the real lion of change.

Kenny did not qualify for special education services. He continued to struggle academically, but the strategies that arose from his experience served him well. As the school year ended, Kenny made a point to proudly inform the practitioner that he was promoted to the fourth grade.

CONCLUSIONS

Kenny provides a backdrop for the rest of the book. Chapter 2 reviews empirical literature to explain how change occurred with Kenny, and translates 40 years of research into pragmatic guidelines for school-based practice. Subsequent chapters illustrate these guidelines with prac-

tical examples of intervention for a wide range of clients and problems. Kenny also proves that change can occur quickly and with limited practitioner time. Effective intervention resulted from a 15-minute conversation sandwiched between the routine chores of evaluation. This book hopes to convince you that every contact, no matter how brief, is an opportunity for change.