



# CO-AUTHORING HOPE: Using Narrative Therapy to Bridge Gaps in Education for Homeless Youth

We are the stories we tell ourselves.

These narratives shape not just how we see the world, but how we navigate it, survive it, and ultimately transform it. For youth experiencing homelessness, the power to reclaim and rewrite their stories can be the difference between giving up and showing up.





*Full Sail Ahead: Supporting Students Navigating Smooth & Stormy Waters*

© 2026 CA Homeless Education Conference



*Full Sail Ahead: Supporting Students Navigating Smooth & Stormy Waters*

© 2026 CA Homeless Education Conference

# The Stories That Define Us

We are wired for narrative. From childhood, we learn about ourselves and our world through stories: the ones we hear, the ones we're told about ourselves, and the ones we internalize as truth.

Think about your favorite movie. What story does it tell? More importantly, what story does it tell about the human capacity for change, redemption, or transformation?



## The Greatest Showman

They are each more than their oddity. The story they told themselves around it defined their mood, relationships, and worth. Someone else believed their approach to themselves could change.

## Other Powerful Narratives

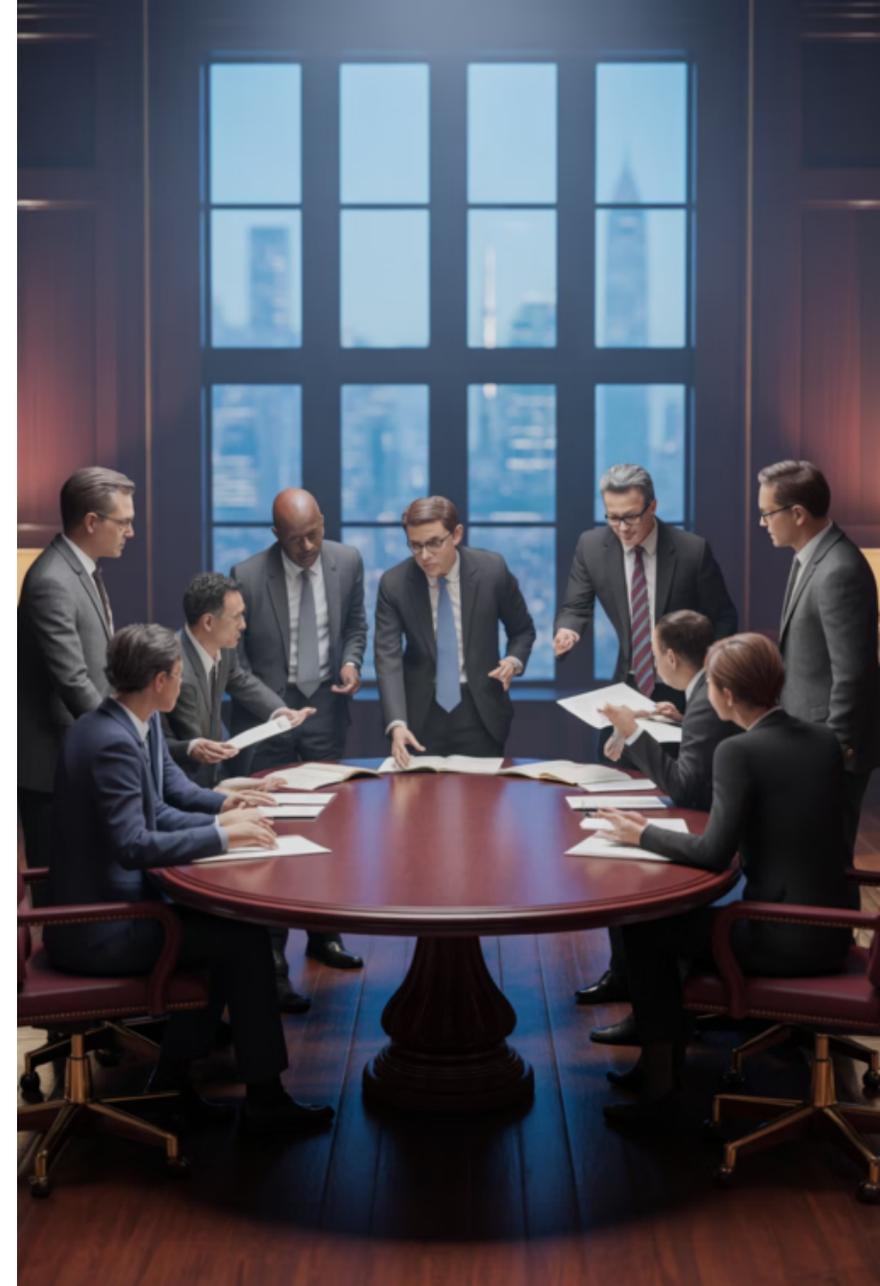
Inside Out 2, A Quiet Place, Creed, Spider-Verse, and Top Gun: Maverick each shows how the stories we tell about our highs and lows shape every decision we make.

# The Stories We're Told Shape Our Reality

Every day, we're fed narratives through news headlines, social media, and statistical reports. These stories may inform us, but they actually shape how we think and feel about entire populations, including our most vulnerable youth.

"Homeless student arrested for truancy" reads very differently than "Youth experiencing housing crisis seeks educational support." Same situation. Completely different story. Completely different response from the reader.

The narratives we construct around homelessness, poverty, and educational failure often reflect systemic assumptions more than individual truth. For the young people living these experiences, these dominant stories become internalized thus shaping how they see themselves, their worth, and their future.



# The Miracle Question: What Story Are You Living?

## The Question

If I snapped my fingers and everything in your life was set right, what would your life look like?

## The Revelation

Your answer reveals the story you internally tell about your worth, your purpose, and your capacity, all stemming from how you've interpreted your past.

## The Reality Check

"That sounds too good to be true." When I use AI to create a "Day in the Life" vision with students, this response tells me everything about the limiting story they're carrying.

The miracle question is solely about excavating the narratives that have convinced us what we deserve, what we're capable of, and what's possible. For homeless youth, these internalized stories are often shaped by trauma, loss, and systemic messages of unworthiness.



# My Story: Finding Hope in Darkness

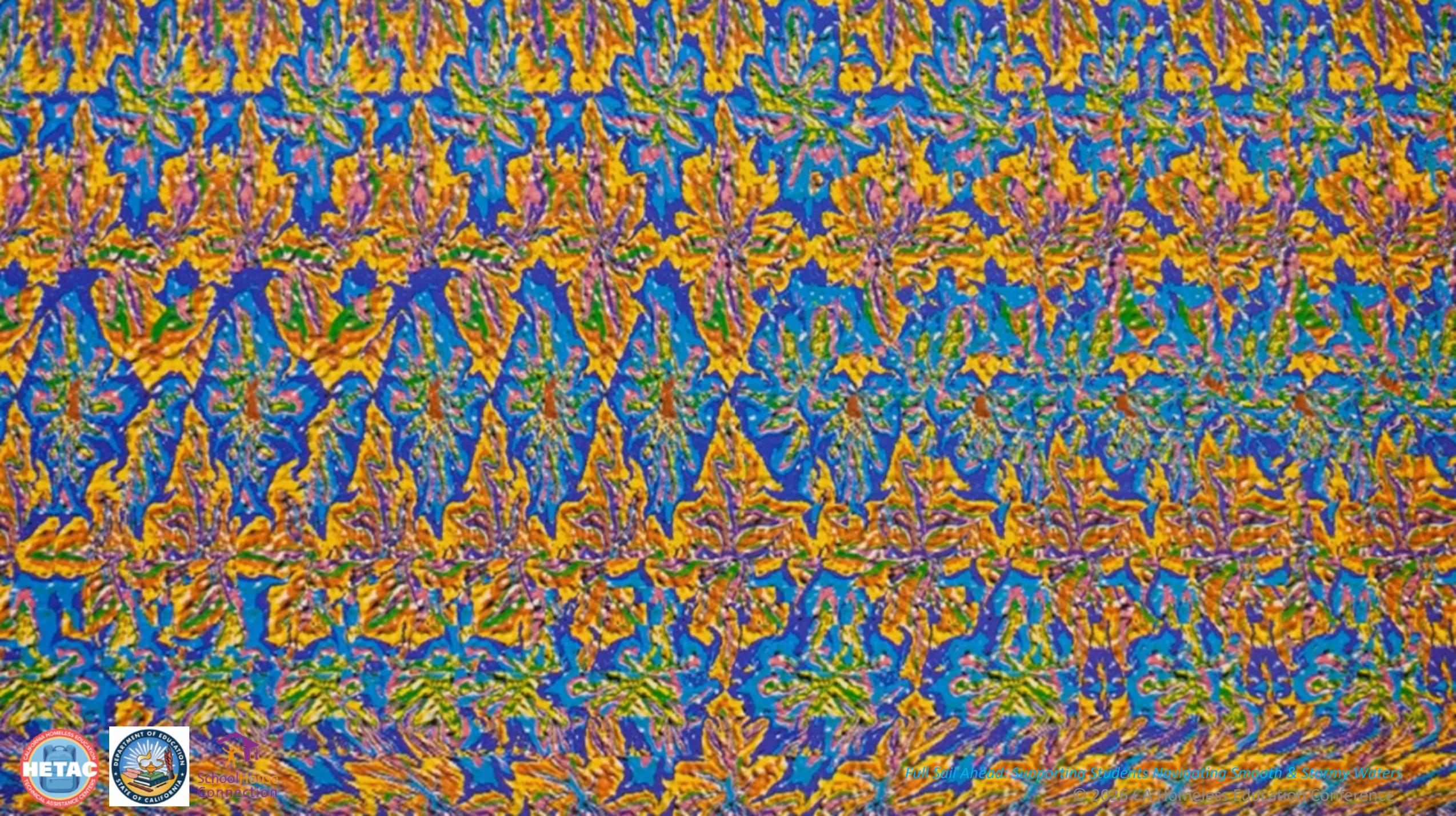


At 28, I was diagnosed with lupus. It destroyed my kidneys so severely that years later I lost consciousness twice, lost oxygen, and nearly flatlined. I came face to face with my own mortality.

I could have told myself a story of victimhood, of unfairness, of a life stolen. Instead, I chose to see those dark moments as my new way to connect with the most hurt and hopeless young people I would later serve.

**What do you do when you're inches from death?** You rethink it as a moment to taste how sweet a vibrant, healthy life is. You recognize that we don't see with our eyes... we see with our minds.

☐ **Our brain interprets and determines the meaning, value, and relationship with what happens in our life.** What we tell ourselves molds our identity and not the actual experiences themselves. This is the foundation of narrative therapy.



*Full Sail Ahead: Supporting Students Navigating Smooth & Stormy Waters*

© 2026 CA Homeless Education Conference

# The Reality for Homeless Youth: An Equity Crisis

Before we explore narrative therapy as a tool, we must first understand the profound inequities these young people face. Educational equity means ensuring all students have access to the resources, support, and opportunities they need to thrive regardless of housing status, race, ability, gender identity, or background.

**But students experiencing homelessness are not starting from the same place**, and our systems are often not equipped to meet them where they are.

## Barriers to Access

- Lack of stable school enrollment due to mobility
- Delays receiving IEPs, 504s, or academic records
- No internet, devices, or quiet study space
- Absenteeism and academic gaps from instability

## Systemic Inequities

- Disproportionate discipline toward students of color
- Undiagnosed mental health issues hindering performance
- Greater exposure to criminalization and foster care
- Generational poverty and intergenerational trauma



# The Data Tells a Story of Inequality

The disparities facing homeless youth aren't just anecdotal but documented, measurable, and deeply tied to intersecting systems of oppression. Understanding these numbers helps us contextualize the urgency of narrative-based intervention.

## 20-30%

### Lower Graduation Rates

Homeless students graduate at rates 20-30% lower than their housed peers, reflecting systemic barriers to educational completion.

## 2x

### Discipline Disparities

Black and LGBTQ+ homeless youth face suspension and disciplinary action at twice the rate of their peers.

## 60%

### Late Identification

Over 60% of homeless students aren't identified until after major disruptions like school changes or crises have already occurred.

These statistics from NAEHCY, NCHE, and HUD data show how homelessness intersects with race, disability, LGBTQ+ identity, and other equity markers. The educational system too often responds to symptoms rather than addressing root causes... and students pay the price.



# Narrative Therapy: An Act of Resistance

Narrative therapy is not just a clinical approach. **It's an act of resistance.** It helps young people rewrite the stories that systems and circumstances have written for them. This is equity work at its core.



## Centers Student Voice

Honors lived experience and centers voices often silenced by systemic structures, restoring agency and self-determination.



## Re-Authors Identity

Helps youth transform identities shaped by trauma and displacement: "I'm a bad kid" becomes "I've survived things no one should have to."



## Counters Internalized Oppression

Challenges deficit narratives and excavates untold stories of strength, resilience, and survival.



## Builds Future Orientation

Asks "What do you want to be known for?" and helps students articulate identities tied to possibility, not just pain.



# From Barriers to Breakthroughs: How Narrative Therapy Bridges the Gap

When we address systemic barriers through a narrative lens, we create pathways for students to move from survival to success. Identity and academic persistence are deeply connected—when students reclaim their sense of self, they're more likely to re-engage with school.

01

---

## Reframe Internalized Stigma

Transform stories from "deficiency" to "resilience" recognizing that adaptation is strength, not failure.

02

---

## Reconnect to Educational Identity

Help students see themselves as more than grades or absences reintegrating self-worth with academic belonging.

03

---

## Externalize the Problem

"The homelessness is the problem, not you"—separating circumstance from identity creates space for agency.

04

---

## Build Safe Therapeutic Alliances

When youth feel heard, seen, and respected, they begin to trust adults again which is essential for educational engagement.

05

---

## Create Future-Focused Vision

Narrative work restores future orientation, which is key to motivation, goal-setting, and academic persistence.



# Practical Steps: Co-Authoring Hope in Your Work

Narrative therapy isn't reserved for clinical spaces. It can be woven into schools, shelters, and community partnerships. Here's how you can begin integrating these principles into your work with homeless youth.

## → **Partner with mental health providers**

Collaborate with community organizations to offer low-barrier, narrative-based services that meet youth where they are.

## → **Create storytelling spaces**

Establish journaling clubs, digital storytelling projects, or narrative circles in shelters and schools where youth can reclaim their voices.

## → **Train staff in narrative principles**

Shift from judgment to curiosity. Replace "Why aren't you trying?" with "Tell me your story." Language matters.

## → **Center cultural context**

Acknowledge racial, cultural, and historical trauma. Respect language, identity, and spiritual frameworks youth bring. Practice co-authorship, not top-down storytelling.

## → **Listen for hope**

Can you hear what they're saying and what they're not saying? Notice absolutes like "always" and "never." These reveal belief systems, not reality. The mind craves explanations and will gravitate toward blame. Help students find alternate narratives.





# Give feedback to Brian

Scan this QR code



Or go to

<https://talk.ac/briananthonydunn>

and enter this code when prompted

TALK

