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Children in the Crossfire. A Relational-Narrative Approach to Bridging Home and School

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Abstract

In this article, I show how systemic social constructionist premises and practices transform, enliven, and expand the range of possibility within my everyday work. The article highlights intentional steps taken towards social collaboration in educational systems. Social collaboration is possible when "self" is regarded as relational and narrative. Individualistic definition of self is critically viewed as an obstacle to social collaboration. I present my work as a family therapist in the form of a case vignette that shows how collaborative work between parties in conflict can significantly impact outcomes for the child and others in relations to "bullying" at school. I describe how I work with students, parents, and school staff to utilise conflict in a way that improves conditions for children and brings about change in school systems. From this, new possibilities become available to co-construct meaningful and dialogical conversations between parents and school administrators. My argument is that this form of collaboration with families and their children supports change at multi layers.

Introduction

As a family therapist and consultant, I have been offering counselling services to couples, families and their children in the Greater Toronto Area since the late 1990s. I provide counselling and consultations to people from different walk of life, with many various cultural, linguistic, and social backgrounds. I am interested in meeting all family members in sessions to engage in conversations and address problems together. For instance, if clients identify problems in a parent-child relationship, in sibling or couple relationships, or between parents and other professionals, I invite those who are not in the session to join our therapeutic conversations. I aim to extend my invitation to all parties in conflict to participate in sessions as long as no safety concerns exist. Therefore, "who attends" is always negotiated at the earliest stage of my involvement. When parents share concerns about their children at school, I suggest the possibility of having meetings with teachers and staff. In this context, I use various formats to ensure the effectiveness and usefulness of conversations for participants. Parents are invited to take the initiative to arrange the first meeting with school administrators. I will explain in the following sections how these meetings are facilitated, and a stage is set for collaborative conversations in the context of conflict.

Theoretical Framework

The following four aspects to the constructionist orientation (Gergen 2015) inspire my consultation and counselling services. Throughout this article, I contrast these aspects with those of the dominant individualistic discourse. The four aspects are the following:

- Self as a relational being: Self develops its meanings in relation to others as opposed to viewing self as a bounded separated being.
- Language is not a tool to present or transfer messages or information from one person to another. Instead, it constitutes realities (Wittgenstein 2009). It is pragmatic. It makes new worlds possible for us. "Language has the power to shape our consciousness; and it does so for each human child, by providing the theory that he or she uses to interpret and manipulate their environment" (Halliday 1993, p.107).
- Truth is contextual. It exists within the "local coherence" instead of being a single truth and universal norm.
- Objectivity in human relations is not possible. Values guide knowledge-making processes. "Self-reflection and self-reflexivity" are critical elements of deconstruction and reconstruction of patterns of interactions.

Bridging Home and School

The initial steps to inquire about a problem affecting a child at school or home include:

a) Identifying stakeholders who care about children and want to help children address problems in their lives.

b) Inviting stakeholders to participate in a meeting. Main stakeholders are usually the parents of the student, their primary teachers, and the school principal or vice principal. In these meetings, the

degree of a child's or student's involvement is carefully assessed, as the problem talk (Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996) may harm and reduce the child's ability to stand up against the problem.

c) Discussing what actions each participant takes in relation to the identified problem. I often find that adults involved do coordinate or collaborate. The absence of coordination and collaboration among adults has shown to prolong students' experiences of problems and lead to the deterioration of student's situation at school.

d) Getting to know a student through participants' eyes. The process of getting to know centres on a student's abilities and qualities. It brings forward a student's preferred self, often overlooked due to the dominance of the problem talk or problematic story. In conversations, each stakeholder shares their knowledge of the student. This helps participants and the student have new views, ideas, and solutions about the identified problem. Talking about the student's strengths and abilities opens up a healing space for repairing and reconnecting with the student facing the problem. These conversations continue until all participants' actions become further aligned with one another in supporting the student to resolve the problem.

Mapping the problem story (Freedman & Combs 1996; White 2007; Zimmerman & Dickerson 1996) begins with my conversations with the key participants to re-define students' difficulties in social contexts within school systems. Collaborative talk with parents and school staff creates a platform to critically view and re-view internalised individualist, modernist beliefs about relationships between parents and their children, between parents and teachers, as well as between teachers and students.

Stepping outside of the dominant individualistic discourse of viewing self as a bounded and separate unit is not easy as the individualistic discourse prevalent in our educational system are influencing how we view students' issues at school. Individualistic discourses frame people as problems. They disallow us to locate problems in-between people as relational by-products. This perspective leads to conflict between home and school because each party locates the problem in the other.

When relational aspects of issues - including values, beliefs, and problems - in students' lives are acknowledged and accepted as an alternative discourse, our work begins. Shifting from individualistic to relational discourses allows key players in a student's life to be part of the process of change in a more constructive, dialogical, and transformative fashion.

Case Vignette: Johnny's Story

I would like to reflect upon my experience of working with a family and their son, Johnny, in the context of a family-school relationship. This story illustrates how working with multiple stakeholders brings about change in students' lives. All names used in this narrative are pseudonyms to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants in this work.

Description of concerns

Johnny is a 10-year-old boy who came with his parents for therapy. The parents, Mary and Tom, said Johnny has been experiencing "fears, anxiety and peer interactional difficulties at school." Mary and Tom talked about their experiences of "conflict" with the school staff when they tried to help Johnny with his problems at school. Johnny said, "I am being 'bullied' at school. There are a few classmates that don't like me and keep teasing me until I get angry and hit them. Then I am in trouble, I am sent

to the principal's office. I tell the principal that the other students started first but the principal doesn't believe me and says I should not be hitting anyone". Mary felt that the school had to do something about the situation. Tom said this way of handling the problem would not make "bullying" stop.

The parents explained that they took on board the school's recommendations and registered Johnny for a behavioural management programme. Johnny said the 10-week program helped him learn alternative ways of responding to his classmates, but "bullying and anger" in student relationships did not stop. Mary and Tom said the school called them daily due to ongoing incidents between Johnny and his classmates.

Mary said the conflict between home and school became further intensified, as the school continued addressing Johnny's problem individually by locating and labelling the problem within Johnny. Mary and Tom contemplated changing Johnny's school and talked to alternative schools. They initiated a formal complaint against the school staff. Johnny was suspended from the school. The school recommended that the parents take anger management courses and parenting classes. Tom felt that the school blamed them for the problems. The parents took their concern to the school trustee as they did not see any actions taken by the school staff.

Naming the problems: conversations to separate Johnny from the problem

Mary and Tom named Johnny's problems as social problems. To them, Johnny's problems consisted of "bullying, lack of voice, isolation, fear, anxiety, and negative reputation at school." In therapy sessions, we characterised and named these problems. Johnny provided thick descriptions (White 1995) of how these problems impacted him, and his interactions with his parents, as well as his relationships with his peers and teachers at school. Johnny said his problems with his classmates had given him a "negative reputation" at school. Johnny said his classmates did not include him in their activities and play. Mary and Tom were concerned about Johnny becoming further isolated. His negative reputation further silenced his voice. Mary and Tom named some other problems, such as "lack of cooperation with school staff and Johnny being viewed as solely responsible for 'hitting'." The parents felt that our meetings with the school staff would help both sides (home and school) come together to see Johnny's problems as relational and would allow them to develop and coordinate actions for students.

Descriptions of the family members' resources, qualities and abilities

Mary and Tom described Johnny as a fun, energetic, and smart child who loves helping and caring for others. Johnny is very good at sports, such as soccer, basketball, and baseball. He likes playing music and watching comedy. The parents linked Johnny's interests to their own. Tom and Mary described themselves as a couple that value education, children's issues, and parents' involvement with school activities.

A possibility for change through co-construction of meanings and actions

As Mary and Tom began to file their complaint with the school trustee, they talked to other parents whom they trusted and felt comfortable. During this time, they received confirmation from other

parents concerning how the school addressed bullying. They found that other parents experienced the same treatment from the school and all cases were dealt with individually.

This new alliance between Mary and Tom and some other parents boosted Mary and Tom's energy to address the issue differently. While Mary and Tom were waiting to talk to the school trustee, they found that the principal was about to retire; consequently, the school management team had changed.

The parents didn't see any change in Johnny's problems at school. The summer passed, and the new school year began. Now the new school management team was in power. The parents felt the new management might have a better understanding, novel ideas, and strategies to reduce bullying at school. Mary and Tom became more involved with the new management and wanted to address Johnny's problems more effectively. They felt more energised by the responses they received from the new principal. This fostered hope that things could change and be reconstructed in a more responsive way.

Collaborative work through family sessions

Johnny and his parents participated in family therapy sessions. Johnny drew pictures of the problems. In our externalising conversations (White 2007), Johnny began to see when and how "fear and anxiety" haunted him in his interactions with others. He saw when and what actions made "fear and anxiety" less apparent in his daily interactions with his classmates. Johnny's parents shared their stories of "fear and anxiety" with Johnny and described actions they took to reduce "fear and anxiety" in their interactions with others. Johnny learned from his parents how to reduce the impact of 'fear and anxiety' on his life.

Collaborative work through meetings with school staff & the parents

Johnny's parents and teachers attended our regular biweekly collaborative meeting. As our conversation continued, they became more aware of Johnny's struggle at school.

At the beginning our conversations, we identified the staff's belief about Johnny that he was seen as a sole responsible troublemaker who could not get along with others. We discussed the impact of this belief on the staff's relationships with Johnny and also with other classmates. We detected that this belief significantly contributed negatively to the way the school staff talk to Mary and Tom. This belief had led the school staff to believe that the parents were responsible for not following the zero-tolerance policy at school. On the other hand, the parents expressed their concerns for Johnny and other students differently in our meetings, as they shared that having the zero-tolerance policy did not help children get along with one another, but instead it had perpetuated a culture of punishment with limited learning opportunities for students.

We continued with using externalising language (White 2007) to re-view Johnny's problems in relation to his peers and teachers. The externalising language helped the parents and teachers become further engaged in understanding the construction of "bullying" in Johnny's interactional patterns with peers. It created a new platform for the parents and teachers to view Johnny differently.

As Johnny's struggles were externalised and placed in his interactions with classmates, the parents and teachers learned that they might be contributing unintentionally to the construction of the problem as well. In this exploration, we all became more sensitive to how we analysed, labelled, and

treated Johnny. We stopped labelling Johnny as a problem. Talking about Johnny without the "problem" label helped the parents and teachers view and interact with each other differently. They became allied and shared their ideas and wisdom against the bullying. The school staff began to view Mary and Tom not as difficult parents, but as active and caring parents who value non-violent resistance actions towards bullying. Through our conversations, the school staff became aware of and in tune with challenges that both Mary and Tom had in supporting their son, Johnny, with respect to his daily experiences at school.

Collaborative talks made visible the role that Johnny's classmates played in the construction of bullying. All stakeholders examined the discourse affecting Johnny negatively and began to make visible the connection between Johnny's problems and the school's cultural/social contexts. It came to light that his classmates would need to become more aware of their contribution to Johnny's experiences of fear and anxiety. Our conversations extended to an understanding that Johnny's problems were not just his. When his problems were viewed as relational concerns, the parents and teachers wanted to explore ways of tackling the problem from other domains to assist Johnny in gaining voice, pushing fear and anxiety out of his life, and taking actions to eliminate bullying in students' interactions.

The teachers came up with brilliant ideas for new ways to tackle issues such as bullying and negative reputations. They introduced group activities for students, during which they worked together in mapping out the impact of bullying on their fellow classmates. The teachers started to imagine ways to engage students in talking about these notions and in becoming aware of their impact on other students. They used visual aids, drew, and wrote poetry and letters in their group projects. These actions were a step towards reconstructing Johnny's self-narrative as a student.

Challenges during the collaborative process

Working with this family and school staff was delightful, energising, and insightful. However, to remain collaborative, I needed to remind myself of the main principle of collaborative practice:

Maintaining a not-knowing stance and suspending my pre-knowledge (Anderson 1997).

This principle allowed me to become aware of the intention behind my questions and to tune into clients' stories by listening to multiple and often contradictory narratives exchanged in the meetings. Listening to the multiple narratives about Johnny allowed me to hold each story tentatively and not marry any singular narrative about who Johnny was or should be. This principle helps tap into participants' local knowledge and negotiate multiple realities and meanings about the problem (Shotter 2008; Gergen 1994; McNamee & Hoskin 2012; Anderson 1997; White 2007). Our conversations highlighted the multiplicity of references and ideas, as we became more engaged in deliberate, and intentional conversations to co-create suitable conditions for the relationships between Johnny, his peers, and his teachers.

Multiplicity of truths, ideas, views, and identities.

We, practitioners, are professionally trained to find discrepancies in clients' narratives and construct our questions to identify gaps in people's life stories. Practitioners learn to seek truth in clients' narratives. This learning must be unlearned for practitioners to engage in collaborative conversations. Engaging with what is shared in the here and now, being radically present (McNamee 2014) to what

is exchanged, and "double listening" (White 2007) to better identify stories of resilience are critical elements of "re-authoring conversations" (White 1995).

Contribution of multiple discursive regimes to problems.

Paying attention to and shedding light on the influence of the disciplinary discursive regimes was a challenge. Maintaining inclusivity of all voices in conversation was difficult. Silencing voices of blame and elevating voices of cooperation invited participants to work together and join in a shared inquiry. What helped was our ability to name the problem as "bullying" and locate it in the larger context of this particular school. Naming the problem, using externalising language, and actively characterising influential discourses allowed us to explore alternative responses to bullying in a sensible and influential manner.

Intended and Unintended Outcomes

Our regular meetings at school and home continued for a few consecutive months. Our collaborative work reshaped the discourse that traditionally clouded this school system. Our conversations helped to create conditions for Johnny to learn and develop new skills with the guidance and assistance of his teachers and parents. This relational approach of addressing students' challenges became a template for both parents and teachers to practice narrative and relational ideas in the classroom for other students.

Viewing problems relationally led to more in-depth conversations on the importance of safety of children at school and highlighted relational responsibilities (Gergen 1994; McNamee & Hoskin 2012; Jenkins 2009) to teach children to stop the practice of bullying and aggression in their interactions with one another. The school staff and Johnny's parents decided to take active roles in inviting other parents to join in practices such as a) separating students from bullying, b) informing students about the effects of bullying on others, and c) assisting children to respond to bullying without violence.

Johnny, along with his parents and teachers, became active participants in separating reactions to bullying from practices of bullying. School staff told me how they co-created many creative ways of educating children about bullying and creative responses to bullying in a non-violent way at the school. Johnny said that one of his teachers created a campaign to teach students to express themselves in a non-violent way. The campaign was invitational, non-punitive, and educational. Older students served as role models for the younger ones, exhibiting non-violent responses and respectful behaviours in social situations. Teachers assigned the older peers new tasks: to be supportive and patient with those who practice bullying and respond to them in non-violent ways to break the cycle of bullying. Teachers became creative in developing projects to train younger students to express and develop non-violent responses to aggression and bullying.

Intended and unintended outcomes rest on the notion of relational being (Gergen 2009) that inspires my work with families and their children. Johnny, Mary, Tom, as well as the teachers and other school staff, created new meanings for their engagement at school and pooled their resources to tackle issues and improve the safety of all students.

Listening to stories of all parties about a problem and its effects on people have strengthened "de-centered but influential" (White 2007), and "non-expert" position (Anderson 1997) that is encouraged in collaborative narrative practices. Remaining curious throughout sessions allows practitioners to

detect multiple narratives, view problems from multiple domains, and discover multiple narratives about persons and problems, as well as have a broader perspective on the location of problems.

By being mindfully vigilant and practicing "double listening" (White 2007), we, practitioners, learn to not view children's problems as solely their own, but pay attention to the context that contributes to and fuels problems in their lives. When we think of self as narrative, one's narrative consists of multiple narratives, paying attention and listening to alternative stories is key in shortening the span of problems in people's lives. Having parties in conflict present in sessions provides opportunities to listen to alternative narratives about children. These opportunities help in significantly shortening the life of problems at children's lives and opens up many opportunities for parties to learn about children as separate from problems. Dialogical conversations help create conditions and invite participants to pay attention to non-violence resistance actions and their impacts on social change.

The following is a snapshot of what Johnny, Johnny's parents, and school staff shared and came to appreciate about this work. They said that collaborative work:

- Allows new policies to be developed that view "problems" relationally not individually
- Encourages all parties in conflict to talk together in a safe environment
- Supports collaborative conversations and discourages top-down talk among different sections at school
- Allows us to adopt a constructive language focused not on deficit but on strength.
- Supports "listening and talking" as a constructive feedback loop platform for further exploration.
- Invites us to externalise and separate people from their problems.
- Creates new coalitions between home and school to tackle "problems" together.
- Targets "problems" not students, families, and/or school staff.

This article highlights how familiar issues can be viewed with new lenses. The individualistic views position a person as solely responsible for problems that they encounter in life. Social constructionist ideas offer us another framework to view self; it suggests that we view self as a relational being. This framework assesses one's actions in coordination with others. One, alone, cannot make a story. One's story is intertwined with stories of others.

Like any institution, an educational system is filled with cultural, political, and social beliefs. It is designed and focused on preparing children to learn, take responsibilities, and adopt life skills to become useful contributors to society; its mandate includes a promise of an open learning space for children to practice fundamental principles of socialisation, growth, development, and learning. People craft and modify school curriculum to help children become active citizens. From the social constructionist point of view, school is a tradition influenced by larger cultural, political, and historical traditions and politics. Sheila McNamee states, "People come together and coordinate in ways that generate rituals, [...] Standards and expectations emerge from these ritualized co-ordinations. We have expectations and beliefs. Those beliefs and values feed into our future co-ordinations. Those values and beliefs are *made*, not found. They are *made* with each other. There is always a standard, but the standard is always within a particular set of relations" (McNamee 2014, p.9).

To rethink, re-view, and re-assign meanings to the notion of conflict shifts our focus to its utility and potential for creating new meanings that free us from being stuck in a particular point of view. Viewing conflict as a rupture makes it possible to access our local knowledge and provides us an opportunity to face and work with the other in a non-threatening way to generate new relational knowledge (Barati 2017).

Social constructionist ideas permit us to critically examine ideas that taken for granted and question essentialist notions such as self, mind, power, and systems. Social constructionist ideas invite us to consider these notions as socially constructed phenomena with real consequences for participants. Collaborative work functions when we recognise many different ideas, views, narratives, search for the local coherence, and coordinate multiplicity in such a way that new understandings emerge (Barati 2017).

Relational narrative practice enables us to revise and reconstruct what is not working and encourage us to question and step outside of restricted frames, such as language, self, and knowledge. The constructionist ideas help us erase the boundaries between us and them and extend the applicability of the pronoun “we” to include everything that is capable of suffering (Shotter 2008).

Viewing the other, as another human, seeing self as part of the other, facilitates the transition from “me” to “we”. Becoming “we” is the first step to collaboration with the other. The dichotomy of us versus them is located in individualistic discourses that prevent us from developing empathy and building inclusive communities. Only by accommodating the plurality of values, we achieve genuine solidarity (Rorty 1979). Schools, as small communities with the intention of fostering autonomy, sociability, and growth in children, are more than ever in need of inclusive and collaborative conversations to address children’s problems relationally.

Let’s keep imagining the kind of world that we can co-create if our approach to viewing and describing problems foregrounds the relational and collaborative, addresses organisational culture so conflict is not seen as an individually based phenomenon, but as a relational, as systemic and social construction.

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