CAN NARRATIVE THERAPY HEAL THE SCHOOL "FAMILY?"

By Michael Thompson, Ph.D.

The philosophy and techniques of narrative family therapy have profoundly influenced my work as a consultant to schools. In my work I no longer try to fix the school's problems, as defined by the faculty or the administration, rather I ask the members of a school community to tell me the story of the way in which they all came to be afflicted by the problem and then I try to help the community re-write their collective story in a way that allows for new interpretations and new modes of behavior. This technique of collective story-telling arises out of the assumption that human beings are interpretive beings and that as a result stories, "actually shape our lives, constitute our lives, and that they 'embrace' our lives" (White, 1994). As Michael White explains:

It's not possible for us to interpret our experience without access to some frame of intelligibility, one that provides a context for our experience, one that makes the attribution of meaning possible.... Stories provide the framework that makes it possible for us to interpret our experience, and these acts of interpretation are achievements that we take an active part in. (White, 1994)

Involving faculties in interpreting and re-interpreting their experience can give them a collective sense of achievement, which in and of itself can be healing. The very act of collective story telling can be empowering for a group. Beyond that, it may be possible to help a school tell a new story about itself, a healing story of hidden power and resourcefulness which creates a new reality by replacing a story of hurt, guilt and blame.

In this article, I would like to accomplish five things. First, I would like to introduce the reader to some of the central concepts of narrative therapy as developed by Michael White and David Epston. Second, I would like to describe the process of the Epston-White interview and the way in which it stands the typical language of psychotherapy and consultative problem solving on its ear. Third, the question of whether schools can be considered to have some of the psychological properties of families---and therefore capable of having a collective story---will be considered. Fourth, I would like to describe three consultation experiences in unhappy schools where I made an effort to elicit and document a new story of the school's experience. Fifth and finally, there will be some questions---in the White and Epston format---asking about the ways in which the reader might be able to adopt the concepts and language of narrative therapy to everyday administration of schools.
THE NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE IN THERAPY

Michael White, from Australia, and David Epston, from New Zealand, have pioneered a new approach to therapy which they describe humorously as "Down Under" therapy. The particular geographical requirements of the two countries may not have been incidental to the narrative therapy techniques which they have developed. In these large and sparsely developed countries, families sometimes have to travel hundreds or even a thousand miles to find a family therapist. Because of these great distances there is little chance for an on-going therapy of many regular visits. Both White and Epston were under pressure to find more efficient ways of working on difficult, traditionally intractable family problems such as encopresis and anorexia. A way had to be found to give families something that they could take back with them, some experience that might grow and continue to promote change far removed from the therapist's office, when the only contact with the therapy might be through phone or fax.

Epston was an anthropologist before becoming a therapist, and brought his respect for story telling to his work, creating a "Story Corner" section of the Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family therapy and encouraging other therapists to tell stories. White had been profoundly influenced by Bateson, and by Bateson's observation, "that it was not possible to us to have an appreciation of objective reality." So White began to focus on the "...network of premises and presuppositions that constitute our maps of the world." (White, Literate Means to Therapeutic Ends). It could be said that both men came to be "therapeutic anthropologists," a description that White has said that he really likes (White, 1994). The two met in 1981, have co-authored numerous articles together, and eventually adopted each other as brothers. It has been an extraordinarily productive relationship for the world of family therapy.

What is the essence of the narrative approach? White says, "I am really interested in people's accounts of their experience" (White, 1994). Further, he attempts to deconstruct a dominant story and make it possible for other, alternative stories to emerge (White, M., 1992). Life is multi-storied, but if one account of a life dominates all others, then alternative facts and unique outcomes are lost because there is no intelligible framework into which they can be fit and find meaning. Because the facts have not been "storied," they are lost from experience.

As analogies for therapy, Epston and White rejected the positivist assumptions of the physical sciences, which imply a machine model in which problems are constructed as breakdowns, and solutions are thought of as corrections and repairs. They rejected the
biological model in which human social life is constructed as a quasi-organism, and in which solutions are seen as emerging from correct diagnosis and excising pathology. They prefer anthropological models of the rite of passage and behavioral text. These allow people to see their crises as transitions and as ways in which they might be escaping from the oppression of dominant stories. The "text analogy" as they call it allows for the "opening of space for the authoring of alternative stories." In short, if you "re-author" your life, then you are indeed living a different life, because stories live our lives. People come to therapy to have their stories fixed. As White writes:

I will make the general assumption that persons experience problems, for which they frequently seek therapy, when the narratives in which they are "storying" their experience, and/or in which they are having their experience "storied" by others, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience, and that, in these circumstances, there will be significant aspects of their lived experience that contradict these dominant narratives. (White, M. and Epston, D. 1990)

This approach takes the traditional depth psychology concept of levels of knowledge, going ever deeper toward the problem, turns it ninety degrees and stands it on its end. Suddenly the levels of depth are simply alternative stories. No one story is deeper or more authentic. Instead there is a dominant story and neglected, alternative stories.

THE WHITE/EPSTON INTERVIEW

How do the techniques of narrative therapy as developed by White and Epston differ from other approaches to therapy? How does the therapist elicit dominant stories from a patient? Having done that, how does the therapist elicit alternative stories from the patient, which may have been lost to him or her? The White/Epston technique follows three steps and involves an unusual use of language and questions. Indeed, many therapists---myself included---have found it quite difficult to adopt the White/Epston language because it is so unfamiliar and even odd at first. Through this description of the steps I rely here on an excellent outline of the White/Epston technique developed by David Epston and Sallyann Roth (Epston, D. and Roth, S., 1994). The three steps of the White/Epston interview are 1) externalizing the problem; 2) mapping the influence of the problem in the person or family's life and relationships; 3) mapping the influence of the person or family in the life of the problem.
The therapist or interviewer's first step is to establish a context where people experience themselves as separate from the problem. Patients traditionally give a "problem-saturated" description of their lives in which the problem and their lives have become intertwined; their lives are the problem. White and Epston ask questions in a way that "externalizes" the problem. They "deconstruct" the story that the problem is using to dominate a person's life. For White and Epston the person or family is never the problem, "the problem is the problem." The problem is externalized and then "unmasked." This objectification of the problem creates a space between the person and the problem in which new possibilities can emerge. White writes:

As persons become engaged in these externalizing conversations, their private stories cease to speak to them of their identity and of the truth of their relationships---these private stories are no longer transfixed of their lives. Persons experience a separation from, and alienation in relation to these stories. (White, 1991)

Perhaps the first use of this technique came when Michael White was treating encroptic children. He embodied their problem and called it "sneaky-poo." The children were then asked how "sneaky-poo" had infiltrated and ruined their lives. In externalizing conversations, the problem is given a name---often a humorous name---and then is talked about as if it were a separate entity, for example: "How does busyness feature in your work life?" "Has perfection always been such a force in your life?" "How does this so-called anorexia interfere with your school work?" In discussing obsessive-compulsive disorder with a hospitalized boy, David Epston might refer to the illness as "Mr. O." and ask why Mr. O is so interested in disrupting the boy's life.

The use of "so-called anorexia" and "Mr. O" is a way of giving patients a new experience of illnesses which previously they may have believed are synonymous with themselves. That is to say, patients come to believe that the dominant story is what they are: a patient may believe that she "is anorexic." White and Epston suggest that "Mr. O" (or "sneaky-poo" or "old trouble") has told them a story which has come to dominate all other stories, and that this is just another of the tricky tactics that "Mr. O" uses to control people's lives.

As the problem is being labeled, the therapist is also eliciting a description of the effects of the problem. This second step is called, "mapping the influence of the problem" in a person or family's life and relationships. It is essential that people be able to tell their story and feel known by the therapist. That fact has long been known to practitioners of all schools of
therapy. However, in narrative therapy the therapist transforms the language of the discourse to create constantly the separation between the patient and the problem. Though patients may find it odd at first and, I sense, "go along" with it to be amenable to a therapist who uses odd language, very soon they are using the language and finding relief in it. The process of externalizing reduces shame and guilt. Patients experience relief from being both understood and from having the problem placed outside themselves. They are only too eager to tell the story of how the problem is wrecking their lives to the eager anthropologist-journalist therapist. (Epston uses a clipboard, writes furiously, stops to get quotations exactly right, and is constantly quoting from his notes for follow-up questions. It is a mesmerizing---and possibly hypnotic---therapeutic technique for the media age.)

After the therapist is satisfied that the problem has been externalized and that the family has had a chance to fully detail the detrimental effects on their lives of the problem, the therapist begins to interview them about their influence on the problem. In this way, people are invited to see themselves as authors or at least co-authors of their own stories. For example, in an interview with a bed-wetting boy and his family, Epston interviewed them in microscopic detail about the one night in twelve years when the boy had been dry, asking questions such as: "How did you know that you might be able to beat bed-wetting that night?" or to the mother, "How did you know to have confidence in your son such that you did not bring the rubber sheet that day?" These prompting questions invite people to elaborate and amplify "unique outcomes" which contradict the dominant story. The unique outcome, during which the person was able to resist or defy the influence of the problem, is then linked in some coherent way to a history of struggle or protest against oppression by the problem. This is called the "unique account" and is elicited by questions such as: "How were you able to defy its prescriptions?" "How might you stand up to business's pressure to get you busy again, to refuse its requirements of you?" "Was it easier than you thought, doing what you did?" "Could your coming here be considered a form of disobedience?"

If a person has accepted the externalization of the problem, and has had enough chance to describe its influence in their lives, then he or she is often the eager teller of a story of courage and resistance. Having told such a story, they are now "on the record" as having stood up to the problem and as having had an impact on it. Most people are glad to be able to tell such a story about themselves. White and Epston try to extend the effect by asking "unique redescription questions" which invite people to develop meaning from the unique accounts they have just given. Such invitations to self-redescription are asked concurrently with speculative next step questions, called "unique possibility questions". Where do you think you will go next now that you have embarked upon self-delight?"
The patient may also be invited to involve other important people (even people now dead) in the newly developing story. This may help to anchor the story and promote its continuation. For example: "Is there any one you would like to tell about this new direction you are taking?" "What would your grandfather have thought if he had heard of these new developments in your life?"

The story can be furthered by asking "experience of experience" questions in which people are invited to be the audience of their own story, by seeing themselves, in their unique accounts through the eyes of others, including friends, relatives and most immediately the therapist. The therapist might ask: "What do you think I am appreciating about you as I hear how you have been leaving busyness behind and are taken up with self-delight?" The patient may also be asked to document or "historicize" the unique outcomes. Historicizing may be done with questions ("Of the people who knew you as you were growing up, who would have been most likely to...?") or it may be done through documentation. Epston very often uses the last fifteen minutes of a session to write a letter with a child that will be mailed to an important person in that child's life. As another method of historicizing, Epston may ask a child patient whether or not his accomplishments can be described to another child back in New Zealand who had also suffered from the same problem but who had been successful in his fight against it. He might say to a boy recovering from obsessive-compulsive disorder, "May I ask Tony, who is the head of the New Zealand society of imperfection, whether you are ready to receive your certificate of imperfection?" The effect on children of documenting and historicizing is very powerfully therapeutic. But Epston doesn't stop there; he takes it a step further. He asks a patient if he can use the patient as a consultant on his next case. This technique, which he calls "consulting your consultants," has an almost thrilling effect on children who have made small gains and I think must help them to consolidate their gains and try for more.

These techniques developed by White and Epston for the interviewing of individuals and families I have adapted for interviewing entire school faculties. I have done this because I believe that faculties in independent schools are small enough and close enough to share some characteristics in common with families. Is the assumption warranted?
THE SCHOOL "FAMILY"

Can a school be compared to a family? Can a school be treated like a family? Certainly many schools are referred to as being "like family" by the people who work in them. In my consulting work, I encounter many, many references to "family-style school" or "family feeling" in the school, or to negative references such as the school is a "dysfunctional family." It is clear that many people experience something in schools that remind them of families, but to what extent does theory support the idea that they are similar? I believe they are similar to the extent that they are both "emotional fields" of the kind described by Murray Bowen.

The human family was earlier described as an emotional unit. It also can be described as an "emotional field." The term "field" is apt, as it suggests the complexity of emotional stimuli that family members are contributing to and responding to on many levels. The emotionally determined functioning of the family members generates a family emotional "atmosphere" or "field" that, in turn, influences the emotional functioning of each person. (Kerr and Bowen, 1988)

It is impossible to spend any amount of time in small, independent schools without experiencing the emotional field that they generate. School faculties are optimistic together (in September), exhausted together (in February); they suffer together over illness, expulsions and parental criticism. In my experience, whole faculties share transferential reactions to school leaders, and are capable of having group depressions. Schools can have a professional atmosphere and a work-like climate, but if you spend any amount of time in them, you will experience them as emotional systems.

Kerr and Bowen (1988) write that to the extent that one's relationship to a human group is simply professional or contractual, then the laws of emotional systems do not apply. However it is difficult for human beings, because they are so social and so interdependent, to resist complex emotional social systems. School people are undoubtedly in this category. So many teachers and administrators have told me that they like the "feel" or "atmosphere" of schools and that is why they have chosen school life over other, better-paid alternatives. Many use highly emotional language to describe their relationship to an institution: they will say, "I love this school."
An assumption of family systems theory is that humans live in groups partly on the basis of an emotional process that attracts people to one another. This emotionally based group process, which varies in intensity between groups, can generate conflict as well as unity, and can be more favorable to the functioning of some members than to that of others. (Kerr and Bowen)

According to Bowen, there are a number of forces at work in an emotional field. First, people's functional roles are to a significant degree determined by what they experience another person as feeling or saying, or by what they imagine another person is saying or feeling. Second, people find themselves in reciprocal relationships with other people that are dictated by systemic forces. Third, there is a constant tension between individuality and togetherness. These forces are at work in every family, and are well-known to family therapists. They are also at work in every school.

The problem is that systemic thinking in schools lags behind more traditional, individual psychological explanations. Though school leaders and teachers often sense or can see group effects, the explanations are usually individualistic and focus on a negative leader or leaders: The head of a school's story to a consultant is often something like, "We have a few older teachers in the upper school who are constantly complaining and it means we cannot institute any changes there, because they always oppose us." The faculty's story may be that, "The head of the lower school doesn't listen." While these observations may in some sense be perfectly correct, they don't address the systemic issues or the school "story" which attempts to account for the systemic problems.

When a problem has been "storied" as being about an individual, when other stories which may be equally true are lost, especially stories about the forces which are operating on and within the entire system. When a problem has been "storied" as being about an individual, most administrative decisions come down to whether that person or persons should stay or go. All decisions are personnel decisions when they have been storied as being about individual psychology: Is so-and-so burned-out? Is Mrs. Smith depressed? Does the head of school have favorites? In this way, schools are a lot like families. Problems are rarely experienced as having emerged from policies or philosophies, but rather as being extensions of individual personalities, which are usually viewed as being difficult or impossible to change. Because in schools people are in fact so close and may consider each other friends as well as colleagues, it becomes impossible to talk to a friend about how they need to change their personality. If systemic thinking provides the theoretical way out of this dilemma, narrative therapy may provide the practical way to generate change because stories are the language of the emotional field of a school.
(It may be true that all consultants come into an institution intent upon finding other, unseen forces at work that have escaped the analysis of the leadership. It may be true that all consultants bring a fresh perspective or a new theory that helps to shake the received assumptions of an institution. I imagine that this is the case; honestly, I do not know, because I am a self-trained-therapist-turned-consultant without much experience in working with other consultants. I fall into a tradition of therapists who have turned to consulting and have brought to organizations the tools of the therapist's office. Since I have not tried a lot of different organizational developmental theories and then chosen the best one, I cannot compare narrative therapy to other theories. I simply saw and felt the parallels between the families I worked with, the schools I worked with, and transferred my methods from the one to the other. How I have done this is described in the next section.)

UNHAPPY SCHOOLS AND THEIR STORIES

I have used the full steps of the White/Epston narrative therapy technique, including a full historicizing document, in my consultations with six schools. I have used the language, techniques and approach in a piece-meal fashion in my work with perhaps twenty schools. As a result of these experiences I am convinced that schools, like families, have a dominant story to tell and many alternative stories that lie hidden, waiting to be told. However, my first experience with the power of a school story came before I had ever encountered White and Epston's writings. It was this experience more than any other which made me believe that their techniques could be adapted for consultation work, and I would like to tell the story of it before describing how I have adapted the steps of the White/Epston interview for schools.

MOUNTAINTOP SCHOOL

I was running a retreat for a boarding school, which I shall call Mountaintop School, in which the head and the faculty were at serious loggerheads. The problem, from the head's point of view, was that the faculty was not meeting its responsibilities: faculty members were not attending sit-down dinners, they were late to faculty meetings and other required events, and they were skipping evening dorm-duty. The problem, from the faculty's point of view, was that the head did not trust them, he was constantly chiding and criticizing and patronizing them, and they were tired of it. The head and faculty had been in a sullen, angry battle for over a year when the assistant head contacted me to facilitate a retreat for the faculty. The two-day retreat, to be held away from the school grounds at the beginning of the academic year, was anticipated with great anxiety by the faculty and the head. I was asked to provide many exercises so that if the conversation stalled or became unpleasant, people could
be diverted and unpleasantness deflected. It turned out that exercises were unnecessary; on the first day fifty faculty sat in a circle of metal chairs outside in the sunshine for almost seven hours and talked. After my introductory talk, the conversation began and almost immediately became heated and accusatory, with faculty members taking the head to task for his patronizing style. He answered straightforwardly and without reproach, but after some time became defensive and began to make the very mistake for which he was being criticized: he began to chide and patronize the faculty. As facilitator, I tried to illuminate, mediate and translate in order to make the setting safe and keep the conversation going without a breakdown into unmanageable levels of anger, but it was clear that we were recreating the central problem and not seeing a solution for it.

At one point, just when I had called for a break, one man asked to speak. He was someone who rarely spoke in faculty meetings at any time, and people were astonished that he came forward. He related that three years previously, when the school had faced serious enrollment shortfalls, the head had let three teachers go from the faculty. One of them had been his friend and his friend had felt that he had been "riffed" (reduction in force) unjustly. As the faculty member told of the loss of his colleague, he talked about the loss of "family feeling" at the school and he began to cry. In response, the head was able to tell a story of his worry about the viability of the school, his agony over having to let faculty members go, how he had carefully chosen to let go only faculty who had talked with him over the years about wanting alternative careers, and how dismayed and betrayed he had felt over the way the departing faculty member had characterized his actions.

The stories were a catharsis for everyone present. People wept, the mood of the meeting changed dramatically, the head became accessible and human. It also provided me with---though I didn't have the name for it at the time---an "alternative story," in which the problem could be "externalized." And so I interviewed the faculty in depth about the falling enrollments and the departure of their colleagues. I told the faculty that their problem was that they had been suffering from "fear" and "loss:" fear of the school's death, and a profound sense of loss from the departure of beloved faculty members. This new story, which I told repeatedly during the retreat allowed the head and faculty to experience themselves as allies in their worries about the survival of the school, and it allowed the faculty to feel that the problem was not the head, but rather one of grief. At a certain point in the retreat, faculty
members could say that they knew that the head of school was not going to change his personality and might in the future act in a paternalistic way with the faculty, yet because the head was not now "the problem," the realization allowed the faculty to imagine that they could speak up in the future, rather than stay silent and act out in passive-aggressive and adolescent ways, like not showing up for dinner.

I could then ask them, what did they imagine they would do in the future if the head were excessively critical of them? They would speak up and speak the truth as their colleague had done in the retreat, the usually silent faculty member who wouldn't let the meeting break up without speaking about the forced departure of his friend. They had an example of unique outcome in a faculty meeting and they all spontaneously historicized it and pledged to copy it.

Many of the important elements of the White/Epston narrative technique emerged spontaneously during this meeting: the problem-saturated description of school functioning, the externalizing and labeling of the problem, the unique outcome which occurred in the meeting, the repeated "historicizing" and "documenting" of the unique outcome and the future-oriented questions which enabled people to imagine more unique outcomes in the future. But aside from the technical elements, the most important aspect of this long, long meeting was my felt sense that until that man spoke, we'd all been discussing the wrong story. The moment we had the new story, the alternative story, discourse and change became possible. One striking aspect of the retreat is that members of the faculty have remembered it as a turning point for five years; they spontaneously remember it as a moment of change and refer to it whenever I meet them. Though there have been troubles at the school since that time, they have never been as bad as they were prior to the retreat.

One might argue that change became possible because suddenly we had, not an alternative story, but the "right" story. That we had suddenly discovered the "true" and "deep" cause of trouble at that school. That was certainly my sense at the time, coming as I did from a background of depth psychology; I thought we had discovered "it." My subsequent experiences with other schools have suggested to me that one doesn't necessarily need to find the one "right" story in order to make change possible.
SUNNYBROOK SCHOOL

Some years ago I was called to a school in which the head and the faculty were extraordinarily angry with one another. The head, who had long been considered the "savior" of the school from an earlier time, was now nearing retirement and a number of serious disputes had broken out at the school. I was introduced to the problem by a set of phone calls with head, board chair and assistant head, all of whom entrusted in me critical opinions of one another. I then went to the school two weeks in a row and had long meetings with the faculty from which the head absented himself. He believed, correctly, that the faculty was too angry and frightened to speak openly in front of him; indeed, no one was speaking openly at this school, which I shall call, ironically, Sunnybrook.

The story from the faculty was that the head, whom I will call Ralph Noble, was withdrawn, mean-spirited; furthermore, according to the faculty, he played favorites and had recently fired the assistant head, whom the faculty trusted. The story from the head was that the board had not been very active and had not supported him in general; recently they had gone around his back to retain his assistant head after she had resigned. The assistant head's story was that she had been the sole support of the faculty for several years and had served as a buffer between head and faculty, and in a moment of frustration had offered to resign, only to have the head of school accept her resignation for reasons of spite and envy. It was a difficult set of stories to resolve. It was particularly difficult to bring these stories together because they had not all been told in public. Though the assistant head was present at the faculty meetings I ran, neither the head nor the board chair had been. It fell to me to write a common story, and so I obtained blanket permission from all participants to write a letter in which I quoted my private conversations with them. I told them that without that permission I could not help heal the school; they were gracious and trusting enough to give it to me. The letter began:

Tonight I finished a series of conversations with all the members of the Sunnybrook community, and I want to write to tell you of my discoveries...though I had a series of meetings and phone calls with (many different people), I am going to write as if everyone attended the same meeting and heard the same things. Please know that I write to you as a "family" because I experienced enough goodwill and community at Sunnybrook to be able to do so.

Having done that, I began to use people's own words to externalize the problem:

Mutual isolation and mistrust have had a destructive effect on the working relationship between the head, the faculty and the board. In his first call with me, Ralph Noble said, "I
may be isolated. People don't talk to me in the way that they used to." A faculty member said, "We're all striving for the same ideals as the head, but there are elements of mistrust."

Another said, "Ralph has become progressively more isolated and now has become aware of it." Ralph said that the board often doesn't return his calls, but "I've gotten used to that." But isolation has not just been Ralph's problem, it is the community's problem. As one faculty member said, "The school as a whole cannot risk talking about itself." Another said, "It's not just with Ralph...we've become divisive."

The attempt here is twofold: first, to bring everyone into the story; and second, to create a common enemy, the external problem against which all members of the community are struggling. The head is not now withdrawn or mean-spirited, he is fighting against isolation, and so is everyone else. Once the problem because "isolation" and "fear," the "unique outcome" of faculty organizing, which previously had been understood to be "rebellious" by the faculty and "disloyal" by the head, could now be seen as an attempt to combat the problem. The letter continues:

However, it appears that sometime last year the community has gotten tired of isolation and fear. Things began to change last year when the faculty asked for meetings about student government. This represented a change for the faculty; it asked for what it wanted in a new way. And the summer workshops were a great success. One faculty member said, "...[I]n the past year or so I've felt a greater sense of unity." Another said, "The summer committees were the high point of my working here."

This "alternative story" is followed immediately by "unique redescription" questions that invite the school community to see itself differently in light of this alternative story which has emerged.

What was the "secret ingredient" in the summer committee? How was the faculty able to overcome fear to set them up? Why was isolation not a problem for the faculty or for Ralph in this case? Was putting the leadership workshop in place easier than the community thought it was going to be?

Questions are the way in which White and Epston like to leave an interview. They both reject the expertise of therapists as representing the "dominant story" of the culture in which professionals are supposed to know more than people do about how life is to be lived. I have adopted this view, and so I do my best to not make recommendations to schools; rather, I ask schools to tell me about "unique possibilities." The letter to Sunnybrook ends with a set of questions to the head of school, to the faculty and to the board to which all are party in letter.
Ralph, it looks to me as if your support of last summer's "leadership" workshops and your offer of a new job to Jean (the assistant head) indicates a change, and suggests that you are sick of isolation and its impact on your job satisfaction. Where do you think this change is going to lead? Do you think it might revive some old relationships and lead to some golfing with friends? Has your contemplation of retirement provided you with some relief, or do you only feel the loss?

Faculty members, what do you think I have appreciated most about you in the six hours that we have talked together? Do you sense the change in yourselves that I sense? Where do you think your new feelings of unity will take you?

Board members, do you hear the need for you to become more openly involved with Sunnybrook at this time? Is that something you can do? What would you need from Ralph and the faculty to be less isolated?

One head of a different school, upon receipt of one of my letters that ended with twenty-four different questions called me up and said, "Why didn't you just give me three or four recommendations?" White and Epston's answer would be that by providing recommendations, the recommendations would have become the dominant story, which would have to be accepted or rejected; in either case it would have limited the possibilities for alternative stories and unique outcomes to occur in the future. Because in my letter I quote so extensively from the people I interviewed, the letter achieves the goal of telling people's story back to them, and the questions achieve the effect of saying, "Tell me more of your story. Where do you think it is going to go?" Six weeks after complaining about all those questions, the head of school called me back and said, "You know, I re-read all those questions. They were pretty helpful. Other people are discussing them, too."

As a therapist, I have been repeatedly humbled by the fate of advice I have given to people, though sometimes they feel they very badly need advice. I try not to be withholding with individual patients for whom giving advice might be a caring act, no matter what they actually do with it. However, with an institution full of intelligent people, I do not feel under much pressure to make recommendations because there are so many people available to have ideas. My job, as I see it, is to make space for alternative stories. Think of how different the emotional impact would have been had I ended my letter to Sunnybrook with the following (no matter how diplomatically I said it):
First, Ralph Nobel, the headmaster, has become seriously isolated and should consider retirement. Second, the faculty should stop being afraid of him and realize that as a group it has much more strength than it realizes. Third, the board of trustees should not meddle in the school's affairs behind the headmaster's back; rather it should become pro-actively involved in supporting him and the faculty.

As accurate as that diagnosis might have been, as correct as the recommendations might have been, there is no sense of possibility in such a set of recommendations. In such a critique there is the inevitable shame of all parties for having been remiss in the past, and then there is the sense of compliance with the consultant's expertise, or the wish to disregard the consultant's expertise, reactions which might result in defensive postures and rationalizations. Instead, the school reacted with their own creativity. I mailed the letter to the head with a cover letter asking him whether he felt he could distribute it. Ralph Noble took the letter, xeroxed it and handed it out to the entire faculty. They all read it together and discussed it. Three months later, he voluntarily announced his retirement at the end of the subsequent year. The board of trustees gave him a gracious and respectful set of retirement parties in which the faculty participated. During his last year at the school, he led a delegation to a conference where I was speaking and they all sat at lunch with me and talked in a very friendly and affectionate way. Eight months previously they had hardly been able to be in a room together because of mutual anger and reproach.

I am certain that the reader is not deceived that I play no role in the telling of the school's story. Indeed, the letter I wrote to Sunnybrook was a feat of editing. I had six meetings with the head, assistant head and board chair. Still, most of the words of my narrative were quotations from the people who told me their story. I hoped that their experience of the letter was that they heard themselves speaking.

WILDWOOD SCHOOL

An elementary day school, Wildwood, experienced a crisis of confidence in its relatively new, young headmaster, George Bryant. At the end of his second year he abruptly fired three long-time teachers at the school. The following fall every occasion turned into a community referendum on his leadership. Under parent and faculty pressure, the board of trustees asked him to leave and he did so, in the middle of the year. The school community was left upset and in conflict between those who had supported the head and those who were furious at him. I was asked to come and heal the rift in the faculty.
The day started out with faculty members expressing anger at the fact of the meeting; it was all the departed head's fault. A faculty member said he was, "Angry at George because we have to be here." Another said, "We did pretty well through the whole thing...I couldn't see how this (meeting) could improve anything." I saw that this faculty expected only pain and suffering to come from a re-hashing of events, and so I asked them to tell me what was special about their school, and they were very happy to do so. They loved their school. I think we spent two hours out of a six-hour meeting discussing everything that was, and had been right, about their school. So the story of the young headmaster gave way to a set of alternative stories about how good the school was and how much they had loved it (the average faculty tenure at the school was eight years.)

Only after the faculty at Wildwood was fully on record with respect to their love and loyalty to the school could they talk about problems that had pre-dated the arrival of George Bryant. In my letter to the faculty, I recounted this turn of the story in their words:

Perhaps all the best aspects of Wildwood were summed up by a teacher who said simply, "This is as good as it gets"...However, three snakes seem to have invaded this Garden of Eden, and had begun to affect the Wildwood faculty even before George Bryant came. As one teacher said, "The undertone was here before George." Another said, "For seventeen years there has been trust and mistrust." Yet another, "Whom can I trust? Whom can I really talk to?" George's arrival seemed to have accentuated the fears and pressures which were beginning to preoccupy the faculty. The first pressure was the STAR SYSTEM. The previous head had (unwittingly, many believe) shown a strong enthusiasm for certain teachers and had showcased their achievements. "She saw things that she really loved in this faculty and they were really nurtured." This left other faculty feeling out in the cold. The head's enthusiasm for certain stars fit together with the parent tendency to lionize certain teachers. One person said, "The parents got involved in star-making."

Once the faculty and I had identified three pressures, the STAR SYSTEM, the UNIVERSITY HIGH THING (being under parent pressure to get children into the prestigious nearby University High School), and CONSTANT CHANGE, we were able to see that the fear and competitiveness that these stirred up caused a terrible seriousness at Wildwood for many years prior to the arrival of the recent unsuccessful head. I wrote to the faculty:

As far as THE UNIVERSITY HIGH THING is concerned, I don't imagine that it is going to go away anytime soon, do you? The question is not whether the parents will feel desperate about their children getting into the Academy or not; every year, some almost certainly will. The question is whether it has to undermine your sense of what it is you do for children. Are there any ways that the faculty can, as a group, protect itself from the intense
competitiveness, perfectionism and anxiety that are part of THE UNIVERSITY HIGH
THING? If the administration makes an effort to downplay Academy admissions inside the
school, will it hurt enrollment at Wildwood? Is there a price to be paid for emphasizing the
intrinsically wonderful aspects of the everyday education at Wildwood? Will the parents in
general not take you seriously? And speaking of seriously, does THE ACADEMY THING
have a role in making everyone at Wildwood so SERIOUS? Is ambition the enemy of the
UN-SERIOUS?

The use of capital letters to emphasize the external enemy is a technique I have used in some
schools, but at Wildwood it seemed essential because I needed to make the story somewhat
playful. I borrowed this technique from David Epston, who signs his letters, "Your friend in
fighting, worry and high expectations."

I must have been successful, both as a storyteller and as an UN-SERIOUS consultant,
because though the school's interim head talked to me about helping it poll the community in
preparation for its new head search, and I expressed interest, she chose a serious consultant to
do that, and I was invited back on an annual basis to check on whether the faculty morale
was O.K. There was not a lot of discussion and debate about my letter when it arrived at
Wildwood. From my conversations with people at the school, I gather the day was simply
remembered as a good experience in which the faculty discovered that they really did like
each other and the school, and that they all suffered from being so serious. I gather that the
next faculty get-together was better attended and more fun than had been the case in years.

What I liked about the story that emerged that day was that the traumatic departure of the
inexperienced recent head was utterly replaced by stories of the faculty's long-standing love
for Wildwood and their long-time conflicts at Wildwood. The story wasn't about the head, it
was about them; it was their story. To use that overworked word, I think that the narrative
technique in this case was profoundly empowering for the faculty.

SUMMARY AND QUESTIONS

I have adopted the techniques of Michael White and David Epston's narrative therapy for use
in school consultation for a number of straightforward and simple reasons. First, educators
tend to be anecdotal people. They naturally fall into story telling. However, as Sarah
Lawrence Lightfoot wrote in her book, The Good High School, if you let school people tell
stories, they usually spiral down into negative and depressing anecdote. This has been my
experience with educators. As hopeful and optimistic as they need to be for children, they
can become helpless and negativistic in describing their own work and schools. They always tell "problem-saturated" stories about themselves. The narrative technique helps them to bring alternative and more hopeful stories to the surface. And because of the story form, the consultation is experienced as familiar.

Second, educators in general tend to be over-responsible, perfectionist people who may try to blame others, but always end up blaming themselves. In their eagerness to find the fault within themselves or their school, they often do overlook larger forces at work. The externalization technique of narrative therapy runs against this tendency and helps them to find the enemy outside of themselves.

Third, teachers tend to rely so much on patience, compassion and developmental understanding in their work with children, that they don't often think of themselves as having much courage. Indeed, the popular cultural mythology is that teachers have retreated from the real world for reasons of weakness and incompetence. ("Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.") The narrative method helps to rally teacher courage in a way that more traditional consultation, with its explicit expertise from the "outside world," does not. Hearing their own words and responding to questions gives them a chance to respond with new-found fortitude.

Fourth, if you accept the premise that schools are emotional systems, then in order to have an impact, you have to change the emotional field, and that cannot be done---I believe---through a set of intellectual observations or recommendations. It can only be done through changing the family story. I once consulted to a head of school in one of the largest boarding schools in the country. This head's position was in considerable jeopardy because of a faculty perception that the head had gone back on his word to the faculty. For both practical and time reasons I wasn't able to meet with the entire faculty. Instead I met with about forty faculty members to whom I wrote a "document" letter re-telling their story. It had an impact on the entire faculty, even though the majority never read the letter. The impact had to be through the emotional system of the school because of a new story, which was that the head had not retaliated against those who saw him as a double-crosser; instead, he had opened up the conversation by bringing in a consultant who wrote a letter quoting the faculty's own words--some of them very tough and critical--to the head of school. The emotional field changed for people who had not been directly involved in the consultation.

Fifth and finally, I use the narrative method because it frees me as a consultant from the pressure to be so smart and have good ideas. If consultants were honest, they would admit that they have stolen ninety-five percent of their good ideas from their previous clients.
When I arrive at a school, people have thought long and hard about their own difficulties, but for reasons of culture, position, opportunity---and most importantly, because their stories lie buried under a dominant story---their good ideas have not had a chance to rise to a general consciousness. When I go into a school determined only to find alternative stories, it makes me a much more effective consultant, because I am not applying a formula learned elsewhere, and I can be confident that if a new story emerges from within, it is much more likely to have an impact on that school's culture.

As useful as I have found the narrative therapy method to be in healing school problem situations, I am interested in further applications of the method in the every day life of schools. I would be interested in asking "school people" some of the following questions:

- Teachers, do you think the narrative technique of "externalizing" is a useful one in discussing personal issues with children?
- Do you think that it is already used intuitively by teachers?
- What kind of stories tend to dominate children's' understandings of their problems?
- Do you think the method of "externalizing" reduces or enhances feeling of "personal responsibility"?
- Do you think that our desire to see children "take responsibility" means it is difficult for us not to see problems as being inside children?
- If we see problems as being inside children, then do they become dominated by that perception, by that story?
- How can a child escape such a story about him or herself?
- Do school leaders use stories in their usual communication?
- Do these stories have an impact on the emotional system of a school?
- Can you recall a time when a story changed the climate of your school?
- Administrators, would it be possible to use the narrative therapy technique in day-to-day interventions in school matters?
• Is it possible for administrators to ask teachers for stories of how they have "influenced the problem" or will administrators usually feel that they have to defend their policies?

• Is "defensiveness" or the "need to come up with solutions" an inevitable burden of being an administrator?

• What enables administrators to escape from these traps?

• Does narrative technique provide a new way of approaching the problems of small organizations?

• Are the White-Epston techniques really new, or are they a "re-framing" of other previously discovered techniques?

• What size and kind of school is available to these techniques?

• What would be the limits of narrative techniques in organizations?

REFERENCES


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