
Introduction

John was a twelve-year-old boy living with his intact middle-class family in Los Angeles. He was relatively close to his parents and was an only child. John had always been an A student and a model citizen. In fact, John was very mature for his age and had already developed very strong values. Life was going relatively well for John until fifth grade. Even though he attended a reputable school and had very good friends, he started being regularly teased and harassed by a small group of five boys.

As John grew upset about these incidents, he and his family shared their concerns with the principal. The principal was unsure how to address the situation because most of the incidents were not witnessed by supervising adults. John's parents, like most parents, were also wondering if this was unfortunately part of the usual experience of school. The teasing and harassing continued to escalate; John's mood, relationship with teachers, and grades started to deteriorate. One day, as John tripped and fell playing basketball, one of the boys stomped John's hand, pretending to do it inadvertently. John screamed in pain, went to the nurse's office, and complained to the authorities. Because it was believed to be an accident, no actions were taken. John's fingers were sprained.

The next day, he didn't want to go to school. Not too sure what to believe, John's parents required that he go. The five boys spent the day taunting John and "accidentally" hitting his fingers whenever they could. John cleverly switched the cast to his other hand hoping to protect himself, but this wasn't enough. After school, the five boys pinned him down on the ground and rolled over his hand with a skateboard.

Is this an unusual story? Not at all. Sadly, many principals, teachers, parents, and therapists working with young people regularly hear bullying or teasing stories comparable to this. Most adults wonder what should be done to stop this endemic problem of aggression, harassment, and disrespect in schools. Ever since the Columbine shooting, our society has been trying to point the finger at a culprit. Educators feel that they have to be suspicious of any student that seems different, and they have increased their surveillance of the young people under their care. Parents are questioned as to whether they are suitable caretakers. The media have raised countless questions of accountability. Should the

perpetrators be more seriously punished? Should school officials be held responsible? Where were the teachers?

Unfortunately, educators are an easy target for the media, who are seldom aware of educators' actual challenges with an ever-increasing curriculum, never-ending responsibilities, and little support. In addition, when problems become rampant in schools, educators end up spending a tremendous amount of time and energy addressing these problems instead of focusing on academia, their initial goal. Trapped between public expectations, institutional pressures, and disrespect with students, educators can burn out quickly and become exasperated or resentful with a profession they initially entered with enthusiasm.

As a result, in recent years, school personnel have been seeking consultation with our narrative therapy community to find efficient ways to help transform a disrespectful classroom or to work individually with a student. Narrative therapy, considered the cutting edge in systemic approaches, has been a relevant theoretical framework to understand and address school-related problems. It has been received with much enthusiasm internationally for its respectful, effective, and transforming effect on people's lives and broader communities. Students, in particular, have been very receptive to this approach as it is honoring of the person he or she prefers to be and it involves them actively in the process of taking a fresh, empowering perspective on their struggles.

Our intention in this book is to render narrative therapy practices and perspectives available to educators. We want to make the rich and powerful ideas embedded in this complex theory accessible to every school staff. With this in mind, the book is written in a practical, clear, and creative way. Tutorials, exercises, common questions and answers, transcripts of interviews, illustrations, cartoons, dialogues between the authors and students, and numerous examples are used to keep the readers engaged with the material. This work is the result of many years of successful collaboration between a narrative therapist and a dedicated elementary school teacher. By combining therapeutic knowledge with day-to-day educational experience, the text provides a rich and comprehensive approach to a vast array of school-related problems.

This book is not intended as an introduction to narrative therapy but rather as the application of narrative and social constructionist ideas to the field of education. For this reason, narrative concepts are only covered in their relevance to teachers and principals, and the clinical practices associated with the ideas are not thoroughly examined. The interested reader can easily find further information on the subject in the many excellent narrative therapy books readily available (Bird, 2000; Freedman & Combs, 1996; Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997; Madsen, 1999; White, 1997; White & Epston, 1990; White & Morgan, 2006; Winslade & Monk, 1999, 2000; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). A glossary of the more technical words appears in Resource A in an attempt to assist readers' comprehension.

Given that bullying and disrespect happen repeatedly across the country and in a variety of schools, we believe that it does not make sense to focus on the isolated act of each individual involved or on a singled-out factor. We propose a much broader approach that does not blame either culture alone or individuals (whether they are the perpetrators, parents, or educators). In other words, this approach takes into account the interaction of many larger contributing factors and examines how they are experienced in the unique context of students' lives. Once understood in such a way, problems of disrespect and bullying can be transcended to promote choice, possibilities, and preferences.

In this second edition, we have not only added three chapters but we have also, throughout the book, made more explicit how the material is applicable to various grade levels. In our day-to-day work, these concepts are used with people of all ages, from preschoolers to high schoolers to adults. The difference lies mainly in the language used and an attentiveness to different realms of experience.

Part I of this book explores the general context of disrespect, bullying, and chronic behavior problems. This provides a theoretical foundation out of which new perspectives and solutions will emerge. Through stories and experiential exercises, we examine the contextual factors that inadvertently support disrespect and bullying, starting with the general culture, school environment, and educators' assumptions. Specifically, Chapter 1 briefly introduces the different cultural beliefs (discourses) that generally shape people's lives. A legend illustrates how these beliefs limit access to solutions and indirectly encourage disrespect and bullying. This second edition has additional insights into the limitations of the thought process that is generated in these troublesome situations. Chapter 2 examines some effects of these cultural beliefs on schools as institutions and their implications for students struggling with disrespect and bullying. In this edition we have added some and deleted other sections to make these ideas clearer and more applicable. Our intention in writing this chapter is to foster a greater understanding of people's struggles and experiences in schools. Chapter 3 explores the different assumptions that may cloud educators' minds as they are handling problems with disrespect and bullying. Although challenging, this section sets the stage for fresh perspectives and new ways of dealing with problems. In this second edition we have added reference to existing literature and additional common teacher questions. We have also added a classic and inspiring true story that reminds us all that compassion goes much further than aggression.

Chapter 4 introduces innovative practices that empower students to reflect on, articulate, and change their ways of being in the unique context of their lives. These practices are informed by a narrative therapy metaphor and offer simple yet effective ways for principals, teachers, parents, and counselors to promote respect. Chapter 5 integrates all of the

material discussed earlier into a complete view of the actions that must be taken to effectively reduce the occurrence of disrespect and bullying. Chapter 6 discusses detailed ways of ensuring that changes will last and will be owned in a meaningful way by students. In this second edition we have added the transcript of a conversation with a seventeen-year-old young man who was struggling with hatred and ideas of violence.

Part II of the book consists of lively and creative examples of this work in action. It begins with Chapter 7, where students' experiences of school are made visible through transcripts of interviews and class discussions. Chapter 8 then offers concrete ideas on how to promote collaboration, respect, and appreciation throughout schools. We invite adults to move away from telling students what to do or not do and to reduce the ever-increasing temptation to externally control students. Respect cannot be imposed by force. Respect, tolerance, and appreciation grow much more effectively when young people are invited into an environment that manifests such philosophy and that empowers them personally to make better decisions despite the struggles of their lives. These ideas come from extensive research conducted with more than 230 educators in Northern California, who kindly shared with us ways they have found to foster a successful school climate. In this new edition, we have added strategies and stories from teachers committed to collaborative relationships with their students in spite of the mainstream pressures for control and evaluation.

Chapter 9 describes a fun and dynamic program to invite entire classrooms into respect, tolerance, and appreciation. This program is presented as detailed, week-by-week, antibullying activities that have been implemented successfully in a large number of schools in the Silicon Valley in California. In this edition, we explain how this program can be lengthened or shortened to better address the unique needs of each particular class. We have also added specific examples of its application in high schools where this program would be based more on meaningful conversations rather than creative exercises. In Chapter 10, we share a case example of work done one-on-one with a student having an established bullying reputation. Chapter 11 is a new addition to this second edition. It makes visible what happens in the brains of young people as they struggle with anger and disrespect. It also presents how educators can understand and use brain research to foster change in young people who have a history of conflict with their teachers. Through an example, we illustrate how a young person's brain-wiring can be repatterned through a consistent, trusting, and caring relationship with an educator.

Part III of the book is entirely new to this second edition and focuses on preventing problems in the first place. In Chapter 12, we discuss aspects of school experiences that need to be *decreased* to reduce the buildup of negative emotions associated with disrespect and bullying, as well as other experiences that need to be *increased* to maximize the

likelihood that students will experience themselves and others positively. It is argued that the components of a culture of respect, tolerance, and care are constituted by a careful attention to beliefs, people, and their relationships. A story, discussions, and an exercise provide a clear vision for the synergetic partnership that can be created between proactive educators and “response-able” youth. We present strategies to assist educators in remaining connected to their values and preferred ways of being in spite of the challenges of the day. We also discuss the process by which young people become response-able, meaning not only responsible but also capable of handling many situations in a constructive de-escalating manner.

Chapter 13 then goes on to highlight prevention success stories, both of individual educators making peace-promoting choices and a public school which stands out as having a very low rate of problems with bullying and disrespect. The individual success stories are presented with the unfolding of the situations, making visible the thinking of the educator, the temptation to engage in high-intervention responses, the anchors to compassion/perspective, and the final constructive choice with its positive impact on both the student and the school culture. The successful public school is first introduced with a description of what it minimizes and maximizes in its school culture as well as some of its special programs. This description is followed by interviews with the principal, a veteran teacher, a few students, and a poignant account from a parent.

Finally, the book concludes with a series of resources such as a glossary; a summary table of strategies; an essay on cultural discourses; an example of a staff exercise to cultivate collaboration, appreciation, and tolerance; and a problem-solving question list.

The material in this book may be uncomfortable, at times provocative and counterintuitive. We believe that this flavor is part of its biggest value as it would not be useful if we simply replicated other manuscripts that promote the redundant cultural standards. We have striven to gently ask important and serious questions, while honoring the responses and attitudes each reader ultimately chooses to believe in. We hope that every reader will be inspired by at least one of the dilemmas exposed and will finish the book energized to explore new possibilities with colleagues and young people. Above all, we hope that you enjoy reading this book as much as we have rejoiced in the researching and writing of its pages.

You may be wondering how the story ended. What happened to John? After all, he was a “good” kid and the victim of a horrible assault. Aside from extensive physical pain, he had to transfer to a new school. He couldn’t and wouldn’t go back to his regular school, especially since the five boys were not even suspended (the incident happened off school grounds). He, the victim, had to endure switching schools in midyear, losing his friends, and starting with new teachers who were at a different place in the curriculum. His procrastination and inability to concentrate on

homework started to cause conflicts with his parents and teachers. As he was becoming at risk of being expelled from his new school, John was referred for therapy because of suicidal thoughts and . . . violent fantasies about his previous school.

And the cycle goes on, where victimized students become perpetrators, perpetrators become victimized, and disrespect creeps from student–student relationships to student–teacher relationships and then to teacher–student interactions. Given everyone’s good intentions and efforts and the large number of programs and books on the subject, why is bullying still pervasive in our schools? To answer this question, let’s explore the big picture and powerful ways of responding to the culture of bullying and disrespect.