Abstract

This article provides a brief report of the application of a stories-based approach to culture change in a small urban elementary school. In the article we concentrate on recounting the process implemented in an attempt to shift the values and beliefs held by staff about bullying. In the first section we review some of the literature on stories and outline a four-stage model for using stories to shift school culture. We then illustrate each of the four stages as they applied to the problem of bullying. The illustration shows how stories can be used to influence values, norms and beliefs in the school.

Introduction

At the conclusion of a recent workshop on culture and change management, a participating principal approached us and in a quite straightforward manner commented. "It's all very well and good to talk about change, but from my experience, shifting a school's culture as suggested in so many books is next to impossible." After looking to each other for a response, we asked the principal to tell us what she meant. Not surprisingly, she recounted a problem in her school that was bothering her.

The principal's problem related to school bullying, more specifically, apparent acceptance from staff that bullying was so entrenched in the school that it had become an unalterable "fact of life." She felt that the teachers were unwilling to address the issue because it was too difficult, that it was a community not a school issue, and that it was typical throughout the area. The principal recounted an incident that, to her, summarized the situation.

During a staff meeting when I raised the matter of bullying, a staff member made the comment that those kids who complained about bullying were "whussy." That they had to learn to deal with these sorts of things themselves because bullying was a fact of life on the streets. This assertion went largely unchallenged, but I was aware that a number of staff, particularly those who had not been at the school for long, were also concerned about the amount of bullying. A senior teacher with whom I discussed the issue summed up the difficulty. She said that "we" didn't really talk about it much, because then people would think there was a problem.

During the weeks following our discussion we decided to form a partnership to address the problem of bullying in the school. We agreed that the aim of our combined efforts was to bring about a shift in staff and community attitudes toward bullying. The principal agreed to work with us in trialing an approach we had been working on that utilizes a stories-based approach to change management. This article provides a brief report on how this approach was applied in an attempt to shift the beliefs and attitudes held by teachers about bullying. We do not attempt to detail the strategies developed to deal with the problem but, rather, concentrate on the process implemented in an attempt to bring about change. In the first section we review some of the literature on stories and outline the four-stage model for using stories to shift staff attitudes. We then illustrate each of the four stages as they applied to the problem of bullying. The illustration shows how stories were used to influence attitudes, norms and beliefs in a small urban elementary school in Australia.
A Stories-Based Approach to Change Management

Arguments promoting the power and place of stories and storytelling in organizations, and as learning, communication and socialization devices are well established in the literature. A general theme in this literature is that we store our life experiences, attitudes, values and beliefs in the form of stories, not in detached lists of facts and figures. Indeed, Sabrin (1986) proposes that, “human beings think, perceive, imagine and make moral choices according to narrative structure” (p. 8). Witherell and Noddings (1991) hold that stories embody people’s understandings about work on both an organizational and an individual basis (also see Greene, 1991).

The bottom line of these perspectives is that schools, like all social structures, are made up of the lives and experiences of the people who comprise them and that these are most accurately communicated through stories. As Danzig (1996) suggests: "Issues related to school culture, personal relations, values and beliefs, and rituals and myths, take on more meaning as they are presented in stories of practice" (p. 129). In short, stories reflect people’s beliefs about the organizations within which they work.

Stories hoard knowledge and experience; by recalling and retelling stories, personal constructs are communicated, developed and refined. This process of development and refinement, in turn, influences the shape of our personal life story. Clandinin and Connelly (1992) hold that the process of storying and re-storying is a fundamental method of personal and social growth because it helps us to construct meaning and make sense of new life experiences, which, in turn, influence our beliefs about the future. Exploration of self-stories and implicit personal constructs provide a window on the construction process and important insights into what people value as knowledge. In other words, they provide insights into a person’s intuition and the factors that influence their beliefs about a certain role, an organization, or an event. As such, McCollum (1992) suggests that organizational stories can help to establish and identity, and create and maintain interpersonal relationships.

While reviewing the organisational stories and storytelling literature through the guises of social constructivism, interpretive organisational symbolism and critical theory, Boyce (1996) proposes seven reasons why shared storytelling is important in organisations and, by implication, the potential role it plays in organisational and attitudinal change. The first is that telling stories allows organisational members and clients to express experience. The second is that storytelling can confirm the shared experiences and meaning of individuals and groups within an organisation. The third and fourth suggest that stories are also devices for orienting and socialising organisational members, and, importantly, for altering or amending organisational reality. The fifth is that telling stories allows organisational purpose to be developed, sharpened and reviewed. The sixth reason holds that storytelling can prepare groups for planning and decision-making in line with shared purpose and, finally, story telling can play a major role in co-creating vision and strategy.

In a similar vein, Greene (1991) argues that storytelling can influence the understandings of both teller and listener in an organization, and that telling stories establishes a commonality of experience which allows attitudes to be communicated and shared. In Greeneís opinion, storytelling supplies an essential genre for the characterization of human action. In research exploring at the place of narrative in school reform, Clandinin and Connelly (1998) provide a practical example of how stories can ëspreadí and lead to change. After describing how teacher stories influenced the reform process in one school, they concluded thus:

These stories are rooted temporally as individual stories shift and change in response to changing events and circumstances. Changes in the story of school ripple through the school and influence the whole web of stories. Others, such as parents, also influence, and are influenced by, the shifting story of the school (p. 162)

Building on the ideas of writers such as Boyce (1996), Greene (1991), McCollum (1992) and Clandinin and Connelly (1998) we developed a tentative, simple four-stage story-based model of change. Such literature suggests that organizational stories can not only help to establish identity, create and maintain interpersonal relationships, but can also be used as vehicles for organizational change. Given that stories appear to form an integral component of organizational culture, we made the assumption that they could be harnessed to influence, or shift, attitudes and beliefs in schools (Quong & Walker, 1999; Quong, Walker & Bodycott, 1999).

The story-based approach holds that effective leaders are good listeners who actively encourage storytelling, and retelling, to bring about change. The model proposes four stages around which a leader can organize and encourage teacher storytelling to bring about organisational change (see Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). The stages of the model are listed below and explicated through the illustration which follows:

**Stage 1:** actively listen to the stories of the school and community;
**Stage 2:** create the conditions that promote the sharing of stories of success;
Stage 3: perpetuate and in some instances enable stories of success to be created;
Stage 4: explore the basis for the stories of success to discover what common values they share.

The Context

Following our agreement to form an action partnership, we met with the principal on three occasions to plan our approach. During these meetings we established a time line of approximately ten weeks to trial the stories-based approach and agreed to meet once a week throughout the process to critically reflect upon progress and, if necessary, to shift our plans and strategies as the need arose.

The small elementary school is situated in a medium sized urban community on the outskirts of an Australian city. Although the area is broadly classified as “middle class”, demographic shifts over the last few years have seen a noticeable influx of low-income, single parent families into the school’s feeder areas. The population comprises several different cultural groups, including a large proportion of indigenous Australians. The school has a principal, deputy principal and 16 full-time teachers teaching classes from K-6. Under school-based management, the school has considerable discretion over its governance and curricular and extra-curricular offerings.

Stage 1: To actively listen to the stories of the school and community

The first stage of the model involved the principal in deliberately talking about bullying in both formal and informal situations. Working on the knowledge that every teacher had observed and tried to deal with bullying behavior, this strategy was designed to get teachers first thinking and then talking about their experiences. Initial reactions from some teachers were little more than negative shrugs and pronouncements that bullying was of little concern. For other teachers it was an opportunity to recount what we called “war stories” about bullying. As these stories became increasingly told, few teachers were immune from expressing their experiences and, in most cases, their frustrations. A typical example of such a story is given below.

I was on yard duty in Zone 1, around the back of the canteen and over the ovals, when I saw them fighting. It was horrible. Just like some awful Hong Kong movie, three boys had this other kid down on the ground and were hitting and kicking him viciously. I was absolutely disgusted. Of course as I ran up yelling, the three boys took off laughing. What could I do? I was the only one out there, and I couldn’t catch them anyway. So I helped the boy up from the ground and took him into the nurse. I just felt so angry and sickened by what I had seen. I don’t know how the boy escaped really serious injury, I just don’t.

During his stage, teachers quickly recognized that the principal was asking a lot of questions about bullying. This seemed to focus their attention on the fact that the principal was “interested” in the subject and was genuinely curious about what teachers had to say. Teachers soon began to initiate discussions with the principal on their own volition - telling her their “war stories” about bullying without prompting. The principal felt she had been successful when an older male teacher visited her office to discuss his concerns about bullying in the playground. Up to this point, the principal had seen this teacher as someone who had strongly “denied” that it was a problem in the school.

The first stage then was designed to encourage people to first think about bullying in the school and then to get them talking (telling their stories) about their experiences in the area. In short, the principal sought to communicate her interest and concern in a non-judgmental manner to the school community. Most importantly, the principal showed a willingness to listen to teachers’ “war stories”. There was no attempt at this stage to develop “solutions” to the bullying problem. Through encouraging and listening to stories the issue was raised to a higher level of consciousness. In this case, the first stage lasted about four weeks. By the end of that period there was a noticeable “buzz” around the small school.

Stage 2 To create the conditions that promote the sharing of stories of success

Stage two moves beyond the encouragement and “listening to” stories to the creation of conditions which actually promote the sharing of stories with the aim of focusing on stories of success. In our planning we defined stories of success as narratives told by teachers of their positive experiences in dealing with bullying. We did not “require” that the stories necessarily have positive endings, but that they illustrated the teachers’ attempts to address bullying. During the first stage the principal had demonstrated a keen interest in talking about bullying and had managed to get teachers to tell their “war stories”. Perhaps predictably, most of these stories tended toward the negative. They were sometimes humorous, but nearly always focused on describing how bad bullying was. In initial discussions, rarely did a teacher recount what could be described as a story of success.
Our strategy for encouraging stories of success to emerge was to establish a series of “focus sessions” for teachers concerned with bullying. Rather than involving all staff it was decided to carefully select six teachers according to three pragmatic criteria. These were: (1) that the teachers were regarded as influential amongst the other staff; (2) had shared stories about bullying with the principal during the previous four weeks and; (3) were not already overburdened with other school commitments. The focus sessions were simply a series of four one-hour “working lunch” meetings in the library, about a week apart. The principal attended all meetings and kept a record of discussion. She explained to the teachers that they were there to brainstorm ways of dealing with the bullying in the school through telling stories of what had worked for them. She introduced her purpose thus:

I am interested in hearing stories of success. Tell about things that you have done, or seen or heard about, that seemed, if only to some extent, to work. What success have you had in dealing with bullies. What works for you? What works for others that you have heard about?

The first meeting was not immediately valuable, with few positive stories of success emerging. Teachers seemed bereft of ideas, and spent the time exploring each other’s views about bullying and trying to understand each other’s values. The second meeting was little different, although stories flowed, they were usually not concerned with success. As the meeting drew to a close one teacher suggested that they invite a teacher she knew from another school who had been very successful in containing bullying. The group agreed and the principal engaged the person to work with the focus group. The visiting teacher was asked not to treat the meeting as a “training session” but simply to tell stories of the success based on her own experiences in dealing with bullying.

During the third focus session the visiting teacher shared many stories of success. These were both personal stories and stories collected during her own quest for answers to bullying. Of particular interest was a short video showing many different strategies for dealing with bullying in an urban school districts in the United States. One approach shown in the video was when a teacher came across a fight, he did not try to intervene physically, but instead stood back and clapped loudly, at the same time encouraging other students to do the same. The teachers believed that such a strategy was not a viable option in their school and, in fact, treated the approach scornfully. This combined reaction enlivened the session.

At least forty minutes of discussion of what then would work at the school followed the screening of the video. Questions posed by the group included: "Why wouldn’t clapping work?” “Why was it such a strange idea for the teachers at this school?”. The subsequent discussion seemed to stimulate teachers toward openly recounting their own stories of what had worked for them and what would work for others. Teachers seemed to recount previously untold stories of success, as if these had been buried below more obvious negative experiences. This video, through suggesting what had worked in one context, had sparked clear interest in what would work in another. The teachers’ stories began to describe clearly the culture and structure of their own school, and the dominant attitudes toward bullying.

By the end of the forth meeting, it was decided that it was time to move on. The members of the focus group were not only telling their own stories of success, but had had talked to others and had shared these stories with the group. The result of the focus group’s deliberations was seen as the beginning of a subtle shift in some aspects of the school’s culture - teachers were no longer saying that the bullying was not their concern, but were openly discussing ways of dealing with it.

As we moved to the third stage, as expected, no clear strategy had emerged from discussions. We knew at the outset that there was no simple recipe for success to the bullying puzzle. However, we were aware that there was a need to achieve results and turn stories to action. To do this, stories of success need to be communicated, reinforced and, if necessary, recreated.

**Stage 3 To perpetuate and in some instances enable stories of success to be created**

This stage purposefully involved more of the school community in the discussion through spreading and sharing the stories of success that emerged during stage two. As well as more teachers becoming involved, parents and the School Council also became active. Following a council meeting where a number of teachers shared their success stories a parent council member mentioned that she had been involved in developing a Care and Conduct Policy when living in another state. She recounted the story of her involvement in the process and the stories of the success associated with the policy. A key part of the strategy was what her group had labeled *Cooperative Capers*.

The process and label of *Cooperative Capers* struck a cord with the principal and the focus group members. They conceptualized *Cooperative Capers* to mean the process of helping children known to be bullies to work cooperatively with other children on special "capers" or activities. The focus group decided this was an excellent
strategy for combating bullying at the school and presented the idea to a general staff meeting, excitedly predicting the success that could be gained through them developing *Cooperative Capers* into an action plan for dealing with bullying.

The principal then asked for general support for the focus group to develop *Cooperative Capers* into a school wide strategy. No teacher objected and, to the contrary, openly agreed that this was a worthwhile way to proceed. This in itself was seen as a major success, the principal believed that if the suggestion been made two months earlier that most staff would have objected strenuously. The focus group then moved to develop a *Cooperative Capers* strategy. Their aim was to incorporate their own and other people's ideas, based on their collected stories of success, into designing a strategy that would work in their school.

This exercise was one of values clarification within the specific context of the school. The focus group was not provided with any firm guidelines or detail about what *Cooperative Capers* should include, or how it should operate. Their task was to develop the strategy in such a way as to fit with their understanding of the culture and structure of the school -- in other words, what would work and what would not. The group did this rather quickly and within two weeks had mapped out a clear process for how *Cooperative Capers* might function.

Stage three had been one of increased involvement through the sharing of both internal and external stories of success and beginning the process of operationalizing these to form a coherent strategy. Stories of success were by this stage common within the school, and even many of the previously dominant negative 'war stories' were being explored in terms of how to make them successful. As *Cooperative Capers* was developed the principal was aware that her job was one of ensuring that the 'shifted' attitudes endured and moved beyond a "one-hit wonder." This entailed examining the values underpinning the stories of success and embedding formal structures that would assist lasting shifts in teacher attitudes.

**Stage 4. To explore the basis for the stories of success to discover what common values they share.**

Using the collected stories of success and the evolving strategy labeled *Cooperative Capers* we worked with the principal to identify three interrelated values underlying the staffs' emerging beliefs about bullying. The first of the values to emerge from teacher's stories of success was the need for *consistency*. This suggested a consistent dedication by administration, teachers and parents to challenging bullying in any form and wherever it occurred.

The second value to emerge was that *fairness* is not important. This meant that for some children, being treated "fairly," had a different meaning to what many teachers believed "fair treatment" was supposed to mean. What emerged from a number of stories was that while the Assistant Principal was considered a very "fair" person, the teachers believed that this was adding to the problem. The teachers proposed that consistency did not mean that every child must be treated in the same way. In their terms, consistency meant that although every act of bullying must be dealt with, the action in each case should be decided according to the situation and persons involved, rather than by a single set of common rules.

The third value to emerge from the stories of success was that of valuing difference (*Walker & Quong, 1998*). This meant that all children needed to be able to learn from each other's differences. One of the key purposes of *Cooperative Capers* was that the "victim" could learn from the "bully," and vise versa. In other words, that the "bully" could learn to "value the differences" in those they used to "pick on" because they were different.

Drawing on these three underlying values, the principal worked with the focus group to put together a five-page document on their school's *Cooperative Capers*. This document was based on the shared values and the strategies and processes decided upon by the focus group based on stories of success. The policy was then ratified by the staff as a whole and also by the School Council and parents.

**Conclusion**

*Cooperative Capers* was implemented in the school and appears to be working well. The principal and teachers are able to tell many stories of success about how it has operated over the last six months. Stories such as how one renowned bully has totally changed and now spends his time reading to the smaller younger children who used to run from him in fear. Most importantly, the principal delights in pointing out that the number of entries in the "Incident Book" (the day journal in which teachers keep a record of how they have had to discipline pupils) has more than halved.
The policy of Cooperative Capers in itself though is not seen as the mark of the intervention's success, but as merely the written output. The real success is the apparent shift in attitude that has been achieved throughout the three-month process. We began the intervention by asking the question “How can we change the teachers attitudes to bullying?” and then by implementing a stories-based strategy to do this. Without more in-depth evidence, it would be presumptuous to claim that the stories based model on its own was the only factor driving the success of the change. Clearly, the fact that the principal consciously drew attention to the problem was a key factor in the process. However, we do suggest that the deliberate encouragement of storytelling to stimulate, clarify and explore the problem provided a meaningful, communicative vehicle for values, feelings and attitudes to emerge. The stories through which these were communicated allowed the school to challenge its underlying beliefs and assumptions about bullying and, subsequently, to adopt a more positive and proactive approach to the problem. The principal herself is keen to tell anyone who will listen the story of how the four-stage, stories-based approach shifted the attitudes in her school and brought about a much improved school structure for successfully dealing with bullying.

Whereas the process has not been scientifically validated, we were impressed enough with its success in this case to believe that it holds promise across a number of problems and contexts. In two current projects, for example, we are using the model in an attempt to bring about a shift in attitudes toward professional development in a high school, and to the setting of homework in another elementary school. Hopefully, these projects will result in further stories of success and raise awareness of the potential of stories to stimulate change in schools.

References


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