

Preface

In the past decade, an increasing amount of pressure has been placed on school staffs to teach an expanding curriculum. At the same time, resources were decreased, responsibilities grew, and less time was made available for teachers to support each other.

As a result, issues often develop among staff members, such as negativity, isolation, or censure. This can cause principals and teachers to spend a tremendous amount of time and energy addressing these problems instead of focusing on academia, their initial goal. Educators and students alike may suffer.

Our intention in this book is to assist principals, with the collaboration of teachers, support staff, and parents, to form a school culture in which rich, supportive, and energizing relationships will be enhanced. Specifically, the purpose of this book is to help educators find efficient ways to understand and solve staff problems, prevent conflicts, and generally enrich their school culture. With that in mind, we gently invite readers to reflect on somewhat controversial questions and make visible the challenges of the current school system. Once visible, these challenges can be contained and practices can be developed to bring forth each person's wisdom and compassionate self. Narrative therapy, considered the cutting edge in systemic approaches, has been a very relevant theoretical framework to understand and address school culture issues. It offers a contextual perspective that fosters respect and awareness, and contributes to bringing the best out in everyone.

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We have made every possible effort to write this book in a practical, clear, and creative way. Tutorials, exercises, common questions and answers, transcripts of conversations, illustrations, cartoons, dialogues between the authors, 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, consulting with several school principals, 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 staff-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 that 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 introduction to narrative therapy books readily available (Bird, 2000; Freeman & Combs, 1996; Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997; Madsen, 1999; Winslade & Monk, 1999; White & Epston, 1990; Winslade & Monk, 2000; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996).

Embedded in the spirit of the narrative approach is the belief in local knowledges and in the wisdom of lived experience. Expertise is assumed to develop from the handling of everyday life and not simply from theoretical conceptualization. With that in mind, we could write a book marrying the narrative approach and education only by recruiting educators to share their experiences. We believe this has significantly enriched the material that we present and certainly inspired us greatly in the ideas that we propose. As a result, we have interviewed and/or surveyed well over 200 educators from a wide range of elementary and middle public schools in Northern California. The populations in these schools varied in terms of socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity. Schools were visited in rural and suburban areas as well as in the city. Four schools involved parent participation,

while the remaining were general public schools. The questionnaires, surveys, and interview format for this research are included in Resources D and E.

From those conversations we have extracted pressures, struggles, solutions, and reflections that color each individual's journey in schools. We have integrated all of the emerging themes into different sections. The first chapter of the book explores the experiences of principals and teachers in the subculture of the school system. Our intention in writing this section is to foster a greater understanding of people's struggles and experiences in schools, regardless of their respective roles. It covers in particular the pressures that constrain their ways of being and includes quotes from our research that reveal both the humor and hardship of the job. Chapter 2 presents a few fundamental principles and practices inspired by the narrative approach. A careful attempt has been made to eliminate most of the jargon embedded in the theory to render it accessible and relevant to educators. Chapter 3 details the climate problems that can emerge in systems under pressure such as schools. It covers, for example, the numerous problems presented to us by educators, such as gossip, cliques, and union conflicts, as well as more educational themes, such as competition, hierarchy, and evaluation. Chapter 4 offers a complete case analysis of the development of a climate problem and its solution. Chapter 5 engages the reader in the step-by-step process of inviting a group of staff members to change without triggering conflicts. Chapter 6 summarizes the ingredients of a strong school culture. Chapter 7 offers words of wisdom, ideas, suggestions, and strategies shared by principals to prevent or solve problems. Finally, Chapter 8 offers brief suggestions and perspectives for working with other adults in the school, such as parents and yard duty volunteers.

We hope that all readers will be inspired by at least one of the ideas exposed and will finish their reading energized to explore new possibilities with their colleagues. Above all, we hope that the book will bring forth more appreciation and compassion for yourself and the dedicated members of your community.

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Principal
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