

Undercover Teams: Redefining reputations and transforming bullying relationships in the school community

By Michael Williams



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Abstract

Traditional responses to bullying behaviour in schools usually focus on attempting to change the behaviour of the victim or make modifications to the school systems. The ‘Undercover Teams’ approach provides specified means for those bullying to develop positive relations with the victim and other students in their class and thereby rewrite the bullying story. In this article we describe the process by which a transformation of the bullying identity occurs and we explain this with reference to narrative approaches to mediation and conflict resolution. We show how the school counsellor and a selected group of students co-author a new story through a carefully structured series of meetings, and we use real life examples to show how these changes occur.

Keywords: bullying, schools, Undercover Teams, narrative therapy, outsider-witnesses, definitional ceremony

I am a school counsellor in a multi-cultural co-educational high school in New Zealand. I had just returned to my office desk after my lunch break and I turned to see Yvette standing outside my office door sobbing uncontrollably. I knew from an earlier meeting with her and another group of girls, that she had recently immigrated with her mother and extended family from Durban, South Africa. It hadn't been easy coming to a new country, but the family had experienced considerable violence and were happy to come to a new country and school where they felt safe. I asked her what was upsetting her and, through floods of tears, she told me her story.

'It's been going on from last year when I started braiding my hair. Everyone started calling me 'Snoop Dog' and making dog noises and it was getting annoying. When everyone heard the one boy doing it, the others started saying it. It only happens in classes with female teachers. When it's lunch time, one of the boys calls me names and calls me a "kaffir". He keeps on with it whenever he is around his friends. He likes showing off and calling me that. It happens for at least two periods a day. It seems like they only do it to me and I can't do anything. I've tried keeping quiet and ignoring them but there's too many of them and they just keep on with it. When I am at bursting I just yell at them to shut up and I get in trouble from the teachers. I get so frustrated that the teachers don't seem to do anything.'

I told her that I had an idea that I was pretty sure would work. I explained the concept of an 'Undercover Team' and, at the end of my explanation, Yvette said, 'I don't want them to get in trouble, because that will only make it worse. I just want this bullying to stop. I think this could work.'

I shall pause this story now and begin to explain a process of working with instances of bullying in schools in a way that shifts the relationship narrative without pathologising anyone. I shall show how the Undercover Teams approach addresses bullying behaviour in a New Zealand high school by using peer group relations strategically to interrupt and thwart bullying relations (Williams & Winslade, 2008). I will explain the process that I use to eliminate bullying according to five distinct phases: valuing the victim, recruiting the Team, creating the plan, monitoring progress, and celebrating success.

The term 'Undercover Team' was coined by Bill Hubbard (2004) as an application of the 'No Blame' approach to bullying as created by Robinson & Maines (1997) and popularised in a number of countries around the world. It is an example of a 'playful approach to a serious problem' (Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1997). This approach invites students into a storyline where they are given a mission to eliminate bullying by providing the ones responsible for the bullying with new relational spaces from which to act that are incompatible with the original storyline of bullying.

Undercover Teams are a group of peers selected jointly by the counsellor, the person being bullied, and certain classroom teachers. After telling the story of the bullying and deconstructing its effects, the victim is invited to co-construct a support team that includes the two students who are responsible for the worst bullying, as well as four others who don't bully and have never been bullied themselves; ones who would be considered to have power and influence in the class.

Once the counsellor and the student have chosen the members of the Team, teachers' input is sought regarding their views on the suitability of the selected students. This check has the added impact of alerting teachers to the bullying. As a result, they become recruited into the Team and as outsider-witnesses (White, 2007) by observing the conversations and actions around them and assist in contributing to the rewriting of a new narrative for their class.

When the composition of the Team has been finalised, the counsellor calls the students to their first meeting, taking pains to keep the identity of the Team members secret. The story of the bullying is read to the Team members by the counsellor and the name of the student is revealed at the end. This locates the focus on the bullying rather than the person. The students are invited to be 'undercover' secret agents in an exclusive group whose mission is to seek out bullying and to banish it.

The counsellor facilitates the creation of a five point plan with the students and tasks are assigned to each student. Interventions such as just include him in conversations, smile and greet her and blend her in to our games, tell the bullies to back off are common tasks that students have offered.

When they have taken ownership of their mission, the students are left alone for a couple of days to go about their business of disrupting the bullying storyline and replacing it with preferred relationships that are incompatible with that narrative.

Meetings are held at alternating times with the victim and the Team throughout the next two weeks to discuss progress and to review the effectiveness of the plan. Feedback from the victim and the teachers is sought during these times and given back to the Team.

The feedback process provides the victim of bullying with an opportunity to recognise positive actions from others and a time to discuss how to respond. Power is relocated to the victim because the victim decides when the bullying has ceased.

Although the Team is set up on the behalf of the victim, he or she invariably becomes part of a new pro-social team. Where their life at school has been characterised by isolation and rejection, they are offered opportunities of participation and inclusion that were previously denied. Monitoring serves the same purpose that Michael White's use of 'definitional ceremonies' (White, 2007) serves where the group becomes the audience that Team members re-tell their stories to and provide opportunities to acknowledge each other's successes.

The process of the Team's work re-stories the victim's relationship with the rest of the class and the teacher, and offers the teacher an opportunity to see an expanded range of positions for the victim as they start to be less afraid and fearful. When the victim says that the bullying has gone, the Team is called for the final meeting where they receive a food voucher and a Principal's award that recognises their efforts in making the school a safe place.

Phase 1: Valuing the victim

I pick up the story now and Yvette returns centre stage to illustrate the next steps in phase one of the process.

After writing down her story exactly as she told me, and being careful to use only her words, I asked Yvette to explain how the bullying had made her think and feel.

'I got angry on Friday when all the boys started linking on to it and I started crying and getting angus (angry) at everyone. Then my teacher told me to go outside and talk about it and I didn't want to talk. Then I went outside and afterwards I was crying and some kids were laughing 'cause I was crying. It made me feel sore inside, like I am being

tortured by people and everyone is making fun over something so small. It's not small to me actually, because it hurts my feelings and it started last year.'

This line of enquiry invites Yvette to thicken the construction of the problem and to explore the extent of the influence of the bullying. I allowed her to talk without interruption or further questioning. I was curious to understand how the bullying invited her to respond and what it had taken from her. I was interested to see how much resistance she had to it and what it got her to think of herself. I was also interested in whether there was any role that the culture of her class was playing in how the story had grown. Then I was interested in how the bullying was directing her and to find out if she was responding to bullying in any way, for example, by retaliating and thereby keeping it alive. I also wanted to privilege her story and show her that I took this very seriously.

The third stage in the interview phase involved asking Yvette to describe how she would like things to be. These types of questions that helped her to build up a 'landscape of identity' (White, 2007) are usually put in the subjunctive mood, and they begin the process where Yvette considers what kinds of relationship she would prefer. In my earlier work, I didn't ask this question, but I have found that this is a very important step in beginning to develop a new narrative landscape. It introduces hope and begins to establish a platform for change. It challenges the notion that the relationships are fixed, and lays the foundation for considering the kinds of relationships she would prefer. Yvette said, 'I just want everybody to be friendly to me and to take me for what I am. I would like to feel it's a great day, not like I don't want to go to school because everybody is going to bully me ... not to feel afraid of people'.

Yvette came up with some unique outcomes (White & Epston, 1990) that stood in sharp contrast to the existing storyline. Here was the first moment where she clarified the kinds of relationships she would prefer. What had begun on the landscape of meaning now began to be dreamed of on the landscape of action. While her hopes were still not yet actualised, they were verbalised and, therefore, could be realised. She longed for relationships that were accepting and not judging. She wanted to enjoy school and to be at school without feeling afraid. She clarified the difference between what she was experiencing and what she preferred, and began to build the momentum for a resolution of the conflict.

During the fourth and final stage of this phase, I printed off a copy of the class list and we constructed the membership of her support team. We discussed the list and the ways that each one related to others in the class. This took the focus off the person/s doing the bullying and provided space to explore the relationships in general in the class, and it helped the student locate the bullying in the social networks in the class. It also valued the knowledge of the student.

I explained that I would discuss the suggestions with their teachers to see if the teacher might want to add any others. We do this because sometimes the student doesn't always know the class well enough (especially at the beginning of the year) and may choose students who have been kind to them but do not have the respect of the rest of the class.

When we had completed this stage and the names were recorded on the forms, I emailed Yvette's teachers to let them know that we had set up an Undercover Team in their class in order to eliminate some bullying. I told them the names of the students who we had selected for the Team and invited their input.

My final act in this meeting was to read back to Yvette what I had written down to check that I had written down everything accurately.

I reminded her of the timeline of the process and what would be involved, and I sent her back to class.

Phase 2: Recruiting the Team

The next day I called the Team together and, in a serious tone, invited the assembled students to listen to a story of bullying. I told them that I would reveal who had written this story at the end and that the story would be more about bullying than about bullies (in the logic of externalising conversation). I then read out the story of the bullying using Yvette's own words. I explained that they had all been personally selected by her to hear the story and that their selection on this Team had been endorsed by their teachers. I told them that I was not interested in exposing the person/s who has been bullying and that their names would not be mentioned, but that they all might have seen this bullying happening or have known something about it. This explanation has the effect of protecting the victim from potential recrimination or revenge-seeking by the bullies because they would not be 'outed' or blamed. I explained that, when the bullying had gone, they would receive a food voucher and a signed Principal's Award for 'Secret Agenting'.

Then I explained to them their mission and asked if they could keep a secret. I pointed out that the success of this operation depended on secrecy and stealth and that they were on a 'search and destroy mission'. They would be listening out for bullying and would be using all their power and strength of character to challenge it. At this point, I often read out examples of the kinds of statement previous students had said how the bullying has gone away, and statements from Team members about their observations at the end of the process.

Phase 3: Creating the plan

Phase three involves developing a five point plan to help the victim. To help them think about this, I often use the 'miracle question' (de Shazer, 1988) and emphasise this by waving my wand in the air. I say, 'If a miracle happened for Yvette overnight while she was asleep and when she got to school, the bullying had completely gone, what would be different?' From here the Team is invited to develop a plan to bring these things to pass.

The Team that had agreed to re-story the bullying of Yvette came up with the following plan:

- Tell people to stop it if they are being mean.
- Not bring up the word 'Snoop Dog' and stop others from saying it.
- Ask her if she is OK, if she is having a bad day.
- Talk to her, give her a hug when she needs it.
- Tell her that her hair is fine, buy her lunch.

I wrote this plan onto my form and then we allocated tasks to Team members. This plan then became an agreement between us.

When the plan was completed, I checked to see if they could think of ways to keep this an 'Undercover Operation'. I told them how important it was for them to remain 'undercover' because, not only would it protect the anonymity of the Team, but it would give them space to

go about their work without their friends knowing about it. We talked about what they might tell their friends when asked why they went to see the counsellor.

Finally, I let them know that it would be up to Yvette to decide when the bullying had stopped, and I explained to the Team that I would check with Yvette after two days to see how the Team was working. I would then see them again and pass on her feedback to them. This explanation has the important effect of maintaining the seriousness of the process and reminding them that their success is determined by the reports that the victim provides. This last point usurps the power of the bullies and puts into the hands of the victim the power to decide when the bullying has gone.

Phase 4: Monitoring progress

The next day I met Yvette. At this meeting I greeted her warmly and asked her how things were going in her class. I wanted to know how well the Team had been sticking to the agreement (the plan). I shared their plan with her and asked her what she had noticed.

Yvette told me:

‘A big change, they are standing up for me, if I am in need of something, they are always there. I get smiles every morning. It was shocking, he came up to me and when I saw him coming, I started running away because I thought he was going to do something or say something, but then one of the girls on the Team said, ‘No wait, he’s going to give you something’.

‘He came to me and said he was sorry for everything he had done and he gave me this chocolate. I said that I accept your apology. The happiness has come back! Tell them that they are doing a great job and I would like to thank them all for it.’

When I heard such positive feedback, I congratulated her on her willingness to accept the efforts the Team had been making. I asked her what she had done to make the program so successful and whether there was still any bullying that hadn’t been eliminated. I asked her what it was like getting the apology and how he had responded to her acceptance of the apology. I asked her what she had learned about herself and how she could use these understandings if the problem came up again. I asked how she could keep the happiness going and she explained how she had realised that she needed to talk about how she was feeling and not explode in anger. She said that she could be more ‘friendly and light-hearted’. I asked her if she was sure that the bullying had gone and she said that the class was much happier and that she was pretty sure that at last it was over.

After a couple of days I again met the Team. The purpose of this meeting was to review the plan and to give the Team feedback from Yvette about her response to their efforts. This meeting was also a chance to let the Team know what their teachers had observed and to encourage them and affirm their value to her and to the rest of the class. It was an opportunity for the Team to reflect on their work and to discuss how Yvette had responded to them. It was the time to see what still needed to be done and to include any new ideas for action that they might have discovered. It was an opportunity to invite the Team to express what they were learning about supporting each other and making a positive difference in the class. It was also a time to reflect on the changes that had occurred and what still needed to be done to completely eliminate the bullying.

This is what they said:

'She is way more happier, no more "Snoop Dog". The bullying has almost gone, some people are still being stink to her in class but we are sticking up for her. It will take time for people to get used to her because she talks loud and funny. I always say bye to her at the end of the day, be nice to her in front of her friend, now people think I like her!' (Worst bully)

I reminded the Team what powerful work they were doing and how profound the difference they were making in the school must be. I thanked them for their invaluable efforts and said that the final stage was now to check one last time with Yvette and the teachers and if she gave the 'all-clear' we would meet for the giving out of food vouchers and the Principal's awards.

I called up Yvette for the last time and this was what she told me.

'There's no bullying, everyone is nice to me. They have all been good. No one is calling me names. Others say, "Don't make her angry," or something like that. I've felt great all the time. The Teams help people feel confident about themselves, only the Team do it. I want to meet them and thank them'.

Phase 5: Celebrating success

On the strength of Yvette's response, I called the Team together for the '*Celebration of Peaceful Relationships Party*' after arranging for my Principal to sign the certificates and I printed off enough food vouchers and evaluation forms for each member. At that meeting I thanked the Team for their efforts and before, they went back to class, I asked each one to complete an evaluation form for research purposes.

By this time, about two to three weeks had passed from the initial interview with Yvette to the final Team meeting. Both the victim and the Team have been seen three times each. The whole process has taken about three hours, the longest times being the initial interview and the setting up of the Team. When Teams move very quickly, two feedback stages can be eliminated and the total time reduced to two-and-a-half hours.

Commentary on the Undercover Teams approach

In traditional approaches to bullying, the bullying behaviour is seen as a service manifestation of a problem or attitude that affects the bully in his or her essential nature. This perspective takes the view that a bully is someone who was motivated by a need or desire to inflict pain or humiliate another person. This desire to hurt, it is argued, can be traced back to incidents of violence or some form of abusive treatment, often located in the family. Siblings have bullied a person, and he or she has learnt to bully because they've internalised the feelings of powerlessness and shame they experience at the hand of another bully.

We take the view that the source of the bullying is located in a relationship narrative that occurs in the classroom or on the playground. Undercover Teams have the classroom as their context, but the operation of the Team to re-author the bullying story inevitably shifts to beyond the classroom. The focus of the Team is to replace a complex story of bullying with a narrative that resists and challenges its dominance. This new narrative ignores the reasons or causes of the bullying and concentrates on solutions to it. The reputation of the bully is ignored by the

Team (which includes the bully) and existing power relationships are utilised for a different purpose. The expert knowledge of those bullying becomes the means by which they gain greater insight into the hurt and isolating effects of bullying (Winslade & Monk, 2007).

There have been other approaches to bullying in schools recorded in narrative literature. Alice Morgan (1996) worked with a group of girls in Australia to re-author 'teasing' and Marie-Nathalie Beaudoin (2001, 2004) worked with American elementary school and middle school students to externalise 'the bugging bug' and to re-story relationships around it. The approach recorded here differs in that it does not involve working in a group counselling mode. Instead it works through a more strategic interruption of power relations in a way that re-aligns classroom relations and directly targets the discourses that support the bullying relationship. As with the approach recorded here, Aileen Cheshire and Dorothea Lewis (1996, 2004) showed how high school students could be given responsibility for addressing what they called 'harassment', but their approach was through training young people as mediators in disputes. This approach may be called conflict resolution but it is not, strictly speaking, mediation.

In some cases, it may appear that the bullying is mindless. It may be seen as teasing or playing a game that is intended to either gain position or power amongst peers or maintain such a position. There may not even be any malice between the bully and the victim. More often than not, the person doing the bullying is not aware of the extent of the harm they are doing to the victim and any response the victim might make, for example crying or storming off, is surprisingly not seen by the bully as related to their actions. They may even think that the victim likes the increased attention. The friends of the victim might even collude with the bully, not out of fear that the bully will turn on them if they don't support their actions, but because they believe that the bullying is not malicious.

When this occurs, the sense of betrayal is profound for the victim and they may be shocked and surprised that their friends are not taking a stand against this behaviour. They too may not be aware of the impact of the bullying and they discuss the victims' distress as unimportant or trivial or out of proportion. To the victim it seems that even their friends are ganging up on them and they become increasingly isolated from the nurturing relationships that characterise friendship.

Undercover Teams ignore the temptation to find out why the bullying is occurring. The focus is on the effects rather than on the causes of the problem. The absence of investigation into why the bullying is occurring clears the way for the bully to understand the impact of their actions on the victim and to be included in the Team writing a new account of the bullying.

Absence of blame or shame enables the bully victim to save face by not requiring any admission or guilt. No apologies are sought and there is no blame attributed to any person. The bullying becomes the object of blame, not the person or persons bullying. The problem is treated as the problem and the person is not the problem (White, 1988). The bully is saved from a desire to continue the conflict or the bullying or a need for retribution, because of being exposed by the authorities in the school. There is no attempt to isolate the bully, drive him or her into a corner or point a finger of blame at him or her. This approach also enables the bully to consider the benefits of changing their behaviour by providing a space for them to save face without losing face with other Team members.

The purpose of recording the victims' account to the Team without alteration or analyses (reading it like it is) foregrounds the experience of the victim and invites the assembled group to see things from the victim's perspective. On occasions students have said things such as, 'That

must be horrible to be treated like that'. On other occasions students have cried when they hear the story. Sometimes students will volunteer, 'I know what that's like. It's happened to me too'.

They don't have to agree with the story or account for any aspects of it because the voice of the victim has been privileged by the counsellor in relating the story. It stands on its own and is validated as a legitimate account of what's happened that involved the establishment of the Team. It is important that all the members of the Team understand what the victim thinks and feels, and why they think and feel as they do. The impact of the story is deepened and thickened as the Team hears how the person has been affected, and widened by exploring the impact of bullying on others including the victim's family. In addition, by removing blame from the story, the option for the bully to take a defensive position is removed. This enables the bully to look more closely at their own perception of the victim and consider the possibility that their perception might be wrong or unfounded.

Opening up the extent of distress of the victim also enables a discussion of a perception of the victim by the Team members and 'creates compassion all round' (Epston, 2008, p. 143). If the bully has been projecting his or her fears or prejudices onto the victim, then as a team they can form a plan or a greater sense of shared purpose. This sense of working together on a solution of a relational problem provides mutual support to the Team members and continues the process where the group re-authors an alternative storyline (Epston, 2008).

Traditional methods focus on punishing the bully and eliminating intimidation by an increasing show of force, thus a form of bullying or intimidation becomes then a test of who is most powerful. Usually the power of authority is far greater than the power induced by the bully and, when it is used to overpower, then resentment on the part of the bully is usually the result. The power of the Undercover Team lies in acting in a way that is incompatible with the story of bullying (Winslade & Monk, 2008). They act inconsistently with the victims' perception of the bullying and replace aggression or humiliation with support and friendliness. Initial apprehension of the bully's positive action is replaced by relief when the bullying appears to be over.

The Team members also gain a new perception of bullying within their midst. By including the bully in the opportunity to create positive relationships in the class, Teams offer the bullies a stake in the creation of positive outcomes by including the bully in the helping Team rather than sidelining him or her as negative and destructive. They feel that the process of re-writing the positive story becomes their own story. They had been part of a solution rather than part of the problem. These actions contribute to a re-constituted sense of self, a preferred self, incompatible with the story of bullying.

The students who have been bullying do not have to earn the right to membership of this new club. It is offered to them by the facilitator. This is the gift that they don't expect, and typically they relish the opportunity to be part of a new social group whereas in the past they were more likely to be rejected by students who work hard and enjoy school and learning. Occasionally they will confess their role in the bullying and other times they will say that they won't do anything to help. Ironically this is a good solution!

At other times they may not perceive their behaviour as bullying, yet when they realise that others in the Team want to do something positive for the victim, they may decide that bullying does not enhance their reputation. The new group norms may invite them to seek group acceptance to be admired rather than be known as someone to be feared. Often the bullies take charge of the action plan and are swept up with enthusiasm in generating solutions, and their part in writing the original story of bullying is subjugated. Providing bullies with a way out of

their bullying reputation without losing face, gives them a face-saving way out of an intractable problem.

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