

## **APPLYING THE METAPHOR OF "STRENGTH":**

A teacher and student collaborate to keep Trouble out of the classroom

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The following is a report by an elementary school art teacher (second author), describing her experience of using ideas from the narrative therapy approach. She recently viewed a video of a counseling session in which an 8-year old boy was invited to use his newly discovered strength to overcome the problem of 'giving up' in school. The skills of testing for strength and invitation to keep Trouble out of the room were then applied in a 3-minute exchange with a student in her weekly art class of fourth-grade students. Follow-up interventions are also described.

Darnell is a fourth grade child who has, for his entire elementary school career, been what educators call a "troublemaker". In his fourth grade class, he sits at a desk far away from the other students and continues to sulk, throw things, fight with other children, and react before thinking. He has some friends who look up to him for his bullying behavior, but the majority of his classmates do not socialize with him. Here is what happened this week in his art class:

Students were allowed to choose teammates for an art project. Each team was to have four members. Darnell was pleased that he could leave his isolated seat and join his other two "troublemaker" friends in the class. Another boy, Tim, did not have a team and was resigned to join these three. This particular boy Tim has some disabilities that have caused him some troubles in that many students do not want to work with him. In addition, he was the only white child in the group.

Sure enough, as the students began to work on their project, trouble was brewing in that group. One child was to be the reader, one the recorder, etc. Darnell took on the job of recorder telling the other boys he was in charge. Tim sat isolated from the group.

As I roamed the room, helping each group with their challenges, I came to Darnell and Tim's group. The boys were in a big argument and Tim was sobbing softly. I asked what they could tell me about the situation. Tim claimed that the boys were telling him to shut up and would not let him speak. I asked if it was all the boys who were doing this and he replied that it was just Darnell. I asked Darnell to step over to the corner as I needed his help with something. He was sullen, arms crossed, as he shuffled slowly over to the corner. He was used to being reprimanded and used to denying his behavior so he was not happy to be talking with me, an adult.

I told him first that I did not hear or see what happened so I was not blaming him for anything but I needed some help.

T: "Can I ask, Darnell, how old you are now?"

D: "Ten." (Arms still crossed, turned away from me).

T: "Hmmm. Would you be willing to test something for me?"

D: "I don't know." (Mumbled, barely audible).

T: "Well I was wondering if you would be willing to test your strength by squeezing my hand as hard as you can."

D: "Okay." (Cautious grin).

He took my hand at that point and squeezed gently. I told him he didn't need to be afraid of hurting me and he squeezed hard.

T: "Yow. You're pretty strong. Did you say you are ten years old?"

D: "Yeah."

- T: "I don't know, Darnell, I think I felt some 11 and maybe even 11 and 1/2 year-old strength."  
He grinned.
- T: "I've noticed that there is some trouble in the classroom today and I'm wondering if you could help me to keep it out in the hallway. Do you think you could help?"
- D: "Yeah."
- We went out into the hallway and, without my saying anything, he said:
- D: "Stay out here!"
- T: "That sounded pretty forceful and strong. I believe trouble will listen to you. I'm wondering if you can use your strength to help with one more thing. Have you noticed if Tim has many friends?"
- D: "No, we don't like him – he's weird."
- T: "I wonder how that feels to him - what do you think?"
- D: "Lonely."
- T: "Yeah, I think maybe you're right. Do you think you could help today with that?"
- D: "Yeah."

We went back into the classroom, Darnell went to his group and I overheard him say to Jim:

"Would you like to be the recorder for our group?"

The rest of the class time (50 minutes) went smoothly for that group.

The above exchange I had with Darnell took a total of about 3 minutes. The boy was transformed into a kind, helpful, cooperative child. He seemed to actually enjoy working on the lesson. I saw him in the hallway at the end of the school day, talking with two other boys, about 30 feet away from me.

I called to him:

- T: "Hey, Darnell - thank you."  
He looked up and grinned.
- T: "Do you know what I mean?"  
Another grin:
- D: "Yeah." He turned back to his buddies.

How this approach is different than anything else I have used in working with children:

1. There was no promise of, or expectation of a tangible reward. This is not an incentive program like the stickers, popcorn parties, gumballs, lunch with the teacher approach we are used to. No charts to keep track of, no lists, no accounting systems.
2. Children learn the intrinsic rewards for good behavior. These include feeling good about oneself, discovering that others like being with a student who is not causing trouble, and finding out how interesting/exciting/even fun learning can be for everyone. They begin to feel the joy of being a part of something greater than themselves.
3. Children discover their own strengths, talents, and skills for managing their own behavior.
4. Children are respected for the creative problem-solvers they are.

5. Children feel good about themselves for taking on and solving challenges. They begin to understand that they have the strength to deal with a life that can be frustrating, other students who can be annoying or cruel, and not always getting their own way. They feel proud of themselves for their decisions.

Next class

Darnell works well in his group. They are busy with their project. Jim is helping a lot as he is a very bright little guy. Although the noise level is high in the room, the groups are working on their project. At the end of the class, the teacher asks Darnell if she could speak to him. She tells him how impressed she is that he is able to use his Strength to keep Trouble out of the room. She tells him what that means to her and the effect it is having on her workday.

She also states that she believes other people should know about Darnell's ability to help the class and keep Trouble out. She asks him if he would be willing to meet with her in the principal's office some day so she could let her know what a good job he is doing. Darnell said he would be willing to let that happen.

The teacher then asks Darnell how his grandmother is doing. Darnell is at first suspicious because his grandmother (his caretaker) is usually only mentioned in relation to being called about his misbehavior.

Darnell states she is ok. The teacher tells Darnell she knows his grandmother well as they worked together at another school when his grandmother used to do volunteer work. The teacher asks Darnell to say hi to her.

Next class

Darnell is sitting at his desk away from the other kids. His homeroom teacher has had him isolated in the front corner of the classroom as a result of his history of misbehaving. Today he is sitting with his hood covering his head and face as the art teacher walks in. As she enters the class, Darnell waves his hand to her to say hello. He has never acknowledged her before. When greeted by a teacher, Darnell's usual response is to keep walking, looking straight ahead as if he didn't hear her. The teacher instructs the class to assemble in their groups and begin work on their project. Darnell immediately jumps up to join his group. The groups are working well, including Darnell's group, with minimal disruption.

Next week

The projects are lost.

The art teacher discovers the projects the kids have been working on have been lost, or worse, thrown in the garbage by someone.

Although she spent much time trying to track down the projects, including contacting other teachers in other schools who might have been in the school, asking the principal, the custodians, other teachers – they cannot be found.

The art teacher has to inform the class. They are extremely disappointed. She is particularly concerned about Darnell's reaction and the fear he might return to being disruptive.

To her surprise, Darnell is one of the children who, after expressing their disappointment, make the choice to start the project again. They are given the promise they can have as much time as they need to complete it.

The students do several things to address this situation. However, some students are very disappointed and refuse to start the project again. One member of Darnell's group becomes disruptive and states he is not going to continue.

The teacher takes Darnell aside and asks him if he would be willing to use his Strength to console the group member and ask for his cooperation. Darnell immediately walks over to the boy, puts his arm around his shoulders, and whispers something in his ear.

Darnell walks back to the teacher and states, "It's taken care of".

At the end of the day, the teacher notices Darnell's grandmother in the hallway and walking toward Darnell to pick him and walk him home as they usually do. The teacher walks over and tells grandmother about Darnell's achievements in her art class, especially the way he has helped her and used his Strength to help. Grandmother tells Darnell that she has known the teacher a long time, that they used to sing songs together at the other school and knows that the teacher would only tell her the truth. Darnell walks out of the school arm-and-arm with his grandmother.

This is a story the school nurse told me at school today. I asked her to write it down for us. I'm so delighted that others are witnessing Darnell's growth and conquering of Trouble.

On April 21st, I was watching from the clinic window a group of 4th graders playing outside. They were playing 4-square on the parking area next to the dumpsters. One child became visibly upset over the game, and he lashed out physically. He was yelling and swinging his arms. There were no teachers witnessing the incident, and they could not hear or see me in the window. Darnell immediately put his arm around the angry child and tried to walk him away from the area. He came back and also put his arm around the other child. I could see that he was talking. I wasn't sure of the names of the children involved, so I called the secretary to the window. She verified for me that the peacekeeper was Darnell. I wrote his name on my student log, followed by a 2-word description of what I had witnessed:

"Darnell - the hero".

One week later

The teacher's interview with Darnell about his expertise in keeping Trouble away:

I asked Darnell if he would talk with me for a few minutes in the hallway.

Once there, I asked him if he would be willing to help other children out in their efforts to keep Trouble out of their classrooms and their lives. This is the intervention of 'Consulting Your Consultants', taken from the Narrative Therapy approach.

I explained that I sometimes meet other children who have the same kind of challenge and I knew he was now an expert in this.

He said "Sure."

T: "What exactly did you do, Darnell, to keep Trouble away?"

D: "Well I just got ready and put my things away when I was supposed to."

T: "Wow. How did you keep Trouble away so you could do that?"

D: "I said, 'Trouble, you're bad!'"

T: "Trouble, you're bad. So you spoke right to trouble and told it that it is bad?"

D: "Yeah."

T: "What did Trouble do when you told it that it's bad?"

D: "It went away."

T: "And does Trouble ever come back?"

D: "Yeah. But I think - You can do that thing to get in trouble or you can do something else and get to go out and play".

T: "Do you mean now that Trouble has the name Bad that you are able to choose to do something different and get to go out and play?"

D: "Yeah."

T: "Wow, Darnell, I'm so impressed with your Strength. I wonder if you would be okay if we used your ideas to help other children."

D: "Okay."

Last day of class

During our last art class of the year, students created heavy board portfolios for their work from the year. With markers they drew and colored designs that reflect their personalities on the outside of their portfolios. I noticed that Darnell was drawing a large face of a man on his portfolio and then realized that this man was lifting a barbell with weights.

T: "Darnell, that's quite a man there lifting weights."

Darnell wrote 175 lbs. on one of the weights.

D: "Yeah, you know -Strength."

T: "What's that?"

"You know...Strength."

T: "Of course. I understand."

The other boys at the table asked what we were talking about - what about strength? They wanted to know.

Darnell said. "It's between us."

He went back to drawing.

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