'Cut and paste' mediation: A narrative activity for problem solving in schools

By Elizabeth Meyers

Elizabeth Meyers, LMSW, ACSW, is a social worker in Lansing, Michigan, USA. She works in public schools and clinical practice. Her email address is egmeyers2@comcast.net

Abstract

In this article, the author describes a method for processing problematic situations with young children in school. The activity is designed for use with individuals and in mediation with groups of two or more children. The activity is 'hands-on' and visual. As such, it is especially useful with children who demonstrate difficulty with expressive language and sequencing. Coupled with a narrative approach to the nature of problems, the author finds that this method provides a safe structure within which to explore problem situations, generate new solutions and to resolve conflicts.

Keywords: narrative practice, narrative mediation, conflict resolution, school counselling, school social work, elementary school, cut and paste

Explorations: An E-Journal of Narrative Practice
www.dulwichcentre.com.au/explorations-2011-1-elizabeth-meyers.pdf

4

Resolving conflicts with children is often complicated by the manner in which they process their experiences and try to report events. Children start their stories at whatever point is most significant to them at the moment and are often non-sequential in their telling. For young children or others who have difficulty with sequencing or using expressive language, a 'cut and paste' approach is helpful. This process entails writing down the child's verbal account of events, then literally cutting and pasting the sentences back together to create a sequenced story. Once I started using this technique, it became apparent that I could expand its use as a vehicle to explore the nature of problems from a narrative perspective.

This cut and paste activity works well in processing an event with an individual, as well as in resolving disputes. I have successfully used this method with groups of up to four children. The cut and paste process entails three simple steps; recording, sequencing and processing. For this article, I will first describe using it with one child and then discuss considerations for use in mediation with groups of two or more. For the practitioner, it may be helpful to practise this method in conversation with a single child before attempting it with multiple children.

Recording

In recording, we are simply documenting the story. The goal is to get the unedited story on paper. Children learn the value of writing in school. They appreciate the documentation of their story because it notes the significance of and respect for their experience (Freeman, Epston, & Lobovits, 1996; White & Epston, 1990). When the practitioner acts as the scribe, it frees up the child to reflect and she or he will provide more detail once relieved of the mechanics of writing. The practitioner can influence the pace of the telling, so the child or others can attend to and appreciate the story. I often ask children to slow down, so I can record their words or I read them back to make sure I am accurate. Children appreciate this as a demonstration of respect for their thoughts. In return, they are generous with my request for them to slow down and let me catch up. It may reflect, I imagine, their own experience with the difficulties of the writing process. As a practical consideration, I use a heavy paper to ensure that the story physically survives the cut and paste activity.

I start the conversation by inviting the child to tell me about the problem. Wherever they start, the story is perfectly fine. I list each sentence separately in the order it is offered, using the child's language – all of it. Adults often feel compelled to 'correct' children with what we think of as 'appropriate' language. I find that such correction can bring the energy of the story to a dead stop. Instead, I try to appreciate the child's language as a doorway into their world of priorities and norms. Besides, if word choice reveals itself as contributing to the child's presenting problem, there will be time to examine that within the context of problem-solving. Totalising statements (Winslade & Monk, 2007) that reflect the influence of the problem, such as, 'This always happens', or, 'Everybody hates me', are recorded along with other statements. Their role in the current story will also be revealed.

Sequencing

Once the story is documented, I offer the child a pair of scissors and invite them to cut each sentence into a separate strip. With the child's guidance, we arrange them in sequential order leaving room between the sentences to backfill missing information. Typically, the whole mood of the process shifts at this point to one of curiosity and fun as the child moves into the cut and

paste activity of sequencing the story. The activity itself demonstrates that we are not stuck in one story, that we can remove ourselves from a problem story and reconsider events from an empowered perspective. Once the sentences are laid out in order, gaps in the story can then be addressed by asking questions such as:

- 'What happened right before this?'

- 'What caused this to happen?'

- 'How did (the problem) get from here to there?'

In this manner, the story is often worked in reverse to obtain a full sequence of events, recording each additional statement and placing it in chronological order. The practitioner is likely to be curious about events that happened prior to what the child perceives as the problem, because they do not yet comprehend the entire notion of cause-effect. In doing so, we help them back up the story to see how the stage was set for a conflict to occur.

Totalising statements, (again, for example, 'This always happens' or, 'Everybody hates me') can be considered at this point. I have said to children, 'This statement looks bigger than this particular problem. Can you explain to me how they are related?' Sometimes, children will discard those totalised sentences because they are no longer relevant. But children have also demonstrated that these statements can indicate the history of the problem or a chronic issue that colours much of their experience. With such significance, they may want to include these statements. We reserve these for a portion of the document labeled as 'history' or 'influences on today's problem' or whatever title works for the child. The detailed story is pasted onto a larger sheet of paper, reserving room to write in processing comments.

Processing

Cut and paste provides psychological distance from the problem and can be a safe platform from which to externalise the problem and play with possible alternatives to a scenario that promoted failure. In a narrative spirit, we want to maintain the position that the child is not defined by the problem. The 'problem is the problem' (White, 1988/89). To that end, the practitioner can now ask processing questions such as:

- 'When you threw your pencil in class, what were you trying to say?'

- 'Throwing your pencil seems to have invited her Anger to talk to your Anger. Is there another way you could get your point across? Shall we write that possibility down?'

- 'Is there a time when Anger did not do the talking? Shall we note that too?'

- 'Now that we see how (X) happened, does that change our understanding of (Y). If so, how?'

- 'With that understanding I wonder if there might be a different way to handle such a problem in the future?'

These process responses and possible outcomes are also documented and might be noted as solutions or alternative ways to handle future conflicts.

Mediation

When working with multiple children, we want to counter the tendency for the whole conversation to be framed by the first reporter, as described by Sara Cobb (1994) with regards to the power of the first speaker. I clarify that each child in the room has the opportunity to record their story and remind them that we would expect that the stories would all be a bit different. 'So please do not worry about what the other children say, just record your own story.' We follow the same procedure as outlined above for a single child. Each child is asked to listen as the stories are recorded. Using different coloured paper for each story is helpful. After the stories have all been recorded, scissors are passed out, sentences are cut and each child sequences their sentences. We then combine the sentences to make one story.

The mood typically shifts to one of collaboration as the group works to construct one comprehensive story. They confirm each other's recollections and fill in each other's gaps. Some recall events that others did not notice. They may disagree as to which pieces are relevant to the whole story. Once the sequence of the story has been agreed upon and documented, the group can process the events as described earlier.

In group processing, noting the intent of behaviour is especially important for children who have difficulty with expressive language or rely on facial expressions or gestures (often aggressive) to get their point across. In my experience, this is often a component in the problems that either the school principal or I have been asked to mediate. This problem-solving opportunity is a 'teachable moment' in the application of language and social skills.

For example, a nine-year-old boy I worked with had a significant language delay. He had worked with a speech and language teacher since pre-school. He would often display the darkest, stormiest scowl on his face and assume that his classmates would understand his thoughts, based simply on this expression. It worked to some degree, but not enough to keep him out of conflicts entirely. During a mediation session with several of his classmates, his use of 'the look' was identified as a contributing factor.

I asked him to demonstrate his 'look', which he did.

I asked, 'When you made "the look", what were you trying to say?'

In this moment, he was motivated to apply what he had learned about organising his speech in order to be effective with his friends. After a pause of several, long minutes, he slowly whispered, 'I didn't like the game they were playing'.

I replied in a quiet voice, 'And you were hoping they could read your frown and understand what you were thinking?'

He nodded.

I asked the other boys if they could read his frown.

The boys explained that they thought he was just mad at them and confused by his 'mean look'.

I asked the group, 'Now that he has explained what he really meant, does that change our understanding of what happened?'

Explorations: An E-Journal of Narrative Practice
www.dulwichcentre.com.au/explorations-2011-1-elizabeth-meyers.pdf

7

His friends knew he was quiet, but this made it clear to them how he struggled to hold a conversation. One of the boys said that he had asked him what was wrong but had not got an answer.

Another boy stated that he also has trouble putting his thoughts into words and that he gets into the same conflicts with others.

These statements were added to the story. 'It's often hard to get our point across', I said to further externalise the problem. 'How would you boys like to handle this problem in the future?'

The group solved the problem by agreeing on a hand signal he would use to indicate when he had something to say. His friends talked about having to wait for him to speak, but they agreed to be patient in waiting for him to get out his words, because they really valued him as a friend. I added their solution to the document and told them that I would check back with them to see how their plan was working. With guidance in narrative processing from the practitioner as noted above, children can consider alternative solutions that incorporate a broader understanding of the various perspectives within the group.

Sometimes children clearly disagree about what happened or about the meaning of a particular event. They may need to accept that people see things differently. To address this, when we have had an absolute disagreement, we have included multiple meanings. We can then examine the events as well as possible outcomes based on the variations. I have found that exploring the various meanings of events for the group members and the various behaviours based on those meanings is central to mediation with children. With a question such as, *'Now that we see that (X) meant different things to both of you, does that change our understanding of what happened between you? If so, how?'* we can move the conversation to a broader perspective, rather than get stuck in who is right or wrong. Simply by explaining to each other what they experienced, they are re-working the situation from a collaborative perspective. All recollections may not be resolved, but the nature of the conversation can still be healing.

When the mutual story is worked to the group's satisfaction and a solution or alternative plan has been developed, all participants are invited to sign it. Copies are made and given to all. It can be an impressive document and some children are quite proud of the work they have produced. We determine who else might need to know about their plan, such as their teachers or playground supervisors, who were involved with the original problem. We make copies for them as well. We arrange to meet again to check back on how the plan is working, usually within a few weeks. In my personal experience, the resolution has typically continued with an increased positive regard among the children involved. New conflicts may occur and require processing, but they now have a template for solving them.

Example

The following example of this cut and paste approach comes from a school setting. While the events and dialogue are actual, all names used are fictitious. Mark, a ten-year-old boy, came to my office just off the bus one morning, in tears after being teased by Joe, who he thought was a friend. Through the tears, the story was told, filled with totalised statements.

'Everybody hates me on the bus, EVERYBODY! They all do what he says and if he teases me, they ALL pick on me.'

Explorations: An E-Journal of Narrative Practice
www.dulwichcentre.com.au/explorations-2011-1-elizabeth-meyers.pdf

8

I asked, 'If that's how he treats you, why do you call him your friend?'

Mark explained, 'Sometimes he's really nice to me. I've known him for two years. He's one of my best friends here. But when we get around other kids, he's mean. I hate this school. I want to transfer back to my old school.'

I suggested, 'Shall we see if we can get together the kids involved to solve this today so the ride home on the bus would be better?'

He agreed and started listing the entire roster of students on his bus as people who needed to be included. I was concerned that he was defining this problem on too large of a scale for it to be successfully resolved. I thought we'd be more successful on a smaller scale, rather than take on the whole bus.

I asked him, 'Who is most important to you in solving this problem? Who do you really want to get along with?'

Mark said that Joe was really the person he was most concerned with. I suggested and Mark agreed that since the other children seemed to follow his friend's lead, Joe might influence the others on the bus, once the two boys had solved this problem. We could certainly have future conversations that involved more children, if this was found necessary.

I arranged a time with the teacher to meet with the two boys. The teacher had not yet heard of the morning issue. She said that Joe tries very hard to do what is expected of him in school. She correctly predicted that Joe would be upset by being called out of class for a problem. When I picked up the two boys later that morning, Joe's eyes became red with tears.

My first priority was to immediately set a tone of mutual problem-solving, rather than finger-pointing. I introduced myself to Joe as the school's counsellor with a benign description that I frequently use.

'My job here', I said, 'is to help kids with situations or feelings that make it hard to get the most out of school'. I continued, 'You're not in trouble, but Mark tells me that you can help us understand something that was upsetting for him this morning. I'll explain more when we get to my room.'

I limit the child's personal exposure in the public hallways by reserving issue-related conversation for the office. As we sit at the table, there is a variety of coloured construction paper, pencils and pens and scissors to greet us.

'We'll be using this stuff as we talk today', I say. I go on to explain how each person will get a chance to tell their story and how we would expect some differences in their accounts.

'I'll write each story down as you talk', I say. 'Joe, maybe Mark should start since he asked that you join us?' Joe agreed.

Mark told his story, repeating the concerns he had originally voiced. He also talked about teasing as sometimes being a positive way that the two boys interacted; the grosser and funnier, the better. His story included the teasing that he had experienced on the bus by multiple children. But he identified the most difficult part of the morning as happening over breakfast at school after the bus. It included a demeaning comment from Joe about a gift from Mark's mother.

Mark's voice became loud and strained, 'She paid $300.00 for it. She didn't have the money to buy it.'

He repeated this statement and his face looked upset. I wanted to demonstrate responsiveness to Mark, but to be fair to Joe, I did not want to process Mark's singular version of events. I chose to continue with the recording.

'I want to make sure I write this down correctly.' I said. 'May I read it back to you?'

Mark confirmed the account of his story and we turned to Joe for his version. I'd had concerns that Mark was exaggerating the chronic teasing, because his account seemed so sweeping and inclusive of so many kids. I was surprised then when Joe began his story and basically confirmed Mark's report.

He stated, 'Sometimes we have arguments. This was a smaller one.'

He confirmed that the teasing was often done in fun and was mutual.

Joe, being truthful, as only children are, said, 'Some people don't like Mark on the bus. If they see us arguing, they'll join in and tease him'.

I kept writing, leaving room to add processing notes, glad to hear Joe's version of events and glad that I had not insulted Mark by voicing my incorrect assumption.

The second part of the story was complicated by the inclusion of several more students. Joe confirmed that he had said that Mark's MP3 player 'sucked' in response to what seemed to Joe to be an exaggeration of its value. As we progressed, I stopped to verify names and events for accuracy. The sequencing seemed confused, but we addressed that next. Each boy cut and sequenced his own story. As they moved into joining the two stories together, they agreed on the events. Mark seemed pleased to have his experience confirmed, while Joe seemed relieved to be able to discuss the events without blame.

In processing the story, I noted, 'Teasing seems to be a big part of your relationship; bigger than this morning's problem. Should we set these sentences about how you tease each other aside for "history"? They seem to explain some of how you know each other.'

The boys agreed, adding some more comments about teasing.

I continued, 'So, when you tease on the bus, it's part of your friendship? And these other kids butt in on it?'

Joe agreed. 'If they leave us alone, we can solve it.'

'How?' I asked.

'Usually by being funny' Joe said.

Ten-year-old peer pressure can be an intimidating force. I wanted to help the boys achieve a perspective on the group teasing that would allow them to respond in a confident manner.

'The way you describe it', I said, 'it sounds like it doesn't matter what the issue is. They're just joining in because the teasing is exciting; like a chorus of teasing.'

Explorations: An E-Journal of Narrative Practice
www.dulwichcentre.com.au/explorations-2011-1-elizabeth-meyers.pdf

10

Mark started to laugh. 'Yeah, that's what it's like.'

'Shall I call it that on the paper here so we'll remember it?' I asked.

The boys agreed.

I continued, 'If we think of it as an interfering chorus of teasing, can you think of a way to respond to it that is more useful for the two of you?'

'Yeah', said Joe, 'We could tell them to mind their own business'.

Mark smiled and acted out the two of them arguing, stopping long enough to jointly tell the chorus to mind their own business and then back to their own argument. 'Write that down!' he said.

We continued with the interchange about Mark's MP3 player. I read this portion of the collaborative story out loud. The boys agreed on the events and continued to disagree about the value of the player.

Mark's voice strained again, 'She really did spend that much on it'. It seemed that Mark's intent in his conversation was getting lost and causing him to get upset. It needed to be addressed, but in a way that would keep Joe engaged in the process.

'Mark', I said, 'I have a guess here, so tell me if I'm right or wrong. When I see the look on your face and hear the tone in your voice, I think that the greatest value for you in this gift is that it came from your mother. She spent her money on it, no doubt, but how much it cost matters less to you than the fact that it was from her. Am I on the right track here?'

'Yeah, that's right', said Mark.

I turned to Joe, 'Joe, you've been this guy's friend for two years. Have you seen this hurt look on his face before?'

Joe nodded.

'So if we think about this part as Mark being protective of his mom, rather than how much the player cost, does that explain why he's upset?'

He nodded again.

'So, what might be some other ways you two would like to handle this situation?'

Mark said, 'I could tell him that he can believe what he wants to believe. I know what it cost.'

Joe said, 'I can tell him that I'm sorry I hurt his feelings'.

I wrote their responses down then turned to the boys, 'You know, I wonder if this part is also about teasing and being able to tell how people feel about it. You are both smart boys. It's not always easy, but I think, as you guys get older, you'll get better at judging how people feel and what to say. I'll be interested to know how that goes for you.'

Working through the cut and paste process, we developed the following document:

Explorations: An E-Journal of Narrative Practice
www.dulwichcentre.com.au/explorations-2011-1-elizabeth-meyers.pdf

11

The history of teasing in our friendship

- *Sometimes it's fun and sometimes it's for real. Joe will say, 'What are you crying about now?' Or call Mark 'poop-stain'.*

- *Mark said, 'I can tell when it's joking by the way he says, "Poop-stain"!'*

- *Joe says, 'Sometimes we have arguments. This was a smaller one. Sometimes people back me up and I don't want them to. Some people don't like Mark on the bus (so they join in teasing him; like a chorus of teasing). If people stay out of it, we can usually end it by being funny'.*

Today's problem

- *Mark and Bob were listening to Mark's MP3 player on the bus. At school, before going to breakfast, Bob said, 'Why don't you bring it (to breakfast) like Eric?'*

- *Mark: 'Eric's is cheaper (so he can take his all over). My mom paid $300.00 for this one'.*

- *Joe, overhearing this, said, 'I don't think it cost $300.00. It sucks. It's just plastic'.*

- *Mark: 'It was $300.00. She didn't have the money to buy it'.*

- *Joe: 'She shouldn't have bought it, if she didn't have that much money'.*

Ways to change this story

Mark could have said to Joe, 'You can believe what you want to believe'. This would stop the argument. Joe could say to Mark, 'Sorry I hurt your feelings', because he could see hurt feelings on Mark's face. Joe and Mark also said that on the bus, they could stop the Chorus of Teasing by jointly telling everyone else to mind their own business.

It was a refreshing experience for Mark. His life had been impacted by early loss and family instability. His vigilance for chaos and aggression was easily provoked and he tended to be reactive with students and teachers. In a more conventional conversation, it was difficult for him to sort through all of the threats and insults that he perceived, in order to solve a singular problem. And he was a master of 'sidebar' conversations when he sensed a troublesome topic on the horizon.

Our finished document is deceptively simple. But the boys knew the work they had covered during the conversation. The problem was far-ranging, influenced by the emerging social pressures of fourth grade and coloured by Mark's history of loss and the subsequent significance for him of this gift from his mother. As Joe noted, this was a comparatively small problem, but it was now a resolved problem and a successful experience for both boys.

Cut and paste is an activity to engage children in problem-solving without blaming. I have worked primarily with children, aged five to eleven years old, and have found this approach to be effective. Students of any age, especially those who have difficulty with expressive language, sequencing or organisation could find this approach useful. Mark, for one, was so pleased with the outcome of his issue that he proceeded to bring a series of problems to process through the cut and paste activity, some involving peers and some with adults. For Mark and for many

children, it is a relief to relinquish a defensive posture with regards to a conflict and focus instead on collaboratively examining an interaction that has gone awry. The cut and paste activity is fun and engaging. It visually organises the story while providing children with a safe emotional distance from the problem. I would be interested in hearing of experiences that other practitioners have in using it.

References

Cobb, S. (1994). A narrative perspective on mediation: Towards the materialization of the 'storytelling' metaphor. In J. P. Folger & T. S. Jones (Eds.), *New directions in mediation: Communication research and perspectives* (pp. 48–66). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Freeman, J., Epston, D., & Lobovits, D. (1996). *Playful approaches to serious problems: Narrative therapy with children and their families.* New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

White, M. (1988/89). The externalizing of the problem and the re-authoring of lives and relationships. *Dulwich Centre Newsletter* (Summer 1988/89), 3–21.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends.* New York, NY: W. W. Norton.

Winslade J., & Monk, G. (2007). *Narrative counseling in schools: Powerful & brief* (2nd ed)*.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Explorations: An E-Journal of Narrative Practice
www.dulwichcentre.com.au/explorations-2011-1-elizabeth-meyers.pdf

13