

Storying who I am becoming

Reinforcing a child's preferred reputation

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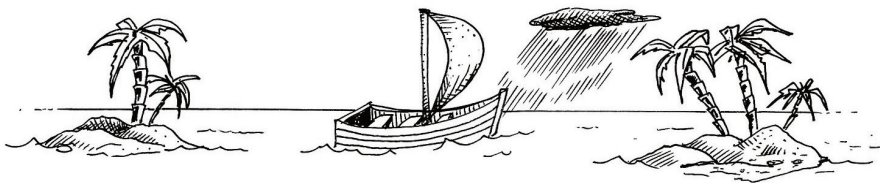
Abstract

The following case study illustrates how developing new reputations with children in a primary school setting can encourage behaviour change. Drawing on ideas from narrative therapy, behaviour change can be achieved through externalising the effects of a harmful reputation for the child and others; through recording accounts of the child demonstrating a preferred reputation; and through publishing and retelling preferred reputation stories to supportive peers and adults around the child. This study demonstrates how developing a preferred reputation with nine-year-old Nikau helped him to shed a troubling reputation that had grown around him over time. The resources and assistance given by family and professionals, along with the high expectations, consistency, and accountability provided by Nikau's class teacher, worked in tandem with a new reputation to provide fertile ground for behaviour change. Subsequently observed changes included a decrease in behaviour incidents, a positive self-perception, an improved home environment, and an improved performance on National Standards assessment data.

Keywords: narrative therapy, behaviour, anger, reputation, migration of identity, primary/elementary school

Recently a psychologist friend and I discussed how narrative therapy ideas might support her work with the primary-school-aged children in her care. My doctoral thesis (McMenamin, 2014) had demonstrated how narrative work with adolescent boys who were in trouble at school could help them move into their preferred reputations and subsequently avoid stand-downs and suspensions from school. My psychologist friend had previously used a narrative approach with a 10-year-old Tongan boy to support him in adopting a preferred identity. This work resulted in a reduction in his previous angry outbursts at school.

Figure 1: Two islands and a boat



Together we drew on a migration metaphor called “Two islands and a boat” which aims to help a person move towards a preferred reputation.

The two islands shown in Figure 1 represent a child’s current reputation(s) and their preferred reputation(s). The boat represents the journey of the child and their supporters as they travel towards a new reputation, aided by the winds above it. As the child identifies a preferred identity and starts the journey towards change, the winds aiding the move represent the support strategies and people who encourage and provide opportunities to grow the new reputation.

With consent from his grandmother/caregiver and from the school, the psychologist and I met with a nine-year-old boy named Nikau². Nikau had received intermittent pastoral support over a 20-month period as a result of fighting and angry outbursts. Teachers reported that Nikau rarely smiled and escalated quickly when upset. When angry he would take a large stick (or similar) and walk around the school with his chest puffed out, sometimes tipping over class furniture. On occasion he would not follow teacher requests and he would sometimes answer back. As part of its pastoral response the school had moved Nikau to another class with older children partway through the year.

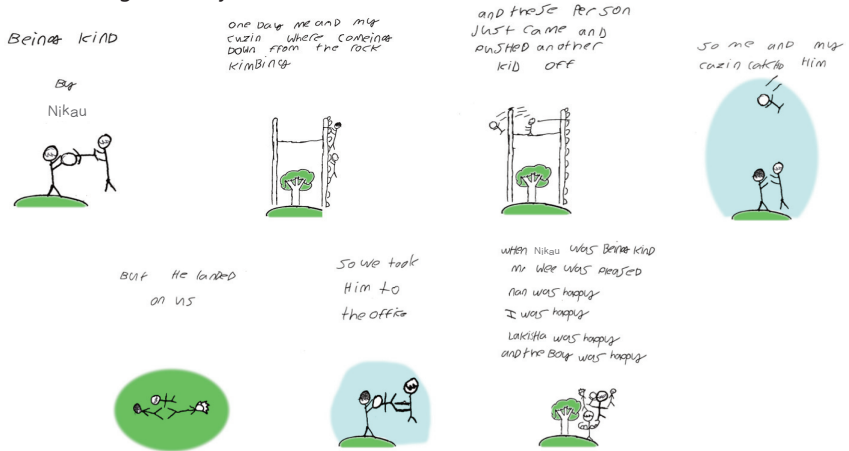
During his previous conversations with the psychologist, Nikau had said he would like to be a policeman when he was older. The local police constable was asked if he could come to school to meet Nikau, and Nikau and some friends were allowed to sit in the police car and try out the siren and loudspeaker.

One of the things that Nikau admired about policemen was that they were kind. Picking up on this idea as something that seemed not to fit with his existing troubled reputation, the psychologist and I met with Nikau in an unoccupied classroom. We wondered with Nikau what place kindness might be playing in his life: “Can you tell us anything about a time when you were kind?”

Using what seemed like the fewest possible words, Nikau told a story in which he and his cousin had caught a boy who was falling from a school climbing frame. Nikau and his cousin had picked the boy up and taken him to the office to be cared for by the adults there. We responded to Nikau's story: "Great story—thanks! Can you draw that at all?" Nikau produced a series of drawings depicting the scene, eliciting my response: "Oh, sweet pictures! Great work! I'm wondering...can you write that story in your own words?" Nikau showed that he could.

Following the telling, drawing, and writing of this story, we asked Nikau a few short questions about what difference this expression of kindness had made for some of the people involved: "How do you reckon that boy felt? What do you think your teacher would feel about that? If your grandmother knew you were being kind at school like that, what might she feel?" We recorded Nikau's largely one-word answers on the paper next to his drawing and writing. Those words and pictures were collated into a book by Paul Ashley³ as follows:

Figure 2: "Being kind," by Nikau



The following week when we showed the newly finished book to Nikau, he was so delighted he seemed to glow with pleasure and pride. When he had read through the story, we all trooped across the school yard to the principal's office. The principal stopped the meeting she was in to welcome Nikau. With him standing beside her, she read through Nikau's story carefully and out loud. Again Nikau appeared to glow with pleasure at the principal's delight in what she was reading. That evening Nikau took

the book home and showed it to his Nan. Nan reported her very real gladness in the conversation recorded below.

Around this time, the psychologist arranged a meeting with the team of people supporting Nikau. Along with ourselves were Nikau's mother and Nan, school staff, social worker in schools (SWIS), district health board psychologist and mentor, and the school's kaitakawaenga/whānau support person. A plan was drawn up recording who was responsible for various strategies to help reach the goal that "Nikau embrace his preferred identity and have resources and strategies to manage any demands of classroom tasks and/or peer relationships." The strategies included Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT) to help with emotional regulation, a mentoring group, and a cool-down space at school. Members of the school staff were encouraged to give verbal praise when they saw Nikau showing kindness, helpfulness, and friendliness.

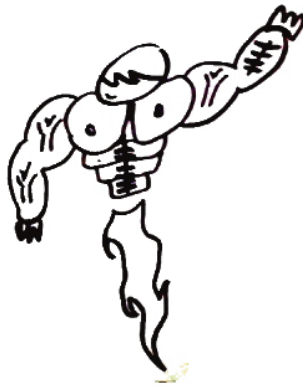
Nikau's teacher played a vital part in not allowing his previous reputation to influence how he was treated in the classroom. This involved treating Nikau as equal to his peers, providing consistency, making sure he felt included and valued, holding Nikau accountable for his actions, and giving him strategies to manage his emotions. This teacher later reported:

When Nikau came to my class it was really important to develop mutual trust so a fresh start meant a fresh start. I needed to show Nikau that what I said could be trusted. Whilst specific circumstances brought him to my class, those would be not held against him. I think I developed Nikau's trust by remaining consistent in both my praise, support as well as holding him accountable for his actions. I treated him as an equal with his peers and expected the best from him. It was really necessary to make sure that he felt included and valued for his contribution as a member of the class. Nikau and I both agreed on strategies to manage himself and we found common ground that each of us was comfortable with. He was allowed to leave the class for a few minutes to cool down but he always had to make sure I was aware either verbally or via a gesture or signal. He was also allowed to write his more personal thoughts, which often contained all manner of swear words, in a special journal. This was an outlet that he really enjoyed and needed.

Nikau stated that his teacher treated him the same as the other kids because he was made to do the same work as the other children, "like hard work."

The following week, in response to our questions, Nikau and a friend discussed and drew on a whiteboard a picture of anger and some things that made anger go away.

Figure 3: Anger as described by Nikau and friends



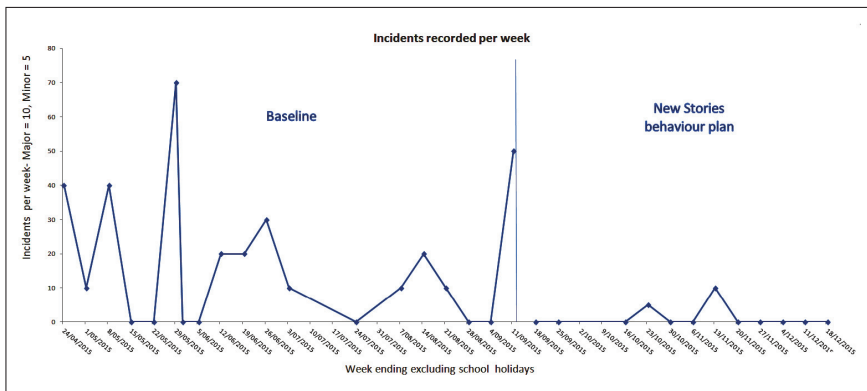
Another book was made from these insights. As the weeks went on, other significant people in Nikau’s life were invited to write stories of when they had seen evidence of Nikau’s new reputation. His teacher wrote a story about Nikau making great choices and his mentor wrote a story about Nikau sharing.

Over the next few weeks the psychologist met with Nikau and his friends to explore what could be done when Anger tried to cause trouble at their school. Following a superhero theme, the boys related stories of times they had caused Anger to flee and the effect that it had on the school. These stories were written as comic strips with the boys in the roles of superheroes. As with Nikau’s first books, the stories included how those around them were affected by their good deeds. For example, “[The school principal] is a bit more happier cos she doesn’t have to hop out of her office which slows her down from doing all her work,” and “The kids felt a bit more safe.”

These comic strips were put together in a book entitled *The Power Boys*, with the artwork supplied by the boys. When asked what they would like to do with the book, Nikau suggested that they put one in every library in New Zealand. A book launch was decided on and the boys invited school staff, peers, and whānau to attend a morning interval celebration in the staff room. Over chips, sausage rolls, and drinks, the comic book and Nikau’s other stories were read by the invited guests and impromptu speeches were made (still using the fewest words possible). While Nikau managed to restrain his obvious delight and pride, both he and his Nan shed a tear.

Alongside the various school- and home-based supports which enabled Nikau to access resources and learn new skills, the stories described above supported Nikau

Figure 4: Nikau’s behaviour record



to shed the reputation he had acquired during his earlier years at school. According to him, Nikau’s preferred identity was one of being a leader, kind, helpful, responsible, and being the same as other children.

With a different sense of his identity at school, Nikau’s behaviour changed. In the chart shown in Figure 4, the school recorded a reduction in behaviour incidents (minor incidents = 5 and major incidents = 10), with the vertical line indicating the date of the team planning meeting.

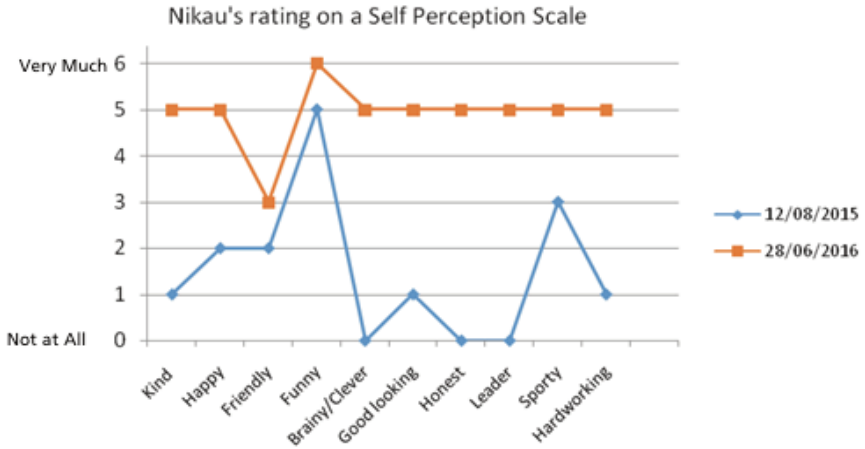
School staff have noted that Nikau now smiles more, is less tense, and although he still gets angry, this does not escalate as it did in the past. His class teacher said that Nikau perseveres with difficult tasks whereas in the past he would give up. Changes noticed by senior school staff include that Nikau has a calm demeanour, listens respectfully, stops and thinks instead of reacting, takes responsibility, can be trusted (e.g., with school keys), and is more willing to participate. Nikau has joined and led the school production crew.

Nikau’s teacher observed:

He started viewing himself as a strong and capable person who was in control of his own decisions and experience at school...his greatest outcome was that he developed a positive view of himself, he had started to see a person worthy of praise, support and success.

Using rating scales with the psychologist, Nikau had initially rated himself as not very kind, nor happy, friendly, clever, good looking, honest, nor hardworking. Ten months

Figure 5: Nikau's self-perception chart



later he rated these same characteristics as “very much,” demonstrating a change in his self-perception. The graph in Figure 5 illustrates the transformation in his view of himself.

As Nikau’s view of himself changed, his school achievement progressed. The associate principal related how surprised the staff were as Nikau’s reading level increased from level 2P to level 3. In Years 3, 4, and 5, Nikau had performed below the National Standard for reading, writing, and mathematics (with the exception of end of Year 4 reading where he achieved at National Standard). At the time of writing, and midway through Year 6 (a year after the intervention), Nikau is on track towards achieving the end of year standard for writing and mathematics. He has already achieved the end of year standard for reading and is working towards end of Year 7 National Standard.

Nikau is now a school counsellor (school leader). When another child in the school was asked for an example of a good leader he identified Nikau, saying he “takes responsibility for himself.”

Nikau said that writing the books helped him see that “you get hurt when you get bullied, so I stopped bullying.” When asked what it was now like at school he replied, “Now the teachers treat me like everybody else. Before they would let me do anything because they didn’t want to make me angry. Before I used to feel angry every day. Now I feel happy every day.”

The implications of all these efforts reached into the family home. Nikau's Nan stated that now when he gets upset: "He just goes away to his room and stamps it out and next thing it's all finished. He used to go from room to room, slam doors, make holes in my walls." She observed: "Now he'll go out there and play...He never used to go out there and play all day at all. He just loves it. He goes out there, rides his bike. He never used to do that at all."

Nan also confided:

I used to bear heavy shoulders with him and going through what I was going through. Before I'd get those dreaded phone calls every second day. I used to wake up in the morning with headaches knowing what my day was going to be like with him. But now, ohh, I get a good night's rest now. So does he too. He wakes up a lot happier in the mornings.

Nikau's mother and father are also proud of their son.

As Nikau recalled and retold occasions where trouble had been absent, along with the effects those ways of being had on those around him, he viewed himself in a different way. The resources, new skills, encouragement, and opportunities provided by those in his support team helped Nikau to embrace a new reputation. Many people contributed to Nikau's growing sense of himself as other than troubled: from the school principal and associate principal to his class teachers, the police youth aid officer, Nikau's mentor, and his sports coach. And around and behind all this were Nikau's Nan, his mother and his family.

Nearly a year after the first planning meeting, Nikau continues to embrace his new reputation. He does experience anger at times but it does not escalate to the level that it did in the past and calm quickly returns.

By gathering together accounts of times when Nikau demonstrates preferred ways of being, by externalising the problem, by illustrating the effects of his new reputation on those around him, and by publishing these preferred stories widely to friends, teachers, and family, Nikau has grown his sense of "Who I am" and has become known by others in ways that fit with his and their hopes for him.

Notes

1. This article was co-authored with the psychologist referred to in the text, whose name has been withheld by request to protect the anonymity of the school and young people involved..
2. All names have been changed..
3. pashley@unitec.ac.nz

References

- McMenamin, D. (2014). *New stories of identity: Alternatives to suspension and exclusion from school*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Waikato, Hamilton. <http://researchcommons.waikato.ac.nz/handle/10289/2222/browse?value=McMenamin%2C+Donald&type=author>

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