Changing the world one verb at a time: Collaborating with teachers in schools in Mexico City.

Sylvia London, M.A. LMFT

Grupo Campos Eliseos

I have been a collaborative-dialogical practitioner for more than 20 years, my main identity is as a therapist, but I also work as consultant, trainer, supervisor and coach. In 1998 my colleagues and I founded Grupo Campos Eliseos,[[1]](#footnote-1) an independent institute in Mexico City, affiliated to The Houston Galveston Institute. In this fifteen years, we have shared collaborative and social constructionist ideas in many fields, mainly training psychotherapists, university faculty and more recently teachers, coaches and business consultants. In this chapter I will talk about the ideas that inform our work and will use a short story to illustrate the way we apply them in our work in schools.

**Our Philosophical Stance**

Following Harlene Anderson´s ideas, (Anderson 1997, 2007) ) our collaborative approach to education is based on a collection of practical philosophical assumptions.This patchwork includes pieces of postmodern and contemporary hermeneutic philosophies, social construction and dialogue theories.These assumptions provide an alternative language that, in turn, provide a particular orientation to educational practices in which students are actively and intimately engaged in their learning and have a voice in determining and evaluating the what and how of it. Inspired in Anderson´s ideas (1997) and adapted to the work in schools, the question that leads the design of my work is :

*How can profesionals create the type of relationships and conversations that invite all the paticipants in the educational community to access and put into practice their resources, strengths and creativity to generate together possibilities, where none seemed to exist before?*

Our aim is to create a collaborative learning community (Anderson, 1998, 2000, in press; Anderson & Swim, 1993, 1994; Fernandez, London & Rodriguez, 2006), where all membres are included, valued and appreciated; a space where there is room for all the voices and all feel a sense of commitment and belonging. In this community we invite participants to acces their sense of hope, care and concern for themselves and their fellow human beings.

**My interest in working in schools**

For many years the main focus of my work has been clinical; as a psychotherapist I have spent most of my time in my office working with individuals and families. Given the fact that I have worked with children and have had close connections with schools, I began to have families who consulted with me regarding incidents of bullying. Working with children who have been identified as victims was possible because there was an identified problem, as well as motivation, on their part and on their parents’ part to look for help to aleviate the pain and develop relational strategies to survive in the school arena. Given the social nature of the bullying phenomena, the possibilities for change in my clinical practice were limited. On the other hand, I have also worked with the children identified as “bullies.” In these cases, the work was more challenging. In most cases the referrals were mandated by the school following a violent incident, There was very little motivation on the part of the child or the family to change, and in these instances the work in my office was almost useless. Reflecting upon these clinical experiences and based in our years of experience as collaborative practitioners and University faculty, we realized that in order to be effective in fostering change, the work had to take place within the school system. creating collaborative learning communities where we could include students, teachers, parents and school personnel In this chapter I will share an example of the work we are currently doing in schools.

**The story[[2]](#footnote-2)**

As part of the School Consultation Team at Grupo Campos Eliseos,[[3]](#footnote-3) I received a phone call from a school psychologist who had been a student in one of our workshops. She worked in a large private school and was requesting a conference on bullying for parents of children attending their grammar school. In order to make a decision regarding her request, I asked her if the teachers and school personnel had information regarding bullying, especially ways to deal with the phenomena in their classrooms and what were the school policies regarding bullying incidents. She told me that the school personnel knew very little about bullying and that the school had not developed policies yet, she said that the school was interested in offering a conference for the parents as the first step.. Her request worried me and I Itold her that I did not think it was a good idea to gather the parents and talk to them about bullying before the teachers had some training regarding the phenomena, because in my experience at the end of the conference the parents were going to ask the school at large and the teachers in particular, questions like: What are you doing in your school and in your classroom to address the problem? or, My son or daughter has been bullied in your school for the last year, what are you doing about it, how are you going to help her? I finished the call telling her that I could not give the lecture, but would be happy to meet with her and the school Principal to talk about the school and their needs. A few months later they called me again and said, “After we talked to you a few months ago, we went ahead and scheduled the conference for parents, can you please come and talk to us?” By then, the school had created a complicated relationship with the parents and were asking for help.

**The Relationship**

We scheduled a meeting and asked the school psychologist to invite the school personnel who had influence in the design of the school environment and the implementation of school discipline. We met with the Principal , the psychologists and the two main vice-principals. After initial introductions and greetings, we asked the following questions:

*What do you think will be important for us to know about your school ?*

*What would you like to know about us and our work?*

We had an interesting conversation regarding the school, its special challenges and characteristics. We also talked about our approach to school consultation in general and bullying in particular. The Principal and his staff were concerned about the school environment, the bullying incidents and the lack of abilities and information the teachers had in dealing with these situations. They were also interested in providing their teachers specific training to develop classroom management skills and interventions. As consultants we had the following challenge:

How can we address the school demands regarding intervention and techniques and at the same time honor our philosophical stance when the focus is on developing relationships and conversations that foster alternative ways of listening and speaking among all the members of the school community?

 Having this challenge in mind, we proposed a training program for teachers and school personnel using a combination of ideas from traditional theories of bullying, positive psychology, solution focus therapy and appreciative inquiry under the umbrella of collaborative practices.

Our guiding question, inspired by Harlene Anderson (1997) was:

*How can professionals create the kind of conversations and relationships that invite all the participants in the educational community (teachers, parents, students and all school personnel) to a mutual appreciation where every person can access and use his (her) strengths, resources and creativity to develop possibilities where none seem to exist before?*

Following our philosophical stance, our main goal as consultants was to create a collaborative learning community (Anderson, 1998), a space where all members of the school felt connected and had a sense of belonging. This included teachers, administrators and other school personnel, especially those who work with students on a daily basis. The questions that guided our work during this initial phase were inspired by the Norwegian psychiatrist, Tom Andersen (1995) : Who do you talk with? When? Where ? and About what?

We offer this long and detailed description of the creation of the relationship with the school because in our experience the most important part of the work as a consultant is done in this initial phase. The way you begin to meet and greet people opens the possibilities to create the framework for a collaborative process and design that includes the voices of all the important stakeholders and the philosophy and values of the institution as well as those of the consultants.

**The Creation of the Consultation Project: One conversation leads to the next**

Following our philosophical stance, where one conversation leads to another, these initial conversations led us to begin the year-long consultation with a two day retreat that included teachers and school administrators.

**Preparing the stage:**

In order to create a collaborative learning community and introduce the ideas and the culture of hope and care, we began our training program with a two day intensive retreat at the beginning of the school year, where all the teachers in the Grammar school were invited to participate. Each teacher received a letter of invitation that included a description of the workshop along with an invitation to take the VIA Signature Strength Questionnaire online ([www.authentichappiness.com](http://www.authentichappiness.com)) and a request to bring to the opening workshop the results of the test. Taking a questionnaire that emphasizes individual strengths fostered the teachers´ curiosity and provided an unusual framework to look at their own resources; this became the first step to look at the strengths and resources available in the school and in the classroom.

**Conversations and Relationships that make a difference**

Keeping in mind the challenge of addressing the school request of offering teachers a training on bullying prevention and intervention, and at the same time honoring our belief that the change in a school environment is possible when there is a community where participants are valued as individual and have a voice. We decided to follow Gregory Bateson´s (1972) idea “from the familiar to the newness,” and begin the creation of the learning community inviting all participants to have a voice doing an exercise on the meaning of the word bullying.

The guiding question for the exercise was:

When you hear the word bullying, what are the ideas, memories and images that come to mind? Please write them in a piece of paper and then share them with your neighbors

The exercise provided the participants the opportunity to reflect upon their personal history with the word and their personal experiences through words and images, first individually and then in conversations in small groups. As the group started to exchange ideas, there was an atmosphere of care and curiosity in listening and sharing personal stories. After twenty minutes we asked the different small groups to share some stories and then share the experience of talking about the subject. Finally we gathered from the stories some definitions of the word bullying and how it affects their experiences in human interactions in general and as teachers in particular.The group as a whole was very engaged in the activity, personal stories were shared and with the stories feelings of care and compassion were in the air. At the end of the exercise we offer a formal definition of bullying that included all the elements the group of teachers had already offered. In this exercise, teachers realised how much they already knew about bullying in theory and in experience, they were able to create their own definition that included all the elements of the formal definition and were able to exchange ideas as a collaborative learning community. At the end of the exercises we asked each group to formulate some specific questions about what they wanted to know regarding bullying for prevention and intervention. This exercise at the beginnig of the retreat created an atmosphere of belonging and connection to the training program. Our theoretical presentations and information regarding bullying were tailored to the group curiosities and interest, at the same time we were able as facilitators to have information about the group that helped us to design together the contents and process along the year. On the other hand the teachers reported feeling engaged and interested. Building on the theory of bullying, (London 2014) we began to use the slogan“We are ok, if everybody is ok” inviting teachers first to pay attention to themselves, their relationship with their colleagues, the institution and their students. Our intention was to create a community that moves from “indifference to commitment.”

After sharing information regarding bullying as a social and community phenomena (London and Benabib, 2013), we were ready to invite the teachers to work in pairs using the information and experience they had while taking the VIA signature strengths questionnaire. The exercise was organized using the following instructions (Pawelsky, 2007):

In pairs , please take turns as speaker and listener

The speaker:

Share with your partner a situation in your life where you were able to use your personal strengths. Describe the situation with as much detail as you can. Help the listener experience with you the nature of the situation.

The listener

Listen carefully without asking questions or interrupting the flow of the story. At the end of the story, make comments and questions that help the speaker savor his or her story.

At the end take some time to talk about each other’s strengths and the way they were used in your personal story and exchange ideas regarding the overall experience of speaking and listening.

The groups came back together and shared their stories and experiences with the whole group. They commented that this exercise was very useful and at the same time very challenging because they were not used to talking about their strengths; they said they had a hard time bragging about what they do well in their life. On the other hand, they were already thinking about ways they could use similar experiences with their students in their classrooms.

 While the teachers were engaged in their paired exercises, we compiled the strengths of the group by collecting the individual strengths and sharing them with the group. We talked about the type of organizations they create together and belong to. We also talked about other ways they can use the information regarding individual and group strengths to create working teams and peer consultation groups. This exercise highlights the principle that the richness of an organization depends on the collective strengths of the individuals that form it, and the capacity to value those strengths and use them as needed by the organization. The teachers were very surprised with the results and at the same time excited about the possibilities. After the exercise we shared some ideas from the research in positive psychology (Seligman, 2002, London, 2012) regarding ways to use strengths as resources in the organizations.

**Strengths and resources in action: Using Exceptions and Numerical Scales**

We invite teachers to take the VIA Signature Strength Questionnaire before the workshop to help them develop a framework that focuses on strenghts, the exercise highlights the difficulty of looking at strenghts in a culture of deficit, by looking at their own strengths, sharing them and listening to their colleagues strengths, we prepare the teachers to look at their students resources.

Ideas from Solution Focus Therapy (O´Hanlon, 1991) that are based on exceptions to the problem and the use of numerical scales helped teachers develop counter-cultural ideas towards problematic behaviors. The principles that guide Solution Focused Therapy include:

* People, (teachers, parents and students) have resources to solve their problems
* Change is constant and inevitable

The work of the teacher is to identify and amplify change.

* In most cases it is not necessary to know too much about a problem to solve it
* It is not necessary to know the origin or the function of the problem in order to solve it
* Only a small change is needed, change in one part of the ssytem can foster change in other aprts of the system
* People define their own objectives and goals
* Change can be fast
* There is no one way to see the problem, different points of view can be equally valid
* Pay attention to what is possible and changeable and not to what is impossible and unchangeable

**Exceptions and scales**

These principles allow us to look for exceptions to the problematic behaviors and to help teachers to look for strengths and talents. Searching for exceptions, especially in situations where a teacher has a very hard time with a student´s behavior, becomes an interesting tool which allows that teacher to relate to that particular student in a different fashion.

Some ideas to look for exceptions include:

* Look for a situation where the problem doesn´t exist
* Look for a succesful situation
* Look for a descrition that is less problematic
* Think about a fun situation
* Think about a situation where the problem is not as relevant

These are some questions to ask when looking for exceptions

* Was there a time when Fred behaved better in the classroom?
* What happened on that ocassion?
* What did Fred do?
* What did you do?
* What did the classmates do?
* What did the parents do?
* Who else noticed it?

**Using scales**

These questions invite teachers to practice ways to look for exceptions, we also model the serach for exception doing interviews with the teachers where we help them to think about theor situation in new and novel ways.

During the yearly consultation ee invite teachers to practice these ideas, questions and strategies in their classroom and come back with their experiences and discoveries. The teachers experiences in teh classroom provide materiales for consultation and more exercise during the year long consultation.

Teachers report that these ways of looking at their studenst and their relationships with them are nota only useful in the classroom but in othera reas of their lives.

**Numerical Scales**

Numerical scales offer a concrete and easy way to asses and predict change, they are also a common practice for teachers in the assesment of children´s performance in the classroom. Numerical scales provide the following benefits:

* A precise, objective, simple and concrete description of the problem
* A Base line and common language
* A tool to asses, compares and predicts the behavior•
* Self observation and evaluation
* Simple and concrete ways to report

Using scales becomes an interesting way to talk about exceptions to the problem and a concrete way to measure and predict change. You coul ask your student, in scale from 1 to 10, where 10 is the best behavior you can achieve, where do you think you are today?, The student could say 5 for example, and the teacher could ask, What makes you think you are on a 5?, the student could mention the behaviors he exhibited that makes him think about a five, the teacher could say, I would have said 6, and could mentioned the behavior he saw in the student that day. Then they can have a conversation about the difference in the perception and the assesment, before asking the student something like: Which number would you like to give yourself tomorrow at the end of the day and what are the behaviors you think you need to have in order to get that number?. This is an example of how including numbers in the conversation provides possibilities to look at the behavor and includes a process of evaluation self-evaluation and comparisons for the teacher and the students. It also includes the possibility of control and self-reguation. On the other hand, the numbers allow us to aspire to small changes as well as big changes and keep the conversation open as we asses the change connected to specific behaviors.

**Consultation and exercises**

Once we shared the ideas regarding exceptions and scales with the group and before we asked them to do an exercise to put these ideas into practice, we asked for a volunteer that would be interested in having a consultation regarding a difficult situation in his/her classroom. A brief conversation with a teacher provided the opportunity to demonstrate the use of exceptions, the questions regarding exceptions and the use of scales to invite teachers to experience a different way to think about the student and the problems.

We invited teachers to form groups of three and do the following exercise taking turns as interviewer, interviewee and observer.

Think about a student you have had difficulties relating to in the last few weeks, look at the exception and scaling questions and in pairs take turns interviewing your colleague about this difficult situation. The role of the observer is to write the questions, monitor the time and help the interviewee when they were not able to ask exception questions, or maintain a conversation on the exceptions and were back into the problem.

The teachers were able to have these series of conversations and realised the questions allowed them to have different thoughts and descriptions regarding the situation, by participating in the conversation as interviewer, interviewee and observer they could look at the process from different angles. The teachers expressed their curiosity and commented that they needed to practice this ideas for a long time in order to feel comfortable with them and use them in their classroom. We asked them to continue the exercise in their classroom and told them that we will provide different conversational and consultation formats to practice within the school year.

**Language and the way we use it**

Following this model teachers began to look for exceptions and use numericall scales, we also talked about looking at each situation as unique where there were possibilities for change. An interesting challenge we encountered is the language teachers use to describe their students´behavior.. We payed special attention to the use of language, inviting teachers to use action verbs. We also encouraged teachers to identify frequency of behaviors rather than using ontological expressions (e.g., the verb “to be”) and perjorative adjectives when talking about the children. For example, if a teacher were to say, “Fred *is* lazy,” we encourage him/her to say, “Fred did not do his homework 30 times this month.” If a teacher were to say, “Fred *is* lazy,” the implication is that Fred cannot be any other way – laziness is a quality of Fred. On the other hand, if Fred did not do his homework 30 times this month, perhaps he can do something different next month. Following the ideas of the SFT, we also invited the teachers to practice focusing in the positive behaviors (exceptions) Fred might present. For example, “Fred scored two goals in the soccer match,” or “Fred helped his classmates solve their relationship problems,” or “Fred takes care of his sick mother.” This change in language provides a more comprehensive description of Fred and allows teachers (and others) to assess the possibilities for change. If the following month Fred still misses his homework 15 times, having a 50% improvement over the last month, the teacher has the possibility of focusing on the improvement instead of the 15 times Fred missed his homework, thus giving Fred motivation to keep on changing. This message indicates that the teacher is aware of his efforts. We worked with the teachers on a series of exercises where we asked them to think about a challenging situation or challenging student and search for exceptions and alternative descriptions for their behavior. These exercises took place in groups where different teachers who worked together could provide different and alternative descriptions of the same student and the same situation.

At the end of the retreat, the participants mentioned that these ideas were useful to be considered not only in the classroom but in all the relationships and contexts. We shared with the teachers a slogan that was created in another school, **“Let’s Change the world one verb at a time.”** In that school, teachers decided that they needed to practice different ways of speaking and different ways of listening. In order to do so, they had the idea to create **“The languag squad,”** where teachers could ask each other to pay attention to their language and every time they heard a fellow teacher use the verb “to be” they would ask, “Can you say it in a different way?” or “Can you focus on the specific behaviors that make you describe the student that way?” The teachers liked the idea and decided to create the **“Let’s Change the world one verb at a time”** banner for the teachers’ lounge.

**The Next Step**

Drawing upon our own experience, the teachers’ comments during the retreat, that the ideas they were learning seem to be useful but difficult to put into practice and required ongoing consultation and coaching, and conversations with the school administration team, together we decided that the next step in the consultation process would be to provide monthly consultation in small groups divided by grade. The conversational spaces were designed to provide the opportunity for hands-on consultation and the development of collaborative learning communities where colleagues became resources for each other. This created communities of care and appreciation within each one of the consultation groups. As part of the process we asked teachers to create a blog for **Best Practices**. In this blog, they were invited to share a description of the challenges they were encountering and the way they solved them. This blog became a space for teachers to share and to consult. In addition to sharing succesful experiences, the blog provided the community of teachers a culture of competence and appreciation, as they began to consult for each other. These experiences of appreciation among collegues invited teachers to look for ways to appreciate strengths and resources in their students

After the first school semester, we scheduled a conference with parents. We gave a talk about bullying and school relatioships and included some information that came from interviewing teachers and students regarding the situation in their school. By then, teachers and school personnel were familiar with bullying theories and had developed some skills to deal with bullying in the classroom. They were capable of engaging in informed and successful conversations with the parents and could provide answers to their questions and concerns.

**Learning from each other: Walking our talk**

After working together as a team for ten months, we designed with the teachers a series of activities to celebrate and emphasize the culture of strength and appreciation we had constructed together. We asked the teachers to take one month to observe each one of their students and to answer the following questions by writing the answer on a small index card:

What have you learned from each one of your students? And what (specific action or behavior) did the student do that facilitated your learning?

Teachers said that engaging in this exercise for the entire month helped them to develop a different attitude towards the class. They could see each student as a potential teacher. The exercise helped them appreciate each child as a unique person, as well as to appreciate the relationship they had with each. The teachers created a poster with these cards and brought it to the classroom to share with the students. They also gave each student the card that was specifically about that student’s behavior, saying outloud and in front of the group the description of the learning and thanked the student for what s/he had taught them along the school year.

In order to strengthen the community of teachers and the spirit of appreciation among them, we created a **Certificate of Appreciation** signed by fellow teachers. On these certificates, teachers singled out characteristics they appreciated in each other and described how they showed up in specific actions and behaviors. They also commented on what they valued about each person. These Certificates were read out loud and handed out at the End of the Year Celebration in front of the whole staff, creating a spirit of recognition and appreciation.

 Last but not least, given the fact that it was the end of the school year, we asked each teacher to write a letter to the teacher that was going to receive their group the following year. In this letter, we asked teacher to tell next year’s teacher the achievements of the year, the way they had accomplished them and his or her dreams and wishes for the following academic year. Teachers said that this exercise gave them the opportunity to reflect upon their practice, value their own work, and put their wishes in words.

This work was very succesful and exciting, in terms of assessing the impact on the school personnel and school moral. Teachers commented that it was difficult to keep this work on an ongoing basis because it goes against the culture and requires a constant reminder to stay away from the culture of deficit and despair that is prevalent in the school systems. They commented that having the best practice blog was a good way to share resources and decided to implement the idea of the language squad to keep on changing the world one verb at a time.

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1. Grupo Campos Eliseos founders are Elena Fernandez, Margarita Tarragona and Sylvia London; Irma Rodriguez directs the Grupo Campos Eliseos Clinic at La Casa de los Niños de Palo Solo, IAP. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A different version of this case appears in

London, S. (2104) Udvikling af et skolefaelleskab baseret pa anerkendesele og styrker, Fortaelling fra Sylvia London, ekstern skoleudvilingskonsulent i Mexico in Haslebo, G & Emmerstend Lund, G. Relationsudvikling i skolen, Relationel Pedagogik, Denmark. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marifer Benabib and Sylvia London are members of The School Consultation Team at Grupo Campos Eliseos [↑](#footnote-ref-3)