

# A conversation with Peter Hawkins

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**RS** *As you know I am co-writing a book on Supporting Teachers. Its aim is to help teachers understand what contributes to stress. More than that, we hope to show how it is possible to create a supportive culture so we are not focussing on reducing stress, but how to bring some of the joy back in.*

*I know that when people are stressed it is hard to see the bigger picture. I can include myself here. We get our heads down and we are in some kind of siege/survival mentality. You are very good at holding the bigger picture – seeing how the different parts of a system interrelate. My experience is that the more everyone understands the bigger picture, the more possibility there is for collective ownership. Would you agree with that?*

**PH** So often we are like the four blind men in the Sufi story, who were sent out to investigate the Elephant. One got hold of its ear, one its tail, one a leg and one felt the trunk.

The first came back and said the elephant is like a large sail blowing in the wind; the second said the first was wrong for the elephant was like a thick rope that moved by itself. The third accused the first two of lying and said the elephant was like a tree with a hard leathery bark. The fourth in exasperation said the elephant was the strongest snake in the world.

Now imagine these four wise men, trying to cure the ailments of an elephant!

So often I find that the hardest work in the change processes of organisations is getting all key players to arrive at a common formulation of the problem, issue or challenge they are tackling. If different parts of the system do not co-own the same problem definition, they are not going to jointly own the solution or way forward.

**RS** *Yes, I was thinking of how not understanding the bigger picture contributes to a blame culture. Teachers feel harassed. They see themselves not able to care for students in the way they would like and often see the government as an enemy. Could you put the aims of the government and individual teachers into some kind of context that would mean that there was more of a meeting?*

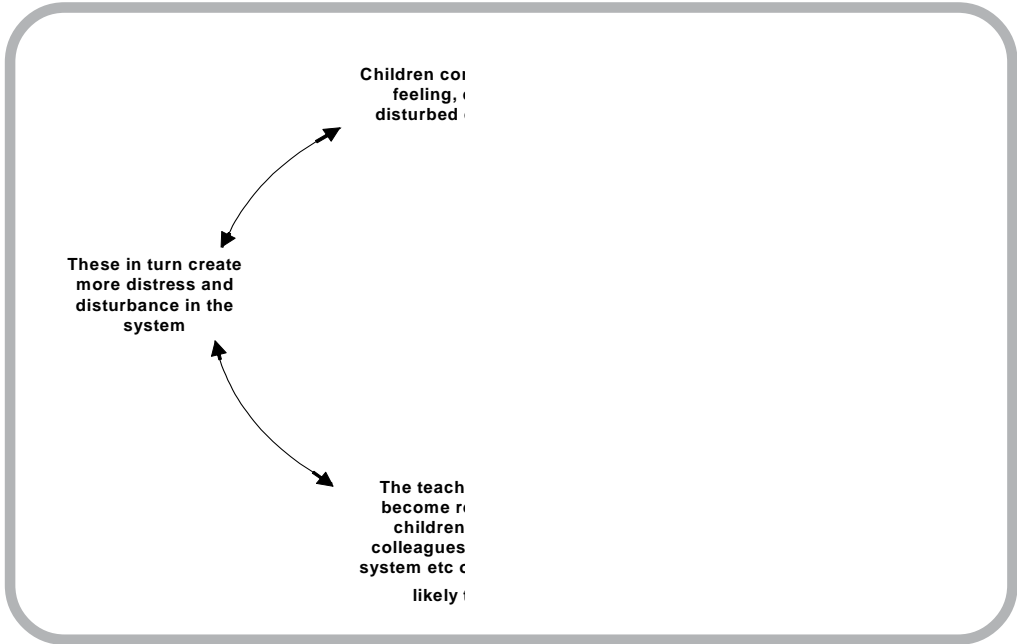
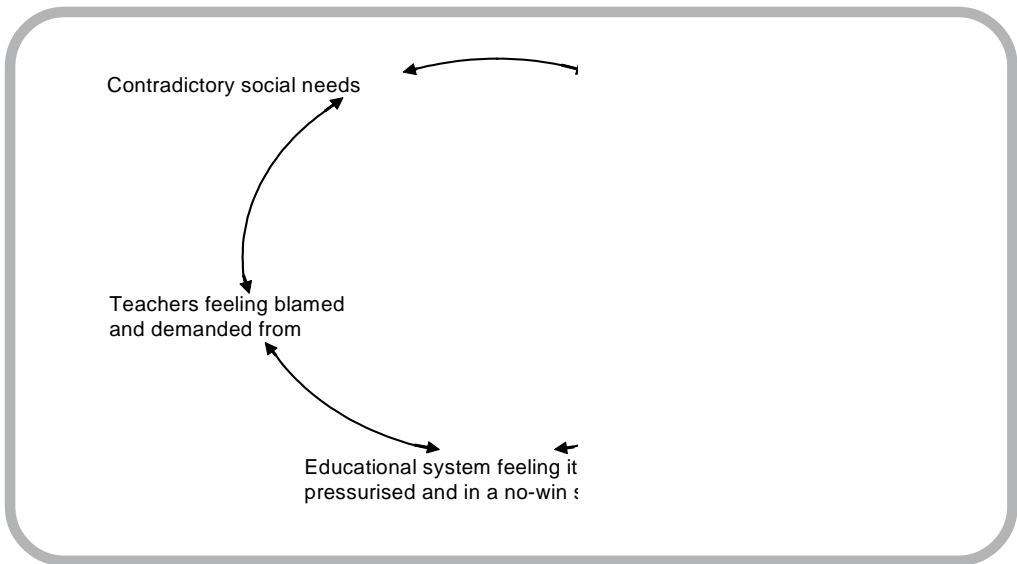
**PH** Often when I am working in education or indeed any of the helping professions, I encounter bright intelligent staff who will tell me how much they care about their students or clients, but that management and government policies and targets get in the way of them helping the individuals they work with. Often they will describe themselves as victims of those higher up the system and 'Them' above them in the system ('blaming upwards'). When I listen to them, it is as if they believe that managers, directors, civil servants and politicians don't care about improving education and deliberately want to make life more difficult for them.

I am privileged in my work to meet politicians, senior civil servants, policy makers and Directors of Education and I find by far the majority care deeply about improving education at least as much as those at the front line of teaching. The difficulty is that social care at the political and policy end of the system and social care in the classroom are two very different varieties and they use very different languages. Teachers often care passionately about the individuals they encounter, the students who are missing out, need extra help and who suffer in the present educational climate. The policy makers' language of social care is more political and sociological; they care about the large numbers of people who leave school without being able to read, write or doing simple calculations; or the young people who fall into the chasm between education/training and employment.

Now the whole system is constantly put under enormous stress. You know that in our book *Supervision in the Helping Professions* (Hawkins and Shohet 2000), I wrote about how all the helping professions are daily importing the 3Ds- that is Distress, Disturbance and Dis-ease. What the individual teachers can not personal process and emotionally contain, will emotionally spill into the wider school system in the form of staff team conflict, sickness or blaming upwards.

At the same time politicians are being burdened by being asked to resolve social contradictions such as: we want lower taxes and better public services; we want our children to go the best schools, but all schools to be of a high standard; we want a better environment, but will complain if petrol prices go up. These social contradictions get translated into competing targets by different government departments, which then get translated into demands on the system. Where the two dynamics collide in the education system there is the greatest potential for the system to become dysfunctional.

Here are the two dynamic flows that create opposing waves of stress:



Contradictory social needs – conflicting political demands – competing political targets – educational system feeling it is pressurised and in a no-win situation – teachers feelings blamed and demanded from.

Children coming to school feeling, distressed, disturbed or dis-eased – some of this is made sense of by the teachers and responded to, but some is absorbed and leaves the teacher distressed or disturbed or dis-eased themselves. The teacher might then become reactive to the children, angry with colleagues, the head, the system etc or become more likely to be sick – these in turn create more distress and disturbance in the system

The challenge to those who are in the middle of the system is to find the language and create the understanding that connects these two different forms of social care and to respond not only to the stresses above them and below them in the system, but also to make sense of the dynamic system for themselves and others. We need head teachers and local government officers who can identify with both sides and interrupt the criticism and blame that flow in both directions.

**RS** *Given what you have just said, what ways forward do you see? It is easy for us to sit here and have an understanding, but translating that into action might be harder. Bear in mind the anguished cries of teachers – not another initiative and we have no time.*

**PH** Leadership starts when you give up the right to make excuses or blame others and we need leadership at all levels of the education system. Leadership that connects the different realities of the different parts of the systems. Leadership that eschews simplistic solutions. Leadership that connects the personal and the societal, the operational and the strategic.

What does this mean in practice? I remember so clearly when I first was running a therapeutic community and was also part of the national management group of the organisation of which the community was part; the staff in the therapeutic community asked me was I part of their team or part of management? It was not difficult for me to say 'I am 100% part of both'; but living that reality was very demanding. To interrupt the vicious cycle flowing up or down the system, one needs to create a pause in the moment when you feel most under pressure to either collude with one side blaming those not present or to rush into the case to defend the absent party. In this pause I find it helpful to ask the question: 'what are the two legitimate systems needs that we have not yet found a way of connecting and therefore they are creating stress and frustration in the people complaining to me?'

By constantly trying to find new ways of connecting conflicting stakeholder needs we at least start the virtuous proactive road and leave the path of reactivity, that temporarily we may get respite from by blaming others, but will inevitably take us down the road of feeling a victim and disempowered.

**RS** *What you are saying has greater relevance than just the teaching profession. Can you say more about how to promote and sustain these virtuous cycles as opposed to the vicious cycles?*

**PH** To lessen the vicious cycles and promote the more virtuous cycles we need a whole range of developmental approaches to increase the capacity of individuals, teams, schools, departments and the whole system to work in a way that is integrating and systemic.

These include:

- supervision and support groups for teachers
- better emotional and psychological education for teachers, both in training and throughout their careers
- training in systemic thinking for people at all levels of the system
- leadership development that is collective and in-situ, rather than leader development that is individual and in a class-room
- bottom up organisational development processes such as those done by Work-Life Support (Teachers Support Network)
- appreciative inquiry such as you have been doing in schools Robin
- work exchanges between front-line teachers, educational officers and policy makers.
- educational change processes that are co-designed by people from all different levels within the system on 'emergent change principles'

**RS** *Peter, while I agree with all your suggestions they sound a bit like a shopping list to me. It's a far cry from that to the meal on the table. In my work with schools I have found that the need to have immediate results is very great. So even when taking on board a method like appreciative inquiry, they want to take short cuts - to get to the planning and action stage as quickly as possible. This defeats a key principle of AI, which is to spend time exploring the best of what is. So whilst a school might consciously agree with many, if not all, these measures, they will either quickly get put to one side when the pressure is on, or be adapted to suit the current system rather than change it.*

*I want to go further than these suggestions. Taking the hypothesis that our outer structures reflect our inner ones, our mind sets, I wonder if there is something in the way that humankind needs to create 'us and them's'. In doing so we draw strength from having an outside enemy, but disempower ourselves because we separate ourselves from the whole. I don't think your suggestions deal with this aspect - what Senge calls Mental Models. I think this could take us into very deep territory. Do you want to go there?*

**PH** I totally agree that a series of separate new initiatives will not move us forward. What I am suggesting is more a careful inter-lacing of approaches, all of which are based on 'we' rather than 'us' and 'them'. The approach needs to be relational rather than transactional and for this to happen we do need to move beyond both our dominant mental models of dualistic thinking and also dualistic intervening.

All change approaches also need to avoid being one off fixes, but rather cycles of change experimentation and then reflection and learning before the next cycle. Importantly the reflection must be a 'we' reflection where we bring together players from different parts of the system – pupils, teachers, policy makers, politicians, educational manager etc. so that the whole system can reflect and learn together.