Psychology for Teachers

Joan Wilmot

As a child I liked school. For a while when I was at University I played with the idea of becoming a teacher. What decided me against it was that I knew I would not be able to stand in front of thirty children and both teach the subject and keep order. Also, maybe even more importantly, I knew I did not know myself. I knew instinctively what much later I read in Parker Palmer's 'The Courage to Teach' 'We teach who we are'. So I decided to become a social worker because I thought that would help me to know myself more, and it did. As a social worker and subsequently a psychotherapist I always received good supervision. During that time I did get to know myself better and I also learned a great deal about group dynamics, systems and group work skills. Some of it was new, and some I had an instinctual understanding of but no words to describe, or strategies to manage; or trust in mine or the group process. I was right - there was a way to understand groups that made an enormous difference to facilitating them. Why wasn't everyone who needed to manage groups, both large and small, institutions, businesses, teams, crowds, why were they not learning this stuff?. Why was it not being taught in all teacher training colleges? Why was it not being taught on social work courses for that matter? People seemed to be afraid of groups; saw them as potentially damaging places. So I discovered principles, models, roles, phenomena that helped me make sense of groups in either role, as member or facilitator.

Paying attention to our feelings - Projective Identification

Nowadays when I stand in front of a group I pay close attention to how I am feeling. I welcome whatever I am feeling, trust it and wonder if it is mine alone or whether I am picking up the feelings from the group. For example, if I am feeling afraid more than likely they are, but they might be afraid to own it, fearful of what others will think if they voice it. Or they may not even know they are afraid; they have managed to block that feeling.

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Once on a large training group in Ireland, my colleague, Robin Shohet and I were beginning to feel absolutely useless. All our tried and tested training materials were not landing. At the break we shared our distress with one another. It suddenly became clear to us that we might be picking up some of the group's distress, some of their feelings of uselessness. We came back and shared this as a possibility - not to pin the blame on them, but as a way of understanding what their work situations could feel like. They acknowledged that at work they often did feel useless and until we shared our insight they had thought we were pretty incompetent. We laughed together. 'Now you know what we feel like', they said.

Of course a group of children will not necessarily be as receptive to the sharing of a teacher's feelings like this group of counsellors were. I am not suggesting a teacher share her feelings, but I am suggesting that she pay attention and wonder if her feelings have something to do with what is happening in the class.

Here is another example. Robin was doing a presentation on projective identification. He was explaining how when we are with people who are very distressed, they transmit this by eliciting strong feelings in us. They can almost make us feel certain feelings, and the hypothesis is that it is the feelings they cannot bear to feel themselves. Certainly children can do this very powerfully. By paying attention to our feelings we can make a guess at what the other person might be experiencing. So, for example, if we feel fear in someone's presence, it is useful to wonder if they might be feeling fear and not able to feel it themselves. Likewise a very angry person who frightens us, might be feeling fear and not realise it.

As Robin was explaining this to his group there was a gasp from one of the members. This member then went on to explain how in the residential home where she was working there was a violent young person with whom the staff could not cope .Just getting her up in the morning required one staff to go in and three to wait outside in case of violent behaviour. They were all frightened of her. She, and she was sure the rest of the staff, had never even considered the possibility that this young person was frightened. And she added 'Wouldn't you be if you were woken up from sleep by four adults ready to pin you down?' She was a mixture of thrilled at this discovery and shocked that she had not realised it before. The following month she reported a complete transformation. The staff member had approached the child with less fear, slowly and warmly. The young girl had become gentle and responsive.

In this instance it was not necessary to share the insight with the young person. Just the awareness of projective identification was enough, as it often is.

Parallel Process

We have looked at how feelings can give a good guide to what is happening. In the example above Robin and I were picking up the feelings of uselessness that the workers were picking up from their clients. Feelings that have not been worked through get transferred from one part of the system to another part, and this is called parallel process. For example if a head teacher feels pressured, he or she may start to pressure the teachers who in turn will pressure the students.

A few weeks ago I came across a diary that my eldest son then aged eight had been required to write at school. It covered a week and each day had three headings; the thing I liked most; the thing I liked least, and it would have been better if. The most telling statements were 'it would have been better if I had done more reading' and 'Miss

Boynton is not satisfied with my work '. This is from a very bright, intelligent boy who has grown up to be successful in his work and now reads prolifically. So already at that young age the pressure is on, on him, on the teacher to have the pupils produce good work. Pressure from the parents to see their children succeed and pressure on the parents to be good parents and so on. I wonder if the pressure we put on children is a sign that we do not trust them and as A.S. Neill said in his book Summerhill, this is because we do not trust ourselves. I notice how resistant my sons are to pressure and when I stop, I realise that I have somewhere not trusted them. So once we begin to understand and see parallels, like pressure or feelings of uselessness moving up and down the system, we are in a better position to stop the blame and fear and we can bring the people in the system back into relationship and cooperation.

Group Dynamics, Systems and Role

I have always been interested in systems ever since I was a child, although I did not have the words to describe it back then. I noticed how people's feelings and behaviour were somehow modified by, affected by, changed by each other, as if we were exquisitely tuned to each other. I could not quite put my finger on it or explain it then, but now quantum physics describes it very well. In his book, Doing Nothing, Steven Harrison reports how 'Irish physicist John Stuart Bell showed in what has become known as Bell's Theorem that any two atoms, once having encountered each other, will forever be connected or have an influence on each other, regardless of their location or distance from each other'. It seems that science has come to the same conclusion as mystics that we *are* all one.

Family therapy also recognised this. They discovered if they treated the so called 'problem' child in a family and they 'got better', then another child in the family became difficult. So they found it was best to treat the whole system - the family - if they really wanted results. It is the same in a team, if they get rid of a difficult worker without attending to the team dynamics, the pattern will be repeated with another worker. So it did not make sense to me when I was a child to see the teacher pick out one child in a classroom and only look at their behaviour. It seemed to me that the class was also like a person and that the behaviour of the person that had been picked out, although about themselves, was at the same time a reflection of the class. So what if we were to look at the child's behaviour to give us information about the class dynamics?. What if we were to see the behaviour of the child as a hot line to what we were unconscious of, or the problem class as a hot line to what we were unconscious of in the school body, or the teacher body or the parent body or the educational authority and so on right up to the government and the electorate? How exciting and heart opening. Now so called difficulties are not judgements, failures, problems as we were taught to believe, but information, understanding, new learning and opportunities to push the boundaries and connect. The opportunities for a school to be a place for connection, communion and community are endless.

Diana Fox Wilson expresses this when she says in her book Supporting Teachers Supporting Pupils 'The way schools and teachers regard classroom management needs to change radically from seeing it as the sole responsibility, and often a matter of pride, of the individual teacher, to seeing it as a collective responsibility of the school. ...Attitudes to teachers who "appear" to be failing in keeping order need to change.'

She is talking systemically here. Just as a difficult student could be expressing something for his (or her) class so a failing teacher could be a symptom of something wrong in the school. Thinking systemically means that we look at the problem as a whole and not just the symptom. The class for some reason needs the role of 'difficult' student, as they need other roles. These roles appear every year whatever the make up of pupils; the 'good' pupil; the 'difficult' pupil; the 'clown'; the 'late' pupil; the 'disruptive' pupil and so on. If we regard the class as a system or see it collectively as one body it is easier to understand what is happening and see students' behaviour in terms of roles rather than personality. We can all be difficult at times, we can be sometimes late, sometimes angry, hurt, sulky, stupid and so on but it is difficult to own all the parts of us, so we have a tendency to project them onto other people who then take up the role. These aspects will get deposited into different students in the class. Gerda Hanko in her book Special Needs In Ordinary Classrooms describes working intensively with one student and when their behaviour improved, a previously well behaved student in that class would start to act out.

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Diane Fox Wilson also writes

'The child's group of co-learners may not wish him to change – frequent causes of frustration for teachers, when their sensitive handling of an individual child is brought to nothing by the reactions of the group which may oppose improvement....Groups, because of tensions in the group as a whole, can make use of particular individuals to express the group's needs and it is useful to understand the collusive roles played by the other children in reinforcing individual behaviour difficulties....Information about the possible links between the needs of individuals and the dynamics of groups has helped teachers not to feel personally hurt, affronted, disappointed or surprised at unexpected undercurrents in overtly co-operative groups and to realise the potential for co-operation in those who are overtly hostile'.

And of course just as an individual student might be carrying something for her class, or a teacher for the school, so schools are carrying something for society.

Content and Process

In any group there is both always content and process. The content is like 'the what', the task, the subject matter, the melody on the piano; the process is the how, the accompaniment, the variations, the what that is going on under the surface. How many teachers have spent much time on the content producing a beautiful lesson plan with creative handouts (the content), only to have it go out of the window (process) within minutes of presenting it to the class. So in my case I could be teaching listening skills to some counsellors, or a teacher could be teaching maths to a secondary school

class and the process may be a power battle around who has got control. Isca Salzenberger-Wittenberg in her chapter in the book The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching gives a very good example of needing to move from content to process so that the class could then be more receptive to the content and also the let the process inform the content. She describes giving an introductory talk on the aims of the course she is running for fifty teachers. However she reports how 'she became increasingly aware of the tenseness of the people in front of me...So I gave up the pursuit of my lecture (the content) and took hold of the moment (the process)'. She asked the group how they were feeling and they shared how anxious they were. After having the space to do this they were much more able to take in the content of her talk. Prior to the exploration of their feelings they had been much too preoccupied with their anxieties to take in much of what she had been saying.

Projection and Transference

We all project. We see the world through our own experience and project that onto the world. We can know we are likely to be projecting onto another person if we have strong positive or negative feelings about them. On the whole we tend to be more bothered by the negative feelings than the positive ones so If I find a participant on my course difficult or a teacher finds a pupil difficult then we can guess that we have projected some aspect of ourselves onto that person. If they remind me of someone from my past. I have literally transferred those feelings, that relationship onto the person in the present, and treat them or react to them as if they were that person without realising what I am doing. At the same time the other person is often doing the same. They may match; I see the other person as my mother and they may act motherly towards me. They may mis-match. For example they may see me as critical and I may see myself as a benign friend.

In fact the people who give us most trouble can potentially teach us most about ourselves if we are willing to take time to reflect (see below). However it is very easy to see the person as bad or wrong and not have time to look at roles, systems or parts of ourselves.It is obvious that students have feelings about and towards their teachers and vice versa. Many of these feelings are echoes of previous relationships - they are transferred. So a child might transfer feelings of fear or anger they have towards a punitive father on to a teacher - seeing the teacher as their father. The technical terms do not matter so much as the recognition that feelings from other relationships are transferred. This can help explain why one student can react badly and another well to a teacher or the teacher's behaviour.

Gerda Hanko describes how in supervision teachers have found it useful to consider, as part of the transference, how children may deal with family anxieties in school, how they may be differently affected at different stages of development by what precedes and follows the break-up of a home, for example, how siblings from seemingly intact families can confront their teachers with puzzling behaviour differences- which affect their learning -according to the different family roles imposed on them, how bereaved parents may hinder a child from expressing his own grief, how an abandoned parent may discredit the one who has left, unaware of the hazards for a child not allowed to think well of both his parents, and how this may affect him at school.

Space for Reflection, and Supervision

Earlier in the article when I was writing about systems I talked about the potential of a school to be a place of connection, communion and community which it can be if it builds into its life a place for reflection. Supervision for teachers on an individual and/or group basis provides an ideal space for this. It is a place where going slowly can paradoxically provide more time and space over time. I say this because teachers say they do not have time for reflection, they have so much to do, but it is not their doing that children learn from it is their being. Listen to any child talking about a teacher they like or respect and remember teachers from your own schooling and you will know that is true. So teachers need time to listen to themselves so that they can listen better to their pupils.

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They need time to explore why certain pupils or certain classes trigger them and then the so called difficult pupil or class becomes a teacher to our self, our soul rather than an enemy. When I have a problem in my work with a client, I take the space to reflect - how could I be contributing, what strategies could I use. When we explore our projections, when we take the time and are willing to look at our own stuff, a surprising consequence is that the pupil or class changes without are having to do anything other than take it to supervision and give it, with the help of our supervisor, loving and close attention. My youngest son used to say of a teacher whom he happened to know a little outside of school that he was not as nice at school as he was outside. Recently he spontaneously remarked how much more relaxed Mr X was at school and how he seemed to be enjoying his lessons and his pupils. I happened to know that this term this teacher had been having supervision. Of course it is not a panacea, but part of encouraging a reflective process that I think could benefit teachers and schools immensely.

Further Reading

Wilson, D.F. (2004) Supporting Teachers, Supporting Pupils. London. Routledge

Hanko, G. (1995) Special Needs in Ordinary Classrooms. London. Fulton

Salzberger-Wittenberg, I. (1983) The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching. London. Karncac.