

Place, hierarchy and respect in a school context: a reflective account

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After a year of using constellating in my classroom teaching, I began to explore how I could apply a systemic perspective more generally to my management practice. I didn't have to look far for issues, as a senior teacher in a large secondary school, I am presented with them on a daily basis.

Often when we think of schools as systems, our analysis leads us to examine what is apparently visible; the school's aims; management structures; curriculum and pastoral arrangements and so on. However, there is much about schools that we don't see, sometimes referred to as the hidden-curriculum, (Illich, 1971; Giroux and Penna, 1983), which is often left unattended. Without attending to these hidden influences the aims of the school remain unachievable at best, and at worse create a high level of dissonance.

This case study is an exploration of respect within a school context based on experiences and reflections I have had between September 2002 and February 2003.

Respect is a contemporary issue both politically and educationally. There are a number of official reports from school inspectors (HMSI) noting that poor pupil behaviour is affecting unduly standards in the classroom. The UK media constantly reports on deteriorating behaviour in many of our communities. Political analysts point to changes in the structure of family life as a root cause of social dysfunction, and the government has responded by including courses on Citizenship in the National Curriculum.

At this point, I want to spend some time unpacking the notion of respect, and then speculating on its implications for school systems.

Webster's dictionary has varying definitions of respect, which seem to me to reflect some of the tensions that exist in school systems. On the one hand, there are more traditional definitions such as; 'to show deference or dutiful regard' (I am presuming this is what traditionalists argue is currently lacking in school systems!) on the other; 'to show consideration for; to relate to' and even 'to look at'.

I find 'to look at' particularly valuable in the light of Hellinger's (1998 and 1999) systemic theories. In constellation work, 'seeing' other members of a system is an integral part of the process of resolution. To truly see another human being is to recognize their right to belong, which is itself,

according to Hellinger, a powerful systemic order. One can speculate as to whether those in positions of authority in schools and other systems truly 'see' the children they are working with.

What are the implications for schools of such a developmental definition of respect?

It seems to me that 'seeing' children involves recognition of all that they bring with them into the system. Rather than seeing children as 'empty vessels' or repositories for the formal curriculum, we can recognize them as fellow travellers, organic and holistic in nature, products of their own family systems and carrying the bundle of contradictions, which is the legacy of all human beings.

For me, this viewpoint is a healthier starting point for our interactions with young people than a skills/knowledge acquisition approach to human development, in that it acknowledges both the uniqueness of all members of the school system, and humanizes the interpersonal transactions that take place.

Such ideas help us clarify the relationship between hierarchy and respect. A simple starting point is that teachers were children before they became grown ups, and therefore they came first. The natural order of hierarchy flows from this, and mirrors the parent-child relationship. Indeed, teachers are 'in loco parentis'. Working with Hellinger's perspectives, we see teachers as the senior members of the school community occupying a rightful place in the hierarchy. They therefore should not shy away from the responsibilities that this places upon them.

Many of the apparent battles that take place in schools echo unresolved systemic issues from family life. (I hear my colleagues' murmur of approval, but I am applying this to us as teachers too!) I have no doubt that the causes of some poor behaviour in schools lie in the absence of apparent hierarchy in some families. It would seem to me that systemic work could be developed into an incisive tool in this field.

For hierarchy to be effective, reciprocal respect must best be established. How often in my teaching career have I worked with situations in which children have apparently shown disrespect to their teachers, only for me to be faced by retorts from them – the children - that they too have been the victims of disrespect?

Importantly, what is the successful route out of this apparent impasse? In the following case studies I will seek some insights into the role of respect and other systemic orders in interpersonal transactions between teachers and pupils.

Case Stories

The School Buses

Hinchingbrooke School is a large school system of over two thousand souls. The children are grouped into year groups of over 300. Each group has a Head of Year, and each member of the Leadership Group links to a year group. I personally link to Year 11.

Both the Head of Year and I have taken assemblies focusing on the need for respect if the school is to function properly and the students to learn effectively. In one assembly I discussed the strategies available to students in those situations where they felt they were not receiving respect from adults (in this particular case it was bus drivers).

Through discussion we came to the conclusion that accepting the adult's authority, whilst disagreeing with the tactics being employed by the adult, would maintain a respectful relationship. However, if this strategy brought no resolution to the conflict and the disrespect from adult to student continued, then there would be a distinct imbalance in the systemic order of 'giving and receiving' [exchange].

As a result of our discussion I volunteered, therefore, to discuss the matter with a few bus drivers and a group of students. It was clear that some of the drivers felt the student's behaviour on the buses was unacceptable, i.e. unruly, but also accepted that their reactions were excessive some of the time. In retrospect, I think I should have got both groups to speak aloud the words "I played my part!" Whilst I am not claiming that this formula has forever improved the lot of both drivers and students on school buses, I do believe that the transaction was one of reciprocal respect, with both parties now "owning" their behaviour's would also reflect that without the attention to respect and the balancing of giving and receiving, a successful resolution would not have been possible.

The Litter Campaign

For me it is a truism that disempowerment and learned helplessness can be a feature of school life, particularly in large secondary schools. I would further observe that from the student experience, the move from relatively small Primary school communities, to more anonymous Secondary ones is potentially traumatic, despite our best efforts to ease the transition.

Hellinger, of course would contend that everyone has " the right to belong" to the system of which they are members, and I believe that this particular case-story throws insights into the relationship between this right, and the systemic order of place and the need for respect.

I have already referred to the relationship between size and disempowerment. For us at Hinchingbrooke this often manifests itself in a lack of respect for the immediate environment. We have launched several "big bang" initiatives, all of which led to immediate improvement, only to be followed by gradual decline.

Both teachers and adults it seems become disempowered to deal with the mountain of litter we produce across the site. This is coupled with an accommodation problem for students, which we have at lunchtimes.

My office is situated next to a sizeable area, to which officially, students have no access, apart from a walk through at lunchtimes. Gradually through this school year, this rule was being honoured more in the breach than the observance! Most staff tended to ignore the problem, and subsequently the condition of this particular environment deteriorated with huge amounts of litter being deposited, and no individual students being prepared to take any responsibility.

I discussed the matter with the Head of Year, and we decided that I would address the students on the matter in assembly.

I was uncharacteristically angry with the students, and told them that I was ashamed to be associated with that particular part of the school. I talked about lack of respect for themselves, myself and their environment told them that a "blind eye" had been turned on their presence in the area and that they had responded to this by taking and giving nothing back.

I banned the students from the area for one week and patrolled each day to enforce this resolution. At the next assembly however, I introduced the following strategy. Firstly, the area could become their permanent home until the end of the school year. However, they had to collectively "police" the area, ensuring good behaviour and a clean environment. (Incidentally, I found it somewhat perplexing to receive concerns from some of my senior colleagues, in that I was giving the students official access to a previously banned area! It seems that their de facto access was less of an issue than my new de jure access!)

The students decided to introduce a rota system for the tidying up ritual at the end of each lunchtime.

The turnaround in events was most remarkable. Even our Head Caretaker was moved to visit the students and congratulate them! I now visit the area each day, to discuss how things are going in their new area, and to listen to their concerns about other year groups dropping litter in "their area" We are now into our sixth week of major improvement.

Reflecting on this, I see the progress from disempowerment to empowerment. Despite its small scale this strategy has led to real and significant change based on my knowledge of ordering forces.

My ban on the students using the area was a clear example of place and hierarchy at work. Secondly, that the door was left open for improved student responsibility, and that they then played their part, shows the balance between "giving and receiving" being effectively established.

I would also note that this led to a change in school rules, and contained an element of risk. The fact that the resolution was a negotiated one shows that reciprocal respect had been established without damaging hierarchy, although it did involve giving something back to the students for their improved performance.

References

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