

## **But I'm not a therapist, I'm a teacher! – How can ideas from the world of therapy be useful for teachers?**

I have worked for many years with pupils who are considered 'at-risk' of exclusion and youth offending. During these years I was continually searching for new ways of understanding these young people and their behaviour. My search led me to retraining as an Educational Psychotherapist and I became interested in how concepts and thinking frameworks from the world of therapy might be of some practical use to the classroom teacher. I will describe some of these uses in this article.

### **The importance of managing our own state**

Therapists pay great attention to self-management and care. They are obliged to have supervision, where they can off-load their issues and emotions related to certain clients. It is accepted that their feelings are an important part of the process. When does this happen in any meaningful, structured way for teachers?

And yet, as teachers in schools we manage relationships, often fraught with overwhelming feelings, all day. We need to make time therefore to be consciously more aware of our own physical and emotional states. We can then focus on strategies for maintaining a resourceful state for teaching. As a general rule, I would say, children come into school and pretty much do the same thing each day. What often makes a difference is our own state. On a day when we are refreshed, positive and feeling in control, we can cope with the pupil who continually comes in late and takes time to settle. On a day when we overslept, got stuck in traffic, found out we are on cover duty and have brought the wrong books to class, we will often become stressed and angry with the same pupil, leading to a totally different interaction.

### **Reflective Task**

Take a moment and write down the feelings you went through in your last working day at school. What do you notice?

Inevitably you will probably notice a roller-coaster of emotions. The first recognition, therefore, has to be that these feelings are valid. Suppressing them can lead to stress and blocks to thinking.

### **How can we manage our state?**

#### **○ Create positive anchors**

Take some time to set and be able to recall a positive anchor, something which will trigger a positive feeling in you. For example, one teacher keeps a photo of his wedding on a beach on his desk but the photo is turned upside down – a visual reminder of a happy event and a trigger for him to remember to think differently when stuck in a negative interaction with a pupil.

#### **○ Be your own best friend/ coach.**

When things are going wrong, what do you say to yourself? Do you beat yourself up and dwell on those moments when you could not deal with a certain child? Do you feel bad that you did not deal with something perfectly and wonder if you really should be a teacher? Now think about what you would say to your best friend if they were in this situation? You would no doubt use a very different kind of self-talk. Choose to be your own best friend and coach.

#### **○ Focus on highlights**

At the end of each day we tend to go home and remember those things which did not work, those pupils we are not reaching. Whilst some reflection might be necessary, this

can be very counter-productive. At the end of each day, take a moment and write down 6 highlights of that day. A highlight does not have to be a big thing, it can be a small success. This will re-frame your day and force your mind to remain resourceful

- **Focus on things you can control**

- **Reflective Task**

- Take a few minutes and think about all the things you are worried about at the moment, particularly things which may affect your ability to consider new ideas and the processes behind challenging behaviour.

- Now make two lists from these - those things you can change and those you can't.

- Notice how much of our time is spent on those things over which we have no real control at that moment. This is how we can put pressure on ourselves. We spend time focusing moment are in our control.

- **Create thinking spaces**

I worked in a CAMHS clinic as part of my therapy training and was struck by the quiet, reflective atmosphere and the amount of time I had to think about my client. Compare this to a normal school day. Where are the thinking spaces? We tend to see a problem and want to jump quickly to finding a solution. Sometimes, with very challenging pupils, we need to take a step back, explore the issue, think differently, try to understand it from different perspectives and then maybe generate some strategies.

## **Use therapeutic thinking frameworks to reflect on behaviour**

If we can make the time to think differently about a pupil's behaviour, there are some key concepts from educational psychotherapy which I believe can be useful for teaching staff. These are :

- Unconscious defence mechanisms – in particular projection, displacement, transference and counter-transference ( Freud, 1973)
- Containment ( Bion, 1962)
- Attachment Theory ( Bowlby, 1969, 1972, 1988)

### **Unconscious Defence Mechanisms**

- **Projection**

When we have unbearable, painful feelings, we may unconsciously externalise them, 'pushing them out' and trying to attribute them to others. We cannot bear to think about them and therefore are 'looking' for another person to 'hold' them, to have them and take them away from us.

- **Implications for the teacher**

The most obvious implication for us as teachers is that how we are feeling when with a child or group of children may give us a good indication of what the children are feeling. If we feel hopeless in our dealing with a pupil, it may be that this feeling has been projected into us and is a clear indication of how hopeless that pupil might be feeling. These feelings need to be contained (that is, in Bion's terms, thought about by a caring, well-intentioned adult to make them feel manageable) named, and perhaps at an appropriate time, 'reflected back' in a 'digested', acceptable form. 'Reflecting back' means the process of trying to recognise the way a pupil is feeling, often by noticing how

you are left feeling in your interactions with them, and putting a name to them in your conversation with the pupil. By ‘digesting’ the feelings, I am suggesting that we need to hold onto our ability to think about them then put them into words, thus making them less terrifying.

### **What can the teacher do ?**

- Be aware of any overwhelming or inexplicable feelings which you are experiencing when with certain classes or pupils. Take a moment to consider where the feeling has come from.
- If you think it is giving you some information about the pupil, acknowledge this and, if appropriate, name it for the young person. For example, you might say to the class ‘ It feels as if we are getting a bit stuck now and I’m beginning to feel a bit fed up. Perhaps some of you are feeling like that and we need to try something different.’
- You may need to take a moment and deliberately change your own and perhaps the class’s emotional and physical state. Do an activity which changes the energy in the room. For example, a physical stretching exercise or a quick team quiz to review main learning points.
- If possible, discuss the feeling with a colleague. It might be cathartic to realize other people are having the same experience and to share strategies for dealing it.

#### ○ **Displacement**

This happens when an emotion we are feeling about a particular relationship or person in our life cannot be safely expressed toward that person, but is displaced onto another person or into another situation. Think about a time when something has happened at work which has made you very angry and how you reacted that night at home to a relatively minor comment from your family!

#### ○ **Implications for the teacher**

It can be a relief to realize that if we are on the receiving end of an inexplicable, overwhelming emotion, it might not be aimed at us. It can be useful to think about it in terms of displacement. Who might the young person be angry at or where might it come from originally? If appropriate, you might ask “*What exactly are you angry about ?*” It may be more appropriate to comment in general, “*Sometimes people get very angry at someone when they are angry about a lot of other things and situations*”. This is easier to hear than being specific about the possibility of the anger being displaced from the pupil’s relationship with another key person in their life. Gerda Hanko ( Hanko, 1999) suggests thinking ‘it’s not meant for me’, rather than the often quoted advice ‘It’s not personal’. At times it can feel very personal!

### **Transference**

Transference may be at work, when, for example, feelings and attitudes from a relationship with a child’s main carers from the past are ‘transferred’ and are played out, or re-experienced, in a later relationship with a teacher.

Transference can be triggered by all kinds of things, for example, a look, a tone of voice, a way of dressing, a role, even a way of walking

Some examples of this are –

- *the child who seems to go out of their way to cross the path of a teacher with whom they continually have conflict*
- *the child who seems to take an instant dislike to a new teacher, despite their best efforts to engage them*

Be aware that this can work the other way round as well. A teacher can find themselves reacting badly to a particular pupil with no apparent reason; the pupil may be triggering a reminder of the teacher's relationship with, for example, their own child or sibling.

All adults can get caught up in the pattern the child is creating around them. Teachers can unwittingly be drawn into re-enacting a relationship from the child's past. Unfortunately, they can then often find themselves, for example, becoming angry and aggressive to children who have experienced domestic violence, almost as if 'playing the part' of the abuser. This is known as **counter-transference**.

- **Implications for the teacher**

These concepts may help us as teachers to realise that there are times when problems arise in our interactions with pupils which are not predictable or caused by our actions. Recognising this might stop us agonizing about what we did wrong in situations where a pupil's reactions seems to have been completely out of proportion to the trigger event or request.

We can work with this transference by giving the child an experience of a different way of relating. If we begin to notice the pattern of interaction, we may be able to stop ourselves being 'pulled in' and can do something different to break the negative pattern.

## **Attachment Theory**

I have also found The Learning Triangle as described by Geddes (Geddes, 2006) to be a useful concept in thinking about the link between early attachment experiences and learning. I will give a short overview here of the main points but for more detailed information see Geddes, 2006 and Bomber, 2007

- **The Learning Triangle**

In any learning experience, there is a triangle between teacher, pupil and task (see below). In order to learn, the pupil needs to feel secure and trust the relationship with the teacher. However, he or she also needs to be able to separate from the teacher and work on the task, secure in the knowledge that the teacher is available to provide help and support when required.

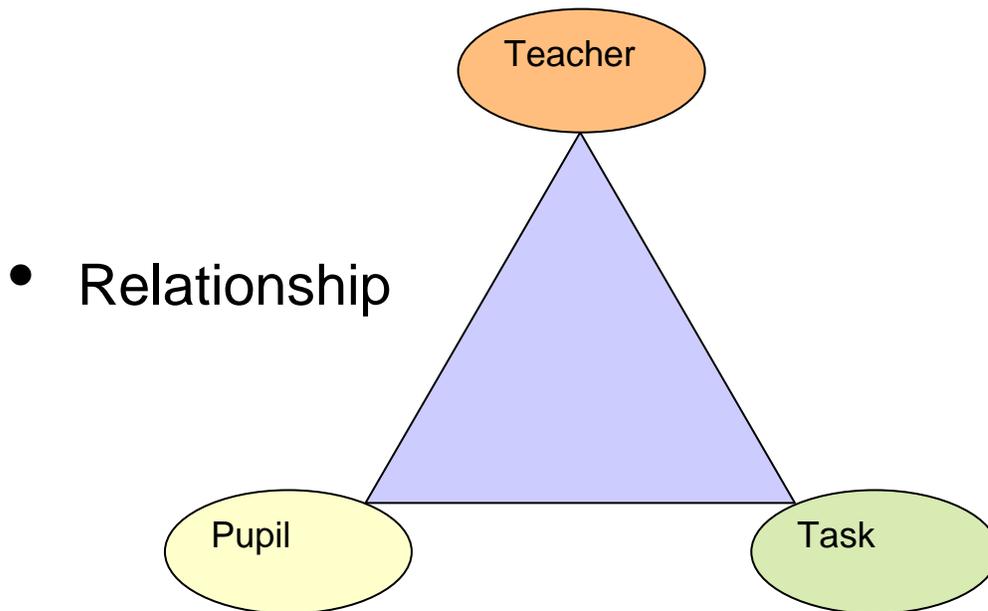
For children who have not experienced this type of relationship with an adult in their early life, it is very difficult to make space inside themselves for the task of learning.

For example, some pupils may be over-anxious about maintaining and checking out the relationship with the teacher, continually seeking her reassurance and attention, and unable to focus on any learning task which might distract them from this focus. These pupils may not have had any experience of a primary caregiver thinking about

them and holding them in mind when they are absent. They cannot believe that the teacher will remember them when not in their immediate vicinity. Such behaviour could be categorized as one of the patterns of insecure attachment, ambivalent-resistant .

Other pupils may be unable to trust the relationship with their teacher: they have learned in their early years that they might be rejected in their attempts to seek attachment. The relationship is perceived as dangerous. These children will only be able to focus on the task, refusing to interact and accept help or teaching when needed. This might represent an insecure/avoidant pattern of attachment

## The Learning Triangle



- **Using the Learning Triangle as a framework**

We can use this as a framework for thinking about a pupil's behaviour. We can look at the behaviour and consider what the underlying attachment need might be. Is the pupil trying to seek the relationship or avoid it? Taking time to think in this way, can then lead us to develop some concrete strategies :

- **The pupil with an ambivalent/resistant attachment pattern**

The child showing an ambivalent/resistant pattern needs to be reassured that he or she can be remembered by the teacher when they are not with them but needs also to be encouraged to take small steps to independence. Strategies might include :

- Setting small timed tasks and letting the pupil know that you will get back to them and when that will be. You might say, for example, 'Try the first 3 questions on your own and then I will come back and check'.
- Make sure you do come back and that if you get distracted, you acknowledge what has happened. 'I am sorry I did not get back to when we agreed, that must have been worrying for you. You probably thought I had forgotten you but I had not'. It is not necessary to be a 'perfect' teacher but it is important to acknowledge the anxious feelings it can arouse in these children.

- Avoid the temptation to over-help. These children need to experience some frustration in order to develop their ability to problem-solve and learn. You can acknowledge their frustration ‘I know it feels impossible to do without the teacher next to you . It can feel very frustrating when we are learning something new. You can trust your brain to do it though’.
- **The pupil with an insecure/avoidant attachment pattern**  
 These children have the need to avoid any possible rejection by the adult. They cannot make use of the relationship but need to learn how to feel safe in it. Strategies which can be offered to address an insecure/avoidant attachment pattern are:
  - Tasks are the key. Work through a task to develop a relationship around it. You can reach these children by commenting on the task itself rather than trying to build a relationship directly. For example, you might say ‘That’s an interesting idea. I was wondering how old that boy in the story is?’ Rather than saying ‘I’m really pleased with the ideas you’ve come up with, how about adding the age of the boy?’. The second sentence has an in-built implication that you, the teacher, have some part to play! The first comment stays in the metaphor of the task, the story. Indeed metaphor and story works well. Activities where they can draw, write or listen to stories, explore and discuss themes in books, on T. V. and film is safer than those which ask them to speak directly about themselves.

## **Conclusion**

I am not suggesting that all teachers need to go away and train as psychotherapists. I do, however, have a belief that schools and staff in school are the best chance these children have to experience thinking and being thought about. None of us on our own can wave a magic wand and make life better for these children and the adults who deal with them. That is why teachers and therapists need to work together and learn from each other.

## **References**

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