

The Modern Diverse School Requires a Modern Diverse Approach

Richard Hogan, Teacher Catholic University School, Ireland

Recent research has highlighted the fact that millennial children have to navigate a far more diverse and complicated system of society than has ever been asked of our teenagers before. Ireland's emergent transformation from a traditional homogenous society to a nation of new immigrants means that the country's teachers are on the front line of educating a more diverse student population. This new diverse group of young students brings with them a new and diverse set of problems. Research also points to the fact that there is inherent in our educational structures, a system of 'looking away' from a difficult child. Slee (2011) refers to this 'looking away' as a 'collective indifference.' Cohen (2001) goes further and intimates that 'both people and societies deny psychological difficulties as many avert their gaze from difficult differences.' Young (1999) suggested that 'late modern societies consume diversity; they do not recoil at difference; what they are less willing to endure is difficulty.' He goes on to say that the late modern world 'celebrates diversity and difference, which it readily absorbs and sanitizes, but what it cannot abide is difficult people.' This is critical when thinking about how teachers go about the business of including children who are experiencing a difficulty in their personal life.

Slee goes further and suggests that some teacher's unions, policy-makers and structures enable 'looking away.' It seems that we recoil from difficult differences and continue to sanitise process in whatever way we can. We know through research that, for example, young people who are excluded from school often end up in the criminal justice system. Slee expounds that the medicalization of difficult behaviour, where the naughty, fidgety, disengaged child transforms now into a maladjusted, troubled, disordered, and genetically compromised and can now be 'fixed,' treated, eliminated or at least managed out of sight is extremely damaging for the child. However, this medicalized approach is often seen as an attractive approach to the school, teacher, or indeed parent, because it places the locus of the problem firmly 'within' the child. We have to ask ourselves as educators – where is the child in all of this process? Where or when does their voice get heard? Kinsella and Senior (2008), for example, suggest that a cultural shift from a focus exclusively on 'individual pupil pathology' that emphasises deficits in the individual child towards a critique of existing organisational policies and practices

is necessary for inclusion to become a reality in Irish society. These writers advocate developing a systems theory, which addresses environmental change rather than forcing individuals to adapt to life within existing structures. O'Gorman and Drudy (2011) reported that 86% of schools surveyed stated they had a SEN policy, although over a fifth of primary schools had not developed policies. Shevlin questions the capacity of schools to translate policy into credible practice, Winter and Flynn (2013) who, in recognising the importance of school ethos as a starting point for the development of inclusive provisions, recognise the professional development of teaching and other staff is a critical factor to ensure consistency of inclusive practice, (Project IRIS – inclusive Research in Irish Schools 2014).

Porter (2008) reflects on the fact that children spend, on average, 15,000 hours in school, with Mortimer, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis, Ecob (1988) suggesting that schools have a greater influence on young people's behaviours and academic achievements than families do. Schools are unlike any other organisations that exist. They may share many commonalities with other organizational systems, but they are utterly unique, (Papantuono, Portlleli, Gibson 2014). It is in this uniqueness that young teachers need to be trained. In school systems, teachers and school head teachers are charged with the responsibility for child and adolescent formation, development, and learning. Teachers undertake these multifunctional roles with little or no training in how to deal with difficult children or what services to access if a child is presenting with a difficulty. Research suggests that if teachers are adequately trained to 'handle challenging situations, this can prevent teacher burn out' (Papantuono, Portlleli, Gibson 2014). In 'Creating inclusive learning environments in Irish schools'; Shevlin, Kearns, Ranaghan, Twomey, Smith, and Winter (2009) argue that "on the whole, interviewees believed that greater access to psychological services for assessment and support/advice on interventions would assist them in creating more inclusive learning environments in the longer run". What they found was that inadequacies in training at undergraduate, postgraduate, and on – the – job training were the most universally cited constraints to creating inclusive learning environments (Shevlin, Kearns, Ranaghan, Twomey, Smith, and Winter. 2009).

THE MULTIFUNCTIONAL ROLE OF YOUNG TEACHERS AND EARLY INTERVENTION:

What we often find in schools is that new young teachers are charged with some pastoral role for incoming first years. When we examine this more closely, we can see the dangers of such a practice. It is estimated that about 20% of school children experience social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, such as behaviour or conduct problems, anxiety and depression, during any given year, and may need the use of mental health services. A report on adolescent health just published by WHO in 2014, portrays depression as the top global cause of illness and disability amongst adolescents with suicide being the third-biggest cause of death. The report mentions that half of mental health difficulties begin before the age of 14, underlining the need for early intervention and mental promotion from an early age. What this report also highlights is the absolute need for young teachers to receive the appropriate training and skills to improve their efficacy and effectiveness while working with young adolescents. Drudy and Kinsella's (2009) analysis of the need for increased expertise in schools is echoed in studies focused on the teacher training in Ireland. Clarke, Lodge, and Shevlin (2012) suggest the initial training of teachers needs to focus not only on the acquisition of skills and knowledge but also on engendering positive attitudes and beliefs about the children and young people who are perceived as different from their peers. Recent policy initiatives from the Teaching Council (2011a; 2011b), supported by recommendations from the Shalberg Report (2012) in Ireland, have prioritised the reform of structures, content, and delivery within initial teacher education to ensure that high-quality teacher education is assured. Within these initiatives, there is an emphasis on enabling newly qualified teachers to address the needs of a more diverse student population (Project IRIS – Inclusive Research in Irish Schools 2015).

NEW SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK:

Within this framework, there is a need to develop a module that teaches teachers how to think systemically in their practice. 'We have to understand how a system works, to make it better' (Bateson 1972). Adopting a systemic approach to education will help the teacher to understand the complexities of communication interactions. This will not only impact on their interaction with their students but also colleagues, other school staff, and parents. Teachers are constantly engaged in this multitasking role. And to gain an insight into systems theory would help them to master these communication

interactions and help them to become even better teachers, (Papantuono, Portlleli, Gibson 2014).

Challenging behaviour is a major source of stress for classroom teachers, with teachers in Europe spending about 15% of teaching time dealing with misbehaviour. Systemic practices in education would offer teachers a new lens on behavioural problems. The school is set up in such a way that behavioural problems are dealt with in a particular rigid process. Often new teachers are quite reticent to report that a student in their class is experiencing difficulty for fear that it reflects badly on their teaching style or classroom management. This further fuel what Slee (2011) refers to as the 'Collective indifference.' However, if teachers are taught during their teacher training how to ask questions that have the potential to elucidate information and how to think of their student as belonging to a system that might be negatively impacting or pressing down on him/her, this can open up a new type of conversation, a conversation that has the potential to be transformative for the young adult.

NARRATIVE THERAPY IN EDUCATION:

Within Systemic theory, there is a model called 'Narrative Therapy.' This places the child at the centre of the therapeutic process and teaches the professional how to ask questions that allow for a multitude of perspectives to come into the room. When a teacher doesn't ask a student a question about the emotional difficulty they are experiencing, it further enhances that child's feeling of alienation. The teacher may feel unskilled or 'out of their depth' to discuss an issue as complicated as mental health; however, by viewing the issue this way, we are giving it all the power. If the teacher - training programme began to address these new emergent problems and if it began to demystify mental health so that teachers are not terrified to explore this new territory, that silent child would be offered a voice. Research reveals that approaching a problem with this type of lens could radically transform school life for all concerned.

THE WORK OF MICHAEL WHITE, AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL FOR TEACHERS:

A Narrative approach to a problem would tell us that 'the student is not the problem; the problem is the problem' White et al. (2007). This is a very useful way of looking at a child's difficulties. Often the problem serves a function for that child or the family or indeed the school. Often what we find happening within the school milieu is one of three things. The school blames the student, the parents blame the school, or the school

and parents come together in a very powerful dyad and blame the student. All of these approaches are about blame and not the solution. And they further scapegoat the child. A Narrative way of looking at problems is about examining labels and the meaning they have for us. Labels are often formed, and prophecies are often launched even in the classroom, without the aid of specialists (Crispiani, Papantuono, 2014). Good (1987) shows that teachers form expectations of and assign labels to people based upon such characteristics as body build, gender, race, ethnicity, given name or surname, attractiveness, dialect, and socioeconomic position, among others (Papantuono, Portlleli, Gibson 2014). However, once we label a person, it affects how we act and react toward that person. 'With labels, we don't have to get to know the person. We can just assume what the person is like' (Oakes, 1996, p. 11).

LABELLING

Our positive or negative expectations strongly influence perception, interaction, communication, and behaviour, determining the well – known phenomena of the self – fulfilling prophecy. Once a student has been pegged as a 'troublemaker,' 'lazy kid' or 'quiet,' the chances are increased that our handling of this student will, in effect, end up confirming our negative expectations, helping them to come true (Papantuono, Portlleli, Gibson (2014). Wagar (1963) claims, 'The ultimate function of a prophecy is not to tell the future, but to make it' (p.66), then each time teachers size up or down a student they are, in effect, influencing this student's future behaviour and achievement. A Narrative Approach to education would inform teachers of the ills of labelling and how we live the thick narratives, we get handed by our family, schools, peer group, or milieu. If teachers become more cognizant of these narratives and labelling they can help to change the way the young adult sees themselves and offer them an alternative narrative, a narrative that is more positive. This has the potential to free them from such entrenched deterministic and reductionist ways of seeing themselves. It also has the potential for the teacher to see himself or herself differently. It can offer the teacher the chance to see the underlining presuppositions that help to co-construct unhelpful labels and narratives. Therefore, teachers should become more aware that they, like all human beings, can easily be freed from their expectations. Consequently, their expectations can easily lead them to act and communicate differently, Papantuono, Portlleli, Gibson (2014).

EXTERNALISING CONVERSATIONS: AN EFFECTIVE TOOL FOR TEACHERS:

Michael White put forward the idea of 'Externalising' a problem. When we have difficult children in front of us in the classroom, we are often viewing the difficulty through a myopic lens. Rather than seeing the issue as intra-psychic (inside) of that child we can come to view it as 'outside' the child. Externalising the difficulty can show the child that this narrative in their life is not a fixed narrative and that just as easily as it came into their lives, it can leave their life too. Externalising is a very useful tool for any teacher when dealing with a difficult student. Externalising conversations can provide the teacher with an antidote to the child's internalised understandings of the problem by objectifying it. This makes it possible for the student to experience an identity that is separate from the problem; the problem becomes the problem, not the person. In the context of externalising conversations, the problem ceases to represent the 'truth' about people's identities, and options for successful problem resolution suddenly become visible and accessible (White et al. 2007).

TEACHERS NEED NEW SKILLS IN THE NEW DIVERSE CLASSROOM, CIRCULARITY

Research has shown that teachers confess they often face situations where they feel helpless, situations where they cannot see a way out. They feel helpless in front of seemingly impossible situations, and risk giving up on the problem, or even worse on the student concerned. They continue to go around in circles, ending up thinking there is no solution (Papantuono, Portlelli, Gibson 2014). Yet, as Watzlawick claims, as long as there are problems, there is a solution. Nardone (2013) argues that problems seem unsolvable and thus impossible because we might be asking the wrong questions, we might be persisting with an inappropriate method of inquiry, we might be looking for the key in the wrong place. Having an understanding of circular questions can help the teacher to ask the right question at the right time. The concept of circularity has been widely discussed in family therapy literature since Bateson's (1972, 1979) elaboration of the cybernetic epistemology of family systems (cf. Hoffman, 1981; Keeney, 1983, 1985; Papp, 1983; Penn, 1982; Palazzoli Selvini, Boscolo, Cecchin, & Prata, 1978a, 1980, Tomm 1984a, 1984b). The Milan Associates introduced the circular interview as a means for conducting a systemic investigation of the changes and differences in family relationships that recursively support dysfunctional interactions or symptoms in the family (Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980). Circular questions are also a useful tool for the teacher to gather information about a specific issue and provide the teacher with an

opportunity to view the problem systemically. Developing an awareness of the reciprocal interrelatedness of behaviours may, in and of itself, promote significant spontaneous change (Penn, 1982; Palazzoli Selvini et al., 1980 Tomm, 1984b).

CONCLUSION

Boys are four to ten times more likely to receive a negative diagnosis and medication than girls. By 1996 over 6% of school-aged boys in America were taking psychological medication. More recent surveys show that in schools in the United States over 17% of boys have a diagnosis and are taking medicine and in the UK prescriptions for medication have increased from about 6,000 in 1994 to about 345,000 in the latter half of 2003 (Papantuono, Portlleli, Gibson (2014). Rutter and Smith (1995) assert that since the end of the old Millennium there has been an epidemic increase in the frequency of SEBD in children, which lead to severe behavioural and psychological problems and exclusions from school (Parsons, 1999; Cooper et al., 2000; Mooij, 1999). In the light of such evidence, it seems more important than ever that we rethink the way we send our teachers into this important profession. Teachers need to be able to address the modern diverse nature of the problems they will encounter on a daily basis in the classroom and the wider school environment. Teachers have to understand their role within this system and the multifunctional role they will be asked to perform early in their careers. Based on research, there are some issues that require Ireland's careful and immediate attention if the country is serious about avoiding the all – common alienation and underachievement experienced by students who are experiencing a difficulty in their lives. In order to address this need, teachers must be taught new skills in how to talk with students about mental health. Demystifying mental health and early intervention are crucial here. Providing the new teacher with a new set of skills and tools to deal with this new emergent form of education is critical to creating an experience for the young adult that is inclusive and understanding.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

With the research I am going to carry out in America, I hope to develop a module for the teacher training - programme which will be a comprehensive introduction to:

- Mental Health awareness: Demystifying mental health and promoting early intervention.

- Systemic practices in Education: Looking at the work of Gregory Bateson and developing a new lens for how teachers see themselves, the student and the school environment.
- Specific focus on narrative approach: An introduction to the work of Michael White. And outlining how Narrative therapy can be used in the classroom.
- Circular Questions: A comprehensive guide to questions that explore the system that children are navigating. A detailed examination of circular questions which will help the teacher to distinguish between lineal questions and circular and reflexive questions.
- Externalizing an issue: A look at how to disarm the thick narratives that children get handed down through their family, school, or peer group.

The overall aim of this research is to improve teacher's confidence and skill set when talking with a student that is experiencing a difficulty. Not only has this the potential to transform the student's experience of school and afford them the opportunity to be truly heard but also has the power to change how the teacher sees him/her self in that system and how they can effect change for themselves and their students. All the research points to a key gap in the teacher training programmes both here in Ireland and abroad. This study hopes to fill that gap.

REFERENCES

- Crispiani, P. *Pedagogia Clinica della Famiglia con Handicap. Analisi e Strumenti Professional*. Junior Bergamo, 2008.
- Mortimer P., P. Sammons, L. Stoll, D. Lewis, R. Ecob. *School Matters: The Junior Years*. Shepton Mallet: Open Books, 1998.
- Oakes A. "Labeling Deprives you of the Most Fulfilling Relationship." *Daily Collegian* (1996): 11.
- Papantuono, M., C. Portelli, and P. Gibson. *Winning Without Fighting. A Teacher's Handbook of Effective Solutions for Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties in Students*. Malta University Publishing, 2014.
- Parsons, C. *Educating, Exclusions and Citizenship*, London: Routledge, 1999.
- Palazzoli Selvini, M., L. Boscolo, G. Cecchin, and G. Prata. "Hypothesising – Circularity – Neutrality: Three Guidelines for the Conductor of the Session." *Family Process*, 19 (1980): 3-12.
- Penn, P. "Circular Questions." *Family Process* 21 (1982): 267 -280.
- Porter, L. "Cognitive Skills." In *Educating Young Children with Special Needs*, edited by L. Porter. Crow's Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin Unchangeable, San Francisco, CA: Jossey – Bass, 2008.
- Rogers, Chrissie. "Inclusive Education, Exclusion and Difficult Difference: A Call for Humanity?" Childhood and Youth Research Institute, Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education, Anglia Ruskin University, UK, 2012.

Journal of Academic Perspectives

- Rose, Richard. Confronting Obstacles to Inclusion: International Responses to Developing Inclusive Education. Abingdon: Routledge, 2010.
- Rutter M. and D. Smith, eds. Psychosocial Disorders in Young People: Time Trends and their Causes. Chichester: Wiley, 1995.
- Shevlin, M., H. Kearns, M. Ranaghan, M. Twomey, R. Smith, and E. Winter. Creating Inclusive Learning Environments in Irish Schools: Teachers Perspective. The National Council for Special Education, 2009.
- Slee, Roger. The Irregular School: Exclusion, Schooling and Inclusive Education. Abingdon: Routledge, 2011.
- Smyth J., D. Barry, and P. McInerney. Hanging in with the Kids in Tough Times: Engagement in Context of Educational Disadvantage in the Relational School. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2010.
- Watzlawick P. (2010) "The Use of Behavioural Prescriptions in Psychotherapy." Journal of Systemic Therapies 29 (2010): 35-39.
- Watzlawick P. and G. Nardone. Terapia Breve Strategica. Milano: Raffaello Cortina, 1997.
- White, M. Maps of Narrative Practice. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.