



## Reflective Account

# How can I introduce a systemic view to support the pastoral care of Year 7 students?

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This account outlines my exploration of the introduction of systemic work with the Year 7 group at Hove Park School, Brighton, East Sussex between December 2006 and March 2007. It is a brief overview of how I am developing and applying this approach in a secondary context to the benefit of students and school as a whole.

### **What was my question about?**

I have been employed one day a week since December 2006 to work as Transition Coordinator at my school. This is in addition to my four day a week permanent teaching post.

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In December I had just finished a training programme with the **nowhere** foundation in the use of systemic approaches in organisations and schools, led by Judith Hemming and Terry Ingham. The courses were part-funded by my school and were structured over a nine-month period, and brought together professionals from diverse backgrounds. They enabled me to become a part of a small group of teachers, heads and educators across the country researching systemic applications in schools.

I had decided early on to focus on 'transition', the movement from year 6 and primary school, to year 7 and secondary school. This is widely acknowledged as a highly significant and often difficult period in a child's education, and I felt that this would be particularly fertile ground for researching and developing systems-centred approaches as part of the pastoral support the children received to induct them into the school because during this period the two 'systems of home and school need to support each other if the child is to do well.

A systemic perspective allows the teacher and the child to consider how their two systems relate to each other – how they support the child settling into their new school or produce issues that hinder learning.

### **What did I try?**

I aimed to introduce the entire Year 7 group to systemic work by running sessions that I called 'links workshops'. The structure was simple. With 10 class groups, each with around 30 students, at Hove Park School, I wanted to mix them up for their workshop. I took two children from each

class and ran the workshops with 20 participants in each. The workshops took place during school time, and so the students missed a lesson, and they were presented as part of the Year 7 curriculum, not as an optional addition. The room was set up with a circle of chairs.

The format for the workshops followed the same pattern, which was refined as time went by. Unclear if it was one workshop or a series with different designs

1. Explanation
2. Theory
3. Stilling
4. Constellating

### **1. Explanation**

Firstly I gave a brief explanation as to why the students were attending:

"We are here to explore our connections, our links, to the world around us: our families, our schools, our friends...many different systems.

Who can think of some other systems?"

"The Solar System ... The blood system ... An ecosystem"

"Yes. And these systems, like our family systems and our school system, need all their parts to function well. If one part is taken out, or is not working properly, the whole system is affected. We can see this clearly with the environment at the moment. It has become unbalanced. We will look at trying to achieve balance."

### **2. Theory**

Secondly, I outlined one of four underpinning principles to the systemic theory I have studied. The four principles are belonging, exchange, hierarchy, and history, and if all four are well attended to a system should function well. Within this initial round of workshops I chose hierarchy, not because it is the most important, but because I felt I could deliver an interesting learning experience for the students.

Only one of these hundreds of students had any idea what hierarchy was, and very few had ever heard the word. I used the school structure to describe it... "if Tim Barclay, the Head, is at the top of the school hierarchy, who is next?" "The Deputy Heads!" "and then who?" In this way we developed a visual display of a simplified hierarchy and started playing with it. "What happens if you take the students away? or the teachers?" It became very clear that each part of a hierarchy is there to allow the system to function, and each part needs to be respected and allowed it's role if the system is to work. The children found it very interesting to acknowledge that they were the reason for a school to exist, and without them it would be without purpose. Themes of anti-authority and disempowerment were explored, and almost all students were engaged and involved in these debates.

To further develop the concept of place and in particular hierarchy, I used a practical exercise whereby the students order themselves by age with the oldest (me!) at 12 o'clock and moving clockwise round to the youngest. This archetypal hierarchy often had an empowering effect, as

students could acknowledge their position in relation to their peers and feel secure in that position. Following this, I facilitated the setting up of other hierarchies of experience such as horse riding, swimming, speaking various languages, allowing participants to see that there are multiple levels of experience existing at once, and that they occupy different positions in relation to the defining theme. This often helped the children's self worth to visibly grow with the knowledge that they hold more authority than their peers and their teacher in certain contexts. Overall this exercise consistently proved to nurture a very respectful atmosphere.

### **3. Stilling**

Thirdly we developed the practice of 'stilling', but starting by discussing sources of information. All students identified books, teachers, parents, the internet, and newspapers as places where they get information. I guided the conversation towards other sources – "who has ever had butterflies in their stomach, and who has heard of a gut feeling?"

Students often started to volunteer their own ideas – "going weak in the knees", "sometimes you just click with someone, you know you get on really well and you know you'll be friends." Information from inside yourself, instinct, conscience. There was an amazing sense of doors opening as we explored these different ways of framing 'information'. I explained how you can really develop an awareness of the information that is coming from within, and that there are very rich traditions that work with this. We then moved into a stilling exercise. Sometimes focusing on the breathing, sometimes doing Chi Gung exercises, but always with the aim of centring, calming, focusing, and becoming more receptive to information from within.

Immediately after the stilling, I set up an experiential exercise that allowed students to immediately recognise information coming from within. I asked them all to get a sense of how they were feeling, and then one by one to stand up. They were to measure whether they were 'informed' from within of any change. Almost every student identified a noticeable shift, and acknowledged the information their body was giving them. Occasionally I extended this exercise and had the group walking mindfully around the room and gauging how they felt in relation to their peers, in different parts of the room, facing different ways, and asked them to identify a place where they felt 'good' and a place where they felt 'less good'. All students registered different feelings in different places, and almost all enjoyed the activity.

### **4. Constellating**

Finally, once the 'information from within' session had finished, we started constellating issues that students had. A constellation is a technique with its roots in family therapy, developed initially by the German philosopher and therapist Bert Hellinger. It is a powerful systemic tool that allows individuals to externalise issues and gain insight into any given situation. Before I started the workshops I had facilitated a few constellations with students, and the results of these were overwhelmingly positive. The setting provides a safe and respectful environment for students to allow deep issues and problems to surface, and to seek resolution to these problems with help from their peers. In my short time in education these sessions have provided me with some of the most moving and human experiences in my role as teacher.

The constellations started off with me asking those present if they had an issue that they wanted to solve. I emphasised that the more important it felt for them, then the more productive the

constellation would be. At first I kept it open for issues of any nature to be brought, but after a couple of workshops I narrowed it down exclusively to school related issues. This was a critical decision – we know how fundamental a role the family plays in a child's life, and constellations allow systemic issues connected to the family to come to the fore, but I had to consider the possibility of a child releasing information only later to find that they regretted it. Focusing on school matters did not prevent these issues from arising, but set them firmly in the context of teaching and learning.

Here are a few examples of issues that were brought by the 11 and 12 year olds at Hove Park;

"I hate maths"

"I haven't made any friends in my class"

"The teachers punish the whole class when only one or two of us are bad"

"I don't feel that this school is catering for my ability"

"A few pupils' behaviour is stopping us all learning"

After a student brought their issue I 'interviewed' them, asking questions carefully designed to identify the systemic elements involved.

To begin with I will use the example of a girl who 'hated maths'.

### **Case Study 1 – 'I hate maths'**

*"I hate maths. It's really boring."*

The girl in question is a bright, able and enthusiastic student, a very strong member of the year group, so it is surprising that she holds this attitude for one of her subjects.

*I ask her if she has always felt this way about maths. She thinks for a time, and says no. We journey back through her infants and primary experience. "How about in year 4?" "I liked it then." We isolate an experience in year 5 when she felt unsupported by her teacher in a numeracy lesson and felt unable to do the work. She recalled – "I put my hand up, but he never came. I couldn't do it and I gave up." This was the moment she switched off.*

Following the interview stage, I generally set up the constellation:

*Using pieces of paper to represent key elements of this event (herself, her teacher, and 'maths') we set up the constellation of the issue. We saw the hidden dynamics of the event and the way that it has influenced her behaviour since it occurred.*

By asking her to stand on the different elements of the constellation she was able to get a sense of how each part was 'feeling', a valuable lesson in empathy in itself. Then I asked her to say specific and carefully chosen phrases, for example:

*(to her old literacy teacher) "I've been carrying this for a long time. It's time I returned it to you (handing back a ball of paper, representing the negative feelings she has been carrying)." The student was able to 'hand back' the negative feeling she took and acknowledge that she*

*had always enjoyed maths up to this point. This process allowed her to rejoin her earlier enthusiasm for this subject.*

I interviewed her 2 weeks later. She was far more positive about the maths lessons she had received since our session, even saying that she had enjoyed them.

### **Case study 2 – 'I feel alone in my class'**

Another case study is that of another girl who courageously brought the issue of feeling lonely and isolated in her class group. This was the first time she had revealed this, 5 months into the school year, and it came as a surprise as she oozed confidence almost to the point of cockiness. She described how she was never chosen as part of a team, or for pair work, and became quite tearful in front of the group during the session. I drew attention to her courage for bringing this issue, and the atmosphere amongst her peers was deeply supportive.

Her constellation gave her a very interesting insight into the hidden dynamics of her problem. She herself had a very active role in maintaining her own isolation by hiding behind a false confidence and 'don't care' attitude which had the effect of actively pushing people away. She readily acknowledged this, and saw that a resolution would come if she reached out to her classmates and allowed them in more.

Two weeks after the constellation she said that things had improved greatly and people in her class were really making an effort to include her. One boy in her class had been in the workshop with her, and she said that he had been really supportive and kind, lending her pens and so on. She seemed visibly softer, and was much happier. She felt that she finally belonged in her class.

### **Case study 3 – I'm being bullied**

One student had reported that he was being bullied by one of his classmates. I decided to do a workshop with the class as a whole, rather than mixing the group up, and he explained that he was always having to watch over his shoulder and it was making him feel very uncomfortable in the corridors. He didn't know when the bully would push him, or grab his bag.

With the permission of the bullied child I had both students represented in the circle by two of their classmates, and they described how they felt. "I feel scared" the representative for the bullied offered. I asked him to tell the representative for the bully that "you are making me feel scared and uncomfortable at school", after which the representative for the bully reported feeling embarrassed and less strong. I then substituted the representative for the actual individuals concerned, and had the bully say "I have been bullying you. I'm sorry."

It is important to recognise the role of witnessing during these constellations, as a whole group of students learn a great deal about the dynamics going on around them and how to relate positively to each other. They can see how their actions, positive or negative, carry consequences for themselves and others in their class and school. It is a very real and alive learning experience, and it is very unusual to have any problems engaging students during a constellation. In this case the class could acknowledge the situation and support a move towards reconciliation.

The bullied student described his experience of the constellation as follows.

*"When we were doing it I was quite surprised that someone as popular as ----- would stand up in front of the whole class and his friends and say sorry openly to me...since the circle thing it's been alright. He ignores me, I ignore him, we don't really talk...we get on by ourselves really and mind our own business."*

*"Would you say things have improved since the circle thing?"*

*"A lot, yeah."*

### **What did I learn and what insights did I get?**

This small systemic intervention demonstrates a number of positive and far-reaching effects generated by this approach. Students gain a deeper sensitivity to their role within the school, and how valuable they are to it. They witness problems being resolved, and see their peers displaying courageous and nurturing qualities. They practice empathy, and learn important skills such as techniques for improving concentration (stilling), ways of resolving problems with others, and gain a deep and practical understanding of the importance of hierarchy and their relationship to it.

It is worth mentioning how few discipline issues arose during these sessions. There are a significant number of children in this particular year 7 group who 'get into trouble' on a daily basis, but I never experienced any serious issues. Perhaps it is because they were not with their normal class group, or maybe they could access the learning without feeling insecure about their ability. They certainly generally enjoyed the workshops. No doubt a bit of all of the above, but all students spent the time engaged in their learning.

The changes afforded by this approach are often enduring, and may allow students to overcome difficult obstacles that may impede their future success. In terms of the Every Child Matters (ECM) agenda it can contribute very significantly to its integration into school life, as it comfortably explores and develops the five main themes:

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution
- Achieve economic well-being

The ECM website states that "Children and young people will have far more say about issues that affect them as individuals and collectively" (<http://www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/aims/>), and this empowerment of the individual in their connection to their school, family and community is a real strength and asset of a systemic approach. This also means it fits in very well to the personalised learning agenda.

### **How has my insight affected what we're doing now – and what difference is this making?**

From this pilot intervention I can see that the underpinning principles and practices of the systemic approach explored here have much to offer. This is especially so in light of the significant changes that are occurring in secondary education in the next few years.

It is only a small beginning. I would like to further its develop in two areas.

1. I would like to introduce this approach to the primary schools that resource Hove Park with students, and consolidate it's role in our year 7, thus helping to knit together key stage 2 and key stage 3 with common and innovative practice. There is some hope for this as we are part of the Leading Edge Partnership, funding work in, amongst other areas, transition between secondary and primary.

2. A second area that I would like to start working on is using the theoretical principles outlined above to inform the mechanisms and processes in the school structure that we use to deal with discipline, inclusion and gifted and talented students.