



Why ?

‘A child’s current behaviour often reflects an essentially sane response to an untenable set of life circumstances.’

‘It must be recognised that the area of pupil behaviour is highly emotive. It challenges teachers’ sense of their own professional competence and both teachers’ and parents’ self-esteem. . . emotions often get in the way of constructive planning.’

The Dilemma

- I'm not a therapist, get me out of here!



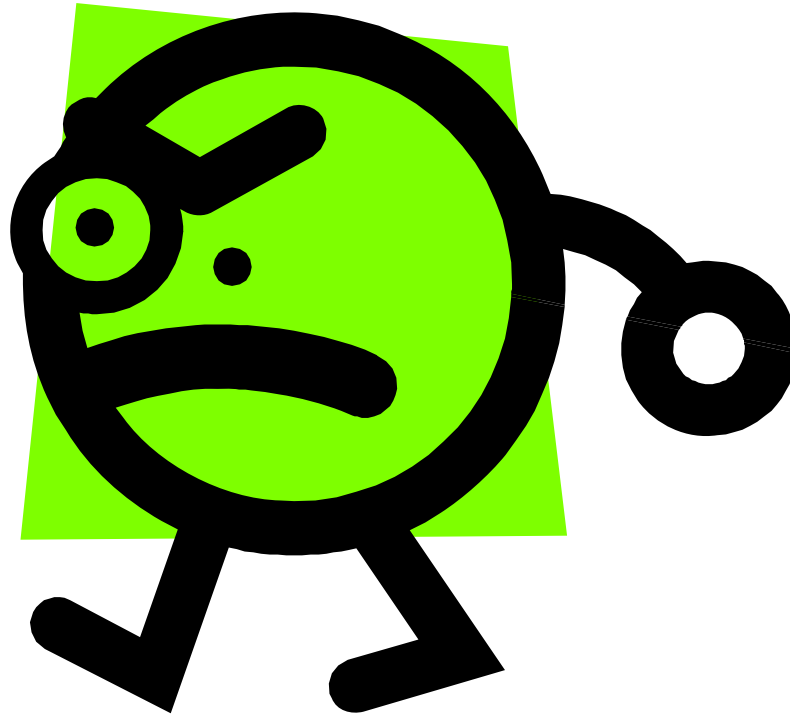


Teaching vs Therapy

- Time – constraints, structure
- Control – who has it?
- Child or Adult led ?
- Private vs Public
- Feelings vs Facts
- Choice vs Compulsory
- Structured vs Freer
- Listening vs Talking
- Ownership of the knowledge
- Time to think vs Attacks on thinking

Envy

- If I can't have it, why should you?



A good learner

- Feels safe and is willing to take risks
- Has good self-esteem
- Can seek help when needed without expecting criticism or ridicule
- Is able to concentrate and be what Gardner calls 'in the flow'
- Is able to manage frustration, anxiety and disappointment
- Has the capacity to bear the powerlessness of not knowing
- Is optimistic and has a positive attitude to a problem
- Can wait for attention.

Learning

- Learning takes place where we struggle to match what we know with what seems to be new and different
- For those whose internal and external worlds are dangerous they may not be able to take this risk

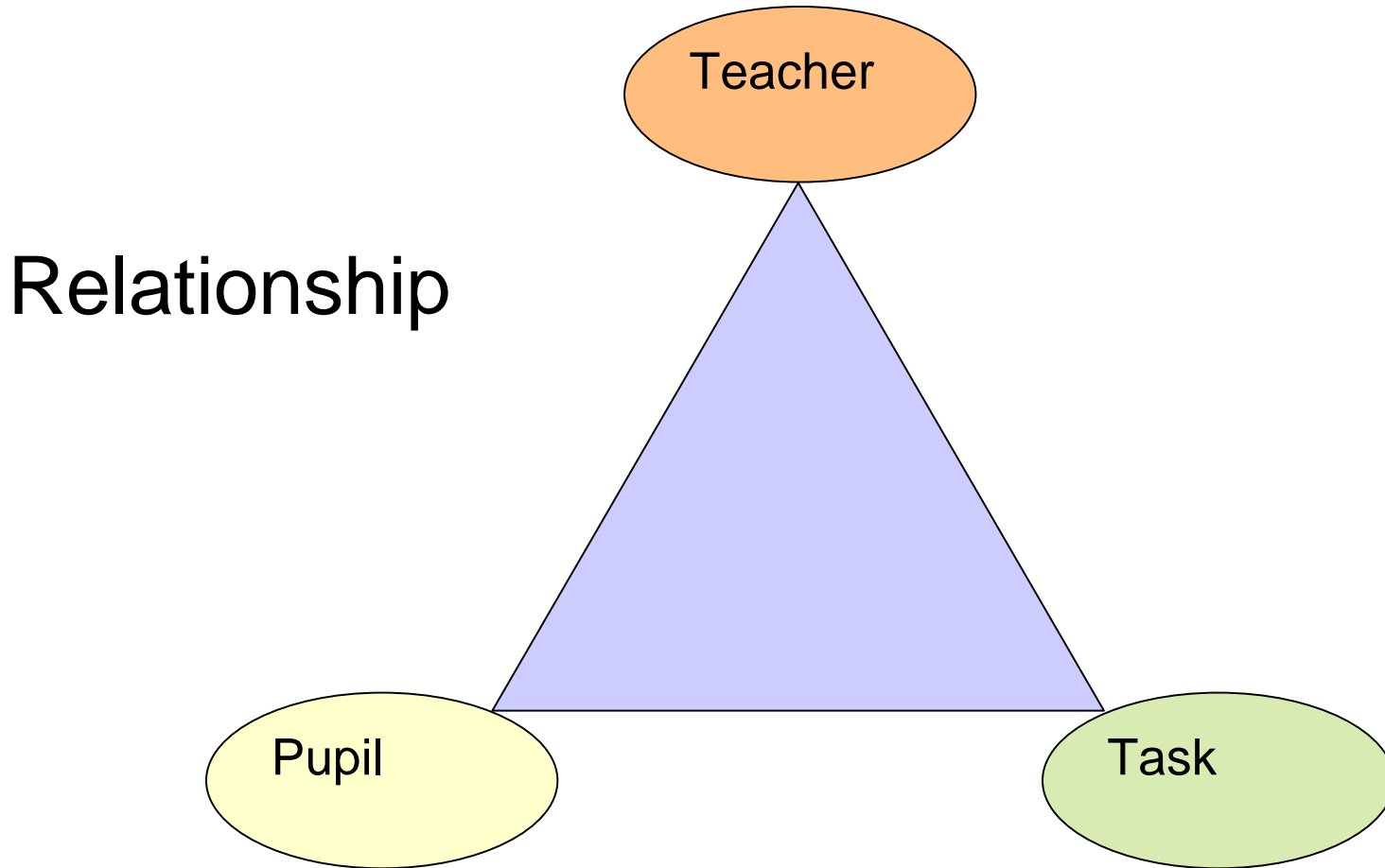
Why learning can be dangerous

- Learning requires us to feel positive about ourselves
- Learning requires taking risks
- Learning requires trust in relationships
- Learning requires 'taking in' and some children feel they are not worthy or too full up with other stuff
- It involves letting go of 'hypervigilance

Risk Factors

- Parental mental health illness
- Bereavements
- Neglect
- Emotional Abuse
- Physical Abuse
- Sexual Abuse
- Domestic Violence
- Loss, separations, complex family relationships
- Several moves, involving continual changes of home and school

The Learning Triangle



Effects of trauma and loss on the brain

- A lack of 'attuned, sensitive care' can cause babies and young children to have abnormally high levels of stress hormones, including cortisol, in their bodies.
- High levels of cortisol are known to significantly impair the growth and development of the baby's brain and body.
- High cortisol levels can affect a child's ability to think, to retrieve information and to manage his or her own behaviour.
- Significant parts of their brains are not hooked up
- The 'flight-and-fight' response triggered by the oldest part of the brain is over-used.

Meaningful Targets?

- **Why the conditioned response and reward principle does not always work**
- Life and circumstances has taught some young people a different lesson
- How do young people know what a target actually means?
- E.g. What does it feel like to be 'concentrating? What lets them know that they are doing this thing called 'focusing'?
- They may have had very few experiences of the target behaviour, either from a shared experience with a thinking adult or on their own in a calm environment.
- Children and young people need adults to help them make sense of their experience and name the experiences they are having.

‘Conventional Wisdom’

- Positive attention leads to better behaviour
- Repeated examples of success and appropriate behaviour will lead to changes
- Choice
- Developmental stages
- Motivational Cycle of Change – what does the present behaviour bring you

What can you do?

- Make it clear that emotional health is as important as physical health.
- Pay attention to your own emotional state and have strategies for getting into a positive state for teaching and learning. Share these strategies with learners
- Learn to listen to the feelings underlying communications with you.
- Noticing 'attacks on thinking'

Name the feeling

- Be prepared to name the feelings, particularly the overwhelming emotions. 'I wonder if you are now feeling disappointed and let down'.
- Be aware of being pulled into the 'counter-transference', controlling, punitive
- Think about where the feeling is coming from – projection, displacement ?
- Encourage pupils to develop a vocabulary of feelings. This can be done through subjects such as History, English, Geography and Art.

Activities

- Develop activities which allow recognition and acceptance of negative feelings e.g competitive games such as hangman, battleships, teach children how to win and lose safely.
- Make sure young people know it is not the **feelings** which are bad. We all have **bad** feelings, we need to acknowledge and decide how to act on them.
- Use creative activities and metaphor to help pupils explore feelings in a safe, 'contained' way e.g stories, drawings, modelling, games, videos, soaps. Comment in a the third person, indirect way.
- Plan for times when anxiety might need to be lessened. Concrete, mechanical tasks can provide calming left brain activity

Support staff

- Ensure all staff know the importance of emotions in learning, discuss it with them, help them manage their own states.
- Encourage the setting up of staff support groups to discuss cases and encourage re-framing of behaviour into discussions about the possible underlying need.
- Admitting to not knowing something or feeling overwhelmed is not a weakness.
- Focus on a skill e.g empathy and make explicit links in all curriculum areas.
- Link to learning styles and talk to young people about how they learn, not only about behaviour

Whole school strategies

- Thinking spaces need to be created. This can be done through collaborative support groups such as those advocated by Gerda Hanko (1999), through supervision by outside consultants, or across departments, meetings around a particular child and young people. Include time to talk about the feelings of staff involved with working with these challenging pupils
- Focus on what is working rather than what is going wrong. Share the experience and do more of it
- Suggest whole-school ideas for staff to use in developing the Emotional Literacy of students. For example, if you have a weekly staff bulletin or noticeboard, have a thought for the week for everyone to focus on with their pupils, for example, *“Show empathy with others... Be kind to others... Use good listening skills”*. All staff should then take every opportunity to ‘catch students being good’ and doing this

Whole school strategies

- Be prepared to admit to your failures as well as your successes. See these failures as opportunities for learning. Show that everyone is human
- Use the start of meetings to focus on any unconscious anxieties. Even five minutes discussing what is uppermost in your mind can help relieve some anxieties and bring the focus back to the task
- Be aware of unconscious defence mechanisms such as envy and spoiling which might begin to operate in moments of stress around teaching certain pupils
- Build in planned, time-tabled meetings for key staff to discuss the needs of the most challenging children and young people. It will save time in the long-run

Whole school strategies

- Practise assertive, not aggressive or passive, communication. Develop the art of ‘clean feedback’, in which you separate out a description of a behaviour and what you infer from it
- Develop a common vocabulary which re-frames behaviour in an attempt to understand what might be driving or what it might be showing us. Ask, for example, *“What is the child’s need?”*
“What do we want?”
- *“What might be going on here underneath the behaviour*

And finally

- Remember that Winnicott talks about 'good-enough mothering'. There is also 'good-enough' teaching. You do not need to be perfect. You need to be prepared to think about the good and the bad.

Want to know more?

- Marie Delaney January 2008
- The Learning Harbour, Crosshaven, Co Cork
- Email : mars37_2002@yahoo.co.uk
- Teaching the Unteachable, October 2008, Worth Publishing
- www.caspari.org.uk
- www.pilgrims.co.uk