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# Sweet Chilli in the Soup

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## **Abstract**

Psychotherapists know a great deal about child development, attachment theory, systems theory and ways of relating. They have a lot to contribute to the education system, which is currently in need of a great deal of help. Teachers in the grip of the current crisis for the education system are compromised in their ability to think about children's experiences and to create an environment where children feel safe, understood and cared about. This paper posits ideas as to why the system is failing children and teachers. It explores ways in which psychotherapeutic understanding could help to fire up the "grey soup" of the education system, and at the same time soothe the palate of teachers and the children in their care.

## **Introduction**

One of my passions is to think about the way therapeutic knowledge can be useful in everyday life, particularly in the service of children. I can think of nowhere more in need of the understanding that we as psychotherapists have to offer than the education system, which I see as a very needy patient. It attempts to contain its psychotic anxiety by trying to control, streamline and standardise everything. Most teachers are over-stressed and depleted, many are cynical and emotionally withdrawn, and some are at crisis point. And all children are affected by the teacher and the school system.

## **Weaving Psychotherapy with Teaching**

In 1999 I was visited by a very disturbing dream, which initially I understood to be about war torn Kosovo.

In the dream, I am with my family in a place that we realise is going to be unsafe. We need to pack up and move and we travel to a grassy glade, which seems a safe refuge. We plan to settle down for the night. It becomes apparent, however, that this place is not safe and the adults start preparing to do battle by arming themselves with sharp sticks, rocks and anything they may be able to defend themselves with. Being deemed more geriatric than the other people present, I am sent to some distance away to look after the children. I am look-

ing at my granddaughter's face. She is playing happily. In my mind's eye, I anticipate the change in her face as the fighting starts. I am aware that there will be bloodshed, possibly death. I imagine her face changing from contentment, to puzzlement, to terror and I feel distraught as to how I can ameliorate the forthcoming traumatising experience for her.

With the assistance of my Dream Group I began to make further sense of this. I had just been running Post-Graduate Professional Development courses for teachers. I had entitled these "Where the Wild Things Are, How to Still Them (without the use of Ritalin) and Be Home in Time for Tea", and the second course was called "The Child You Don't Want to See on Monday Morning". Most teachers felt very sustained and stimulated by these courses but they also elicited enormous distress. I recognised that they were being asked to look after a classroom full of children and to hold the feelings of distress which accompany this. As an ex-teacher, I am no longer in the front line, but am a safer distance away. This allows me the luxury of being able to fully experience feelings. Many teachers are so busy trying to stay alive that they can't afford to experience the feelings of being in the front line, a phenomenon we understand as disassociation. Paradoxically the teachers most beneficial to children are those who can experience strong feelings in response to a child and not act out their own.

After 17 years of working as both a Primary and Secondary teacher, I left teaching in 1982 to train full time in Child Psychotherapy. During my training I became aware of a whole world of knowledge about children. As a teacher, I had struggled to understand their behaviours. Suddenly things I had not been able to make sense of opened up before me. In my naivety and with limited knowledge, I felt proud of ways I had intuitively managed to be with children, and ashamed of things I had not understood and the ways I had, at best, failed some children, and at worst, been destructive to others.

In 1990 when the opportunity came to return to the education sector by working as a counsellor at the Dunedin College of Education, I was keen to apply. I felt excited at now being able to be part of an institution whose key focus was preparing students to work with children. I felt a sense of delight that today's students could have opportunities to tap into the vast wealth of knowledge that has emerged about children's emotional development since I was a student.

Although I love the counselling work with students, what has emerged over the last ten years is a sense of disillusionment about the way teacher training happens, and the way the education systems currently functions. I believe teaching is in a state of crisis. Teachers, like other occupational groups who work with

children, are distressed, exhausted, and in desperate need of soothing. The pressures they are under often render them unable to think about children's experiences. This can easily lead them to experience themselves as victims and children as perpetrators or attackers.

### **The centrality of attachment**

The fact that little is taught about attachment during teacher training exacerbates the difficulties in thinking about children in a psychological way.

The post-graduate teacher courses I have been facilitating for teachers are fundamentally about children's emotional development, and I have included the notion of how important teachers are to children. By the age of five onwards most children will spend more waking hours with their teacher than with any other adult.

I have looked at the process of attachment and explained something of the work of Winnicott, Bowlby, the Robertsons, Mahler, Ainsworth, Main et al. We have looked at attachment categories and the way attachment patterns are transferred from parent relationships to other relationships. We have worked with the significance of this in the school situation, enabling teachers to better understand the significance of a child's attachment pattern. It has been helpful for teachers to understand that the behaviour patterns they are dealing with have been at least five years in the making before children started school. Whilst they cannot fix things for children from distressing backgrounds, teachers can impact positively on their well-being and they can ameliorate their difficulties. It is also possible for the child and the teacher to establish a different attachment pattern from the one which operates at home.

In my work with adults who have suffered profound early abuse at home, often the only person who has believed in them, tried to understand them, or showed kindness to them, has been the teacher. This has enabled the child to hold on to the first realisations about themselves as not all bad, maybe even likeable. *"Unlike Mum or Dad's face that frowns and contorts, the teacher's face lights up when she looks at me."* *"She is gentle when I have fallen over and she washes my knee and bandages it, and is not rough and cross like my Mum when I hurt myself."* I want teachers to understand how significant this is to the child.

### **The costs of a curriculum focus**

Unfortunately I believe it is becoming more and more difficult for teachers to respond thoughtfully, positively and empathically to children. Teaching has become focussed on the curriculum, not on children. As our social values have changed, schools have become a business, in competition with other schools. What children

have to learn and what teachers have to teach is prescribed entirely by the curriculum. In the past if I had a Sri Lankan child in my classroom, this would be a wonderful opportunity to discover more about Sri Lanka. It would also allow a different child to feel special. It was an opportunity to call on the expertise of the parents and to involve them in the school. Currently, unless the curriculum specifies that Sri Lanka could be covered this year, this would not be possible.

There is the notion that each year children will attain certain educational goals. For some children, learning not to disrupt, learning that you can matter to someone, or learning that you don't have to try to please the teacher all the time, represent the acquisition of significant learning. This learning may be deemed important in so far as it affects classroom management or teacher's stress levels, but it does not meet the prescribed learning objectives.

At one time there was an understanding that children learn by doing and the doing needs to be fun. When teachers are stressed and exhausted it is difficult for them to create an environment where fun is possible. Play is regarded as a luxury for both teachers and children, not an essential way of being in the world. Teachers increasingly work too hard to have much time for it, and the belief that children need to attain objectives is put above creatively experiencing and acting out their inner world, and thus allowing space to work out attachment conflict issues.

When we go back to the beginning of teaching and the selection procedures for prospective students, it is not seen to be appropriate to ask interviewees about their personal lives. It would seem that the current climate wants to put aside all possible reference to our personal selves, be they students, teachers, or pupils, and to focus instead solely on academic goals. At the same time some teachers are saying that teaching takes up 20% of their work – the rest is managing the difficult classroom relationship issues and social problems.

### **Education's operating syndromes**

I am struggling to make sense of what is happening in education and would like to suggest that a number of syndromes are operating.

*Firstly*, there is the 'Tell me what to do' syndrome.

Education, perhaps more than any other profession, is firmly entrenched in a dependency model (Bion). Children are dependent on their teachers for approval, provision of access to learning, safety and enjoyment. Having exited the secondary system, many students then immediately enter the tertiary system. Whilst some things are different, this is none the less a continuation of dependency. Students have to attend 90+% of their classes in order to pass the course, a roll is taken, and errant students are followed up on. Those students

who wish to develop independence - e.g. mature students - commonly complain that they are treated like children.

Teachers are therefore caught in a system that fosters dependency. Not only must the curriculum be followed in the prescribed way, it also must be recorded in ways which fit the Education Review Office's notion of how this should be, rather than the way that is easiest and most efficient for the teacher. Failure to comply leads to a negative report for the school. Many teachers have described thoughtful and innovative ways of managing bullying, teasing, peer relationships and a positive classroom climate. Some of these fall outside of ERO's prescription so, like children who need to be compliant in order to be rewarded, teachers too recognise that their career continuance or promotion also hinges on compliancy.

A greater proportion of teachers than ever before, are employed in tenuous limited term jobs. They are dependent on the Principal or Deputy Principal's good opinion of them for continuation of the job or a reference, which may earn another appointment; e.g. a forty-eight year old woman, after teaching for 15 years, eventually managed to attain a permanent position.

*Secondly*, there is '*The Little House on the Prairie*' syndrome.

In Laura Ingalls Wilder's classic stories of the 1870's, she describes a family who journey 600 miles by covered wagon to Kansas, where they build a little house on the prairie. It is inhospitable, lonely territory where the family live hand to mouth and confront the dangers of wolves, prairie fires and Indians 'turned unfriendly'. With courage, luck and resourcefulness the family battle adversity.

The family therapy literature describes families who function in closed, homeostatic or enmeshed systems where there is a lack of information exchange, a lack of environmental input, a lack of differentiation, and a lack of effective communication and conflict resolution skills. Pamela Alexander describes the experiences of living in these families as "a diet of grey soup". I think teaching suffers in a similar way to an enmeshed family. Teachers form a numerically significant number of our national workforce. They are intelligent, well educated, often resourceful and innovative. They do not, however, generally experience input from outside of the teaching profession. They must be one of the few work forces who are so isolated in this way. Most other professions interface with allied professionals. Nurses, for example, have professional involvement with doctors, social workers, OTs, and Radiographers as well as their patients. Teachers on the other hand have professional involvement with other teachers. This is therefore a closed system with no permeable points from the exterior and no 'circuit breaker'.

Teachers see teaching as *their* area of expertise and believe that ‘outsiders’ have little to contribute to it.

As in *The Little House on the Prairie*, all the family gather together to pool resources and to keep threats at bay. There is, however, little looking outside the system for help. Connecting with the outside world would be almost akin to traversing Kansas, or asking your grandmother to enjoy sushi.

A recent example of this is that of Resource Teachers in Learning and Behaviour (called RTLBs). Within teaching, concerns about problematic children have led to the introduction of RTLBs. In the school system RTLBs are seen by many people as counsellors, and the people to whom the teacher refers a child who is exhibiting difficulties. Whilst there are undoubtedly people who do this job with devotion and care and skill, for the most part the people doing this work have had on the job training using the internal resources of the education system. They, like teachers, are often wedded to the same way of seeing children’s difficulties and the same kind of behavioural approaches. There is not much scope for carrots, courgettes and sweet chillis in the soup.

As well as the isolation from the external world, most teachers spend their time isolated from each other. They are encapsulated in their individual classrooms with very little opportunity to overlap. Whilst they may observe other teachers’ ways of being with children at assembly, sports day or the end of year show, there may be little opportunity to see how their next-door neighbour sets limits, offers comfort, shares fun, or develops creative thoughts. There is inadequate opportunity for teachers to give or receive support or to vent feelings safely. Not only is Kansas a long way off, so too is the next-door classroom when you have 30+ children to manage.

Robert Karen, in his excellent book *Becoming Attached*, quotes Karin Grossman who suggests that it is quite possible to imagine a whole culture functioning on the avoidant principle: “you mind your own business, you don’t show your emotions, you don’t go to anyone for help” (1998: 261). The education system certainly demonstrates a significant number of avoidant characteristics – a dislike of neediness, a turning away from physical contact, anger, aggression, isolation, the dismissing of the importance of love and connection and shallow, if any, self reflection.

*Thirdly*, there is the ‘Let’s Not Talk About the War’ syndrome.

As for many returned servicemen, sharing feelings opens the possibility of being overwhelmed and losing the capacity to manage. Expressing feelings, particularly of distress or anger, is an indication that a teacher is ‘not managing’

and this may be detrimental to the teacher's status or career prospects. I recall my own attempts to communicate that a child was 'driving me up the wall'. The inevitable shaming response was "he is all right with me". I also recall a classroom I overlooked where there was a continual riot, with the teacher often being under siege - e.g. pinned forcibly up against the door by a group of aggressive, angry teenagers. To my knowledge, he never uttered a word of this assault or humiliation to the other staff members, nor we to him.

### **Other significant changes**

As well as this, in the last two decades some very significant things have happened in education.

1 There have been structural changes with Tomorrow's Schools, which brought in the system of Boards of Trustees, changes to the allocation of funding, and competition rather than cooperation between schools.

2 There have been changes in teacher accountability. At one time teachers were deemed to know best and unlikely to be questioned. Whilst this meant at times that highly unacceptable behaviours were not challenged, nowadays teachers feel they can't breathe without a parent asking "why?" For a long time it seemed that teachers remained the authority figure that no one ever became grownup enough to question. In a climate of challenging authority figures, teachers are stripped of that which is necessary and appropriate for them to retain their own authority, and to make their own decisions. It seems teachers are dependent on the opinion of the community more than ever. Dependency repeats dependency.

Gordon Lawrence describes this phenomenon in his paper entitled "The Presence of Totalitarian States of Mind in Institutions" (1995). He describes fears present in earliest infancy being reactivated by adults in groups and institutions:

The fear of annihilation.

The fear of being made a nothing.

The fear of not being able to make sense of what realities may be.

The fear of disorder and chaos.

The fear of disintegrating.

The fear of loss ending in death.

He sees much of our group behaviour as being specifically designed to avoid group members having to consciously experience psychotic anxiety. He hy-

pothesises that “as environments become more uncertain – and there is reality to this – the management of institutions has become more anxious” thus evoking psychotic anxiety. The pressure on those in charge is to bring into being a feeling of certainty which, in fantasy, will withstand the environmental uncertainty. Unconsciously “the majority of role holders mutually collude” in this way to banish psychotic anxiety.

The corollary is: Such an organisational culture diminishes the capacity for thought and thinking and so role holders at all levels become less able to relate to the external environment....They become entrapped in the inner political world and life of the institution, in a life of action and reaction, doing not being. (1995: 2)

I am speculating that the overwhelming distress involved in daily contact with neglected, abused, out of control children, as well as the market forces thinking which has entered education, stirs paranoid fears in teachers and the whole education system. ERO and school principals, and boards of trustees, unconsciously take up the roles which will banish the psychotic anxieties. The classroom teacher may protest but may also collude. Limiting the capacity for thought, having a curriculum that offers little flexibility and is narrowly prescribed, give the system some illusion of control and order and defend against anxiety. It also reinforces itself by rewarding only “thinking which is sure-fire and certain” since the over-arching fear is of making mistakes. The fear of mistakes is such that it becomes dangerous to have thoughts which are different from the majority. Even creative, dedicated and experienced teachers have a hard job not to fall prey to the power of paranoid anxiety.

As well as the increased rigidity in the system there are other illustrations of this:

e.g. The fear perhaps instilled by fundamentalist Christian parents, around talking about or reading books about witches and wizards. Banning such stories deprives children of a way of learning about good and evil, their own ‘shadow’ feelings, and of attaining mastery over their fears. It also protects adults from their shadow feelings or primitive psychotic anxieties.

There is also a climate of fear around touching children. Teachers have described how they have to walk the playground with their hands in their pockets for fear a child will try to hold their hands, and how they have had to evacuate all children from the classroom when a five year-old child has become out of control, because they are not allowed to physically restrain him. How terrifying for a child desperate for adults to take charge, to be



left with this omnipotent power which can't be contained. I was grateful not all teachers have given up this practice when, on my granddaughter's first day at school, the fire alarm went off. She had waited five years to get there, and was bursting with excitement and was distraught believing that the fire alarm meant the school was burning down. The long wait to become a schoolgirl had been in vain. I felt so grateful that there was still a teacher who was willing to risk giving exactly what was needed – a reassuring hug.

### **What has all this to do with psychotherapy?**

I believe we can weave our knowledge into the field of education.

The education system is a very needy patient. It attempts to contain its psychotic anxiety by trying to control, streamline, and standardise everything, rather like an anorexic who weighs, measures and quantifies everything and is terrified of deviating from the prescribed amount. This serves to suppress the deeper feelings of depression, rage, terror, distress and envy. Individuals who do not subscribe to this group starvation are often treated with suspicion, envy, contempt and denigration. It is rather like living in a flat with eating-disordered women. A non-eating-disordered person eventually starts to worry about his or her own food intake and whether they are being greedy, abnormal and unrestrained.

The capacity to think and feel is being lost. The pain of engaging with children at an affective level is almost impossible to bear without a 'holding environment'. The pain of engaging with one's own feelings is also extremely difficult. This is not a safe climate to express uncertainty, vulnerability, fear, helplessness, distress or anger. Given the opportunity and sufficient time, however, my experience has been that teachers do express their distress and discover intense relief at discovering that others feel the same.

Psychotherapists may be able to help in the following ways:

- **Find ways to make therapy more possible or more accessible for teachers.**

I wonder if other therapists have noticed how few teachers, proportionately to other occupations, present for therapy. Teaching must be one of the largest occupational groups to have no access to Employment Assistance Programme funding for therapy. It is one of the few occupations where leaving the job for an hour is an impossibility.

I believe therapy with teachers can be very useful. As the teacher understands more about him/herself, there is often 'spin off' of the significance of this in classroom. I recently worked with a teacher who had been very cruelly treated as a child. She had unconsciously entered into teaching to attend to her own small inner child who was neglected and abused. As she described her interactions in the classroom, however, I became aware of her own unconscious cruelty, particularly with needy, deprived, less able children, like the child she had been. When she began to treat me contemptuously, to distort my words, and to accuse me of being uncaring and unfeeling, and unresponsive, I had evidence of her cruelty in the transference. When we were able to work with this, it became possible for her to recognise her cruelty in the classroom.

- **Get elected on to Boards of Trustees** (preferably with another two to three like minded people).
- **Encourage and suggest supervision to teachers.** This is a foreign concept for teachers. In my experience there is significant resistance to supervision since teachers fear it would be another way that they could be checked up on and controlled. There is a hierarchical belief about supervision – e.g. like line management. I believe, however, that were teachers able to access this in an ongoing way it would greatly sustain their work.
- **Challenge ERO reporting.** Whilst I have no quibble with setting goals and reviewing whether they have been attained, I believe ERO creates "false self" teachers. Showing weakness, vulnerability and uncertainty leaves them open to attack. Teachers, like psychotherapists, have to be able to not know, at times; to watch, wait and wonder. Teachers feel on trial with ERO, without legal representation, without the right of reply, and sometimes without even knowing what is being written and recorded about them.
- **Suggest psychological books for teachers and children.** Books on self-esteem, grieving, adoption, separation, fears or anger, enable teachers to be able to think more psychologically and enables them to talk with children on a different level. Emotional literacy means that feelings can be put into words rather than acted out, both by teachers and children.
- **Run courses for teachers.** Of the 143 available in-service courses for teachers in Otago, *all* are based on the curriculum with the exception of the two I have offered. I believe psychotherapists can offer valuable information to teachers, such as attachment theory and its implications in classrooms.

A teacher described how she collided forcefully with a child when she turned

around from the blackboard. She felt immensely irritated at the invasion of her personal space. She wanted him 'out of her hair'. In working with her to develop an understanding of anxious attachment she came to realise what her turning away meant to this child and his need to maintain the connection at any cost. Teachers do need to be able to set limits, but sending an anxiously attached child out of the room increases his anxiety and thus increases his need to be 'in her hair'.

We can also offer courses on the importance of touch (supported by the research on failure to thrive), the importance of interplay between parents and infants, the importance of looking, the importance and meaning of play. There is a lovely story in *A Rock and a Hard Place* (1998) about a boy from an abusive family who feared dire consequences of his failure to remember. He rushed out from the class in a state of anxiety to return home to put the rubbish out. On his return to the classroom, his teacher gently put his hand on his shoulder and looked him in the eye and said "One day all of this will be different for you". That's what he took from his school years.

We have things to say regarding childhood depression, acting out and grief, to mention but a few.

e.g. Teachers need to know that the child who becomes unable to concentrate, unable to sit still and whose work habits have deteriorated may be experiencing an intense grief rather than a deliberate intent to sabotage the class.

### **Support for healthy changes**

- **Support teachers.** They need appreciation for the tough job that they do and they need their importance to be promoted. One way to do this would be to get invited as a speaker to your local school. Even teachers who *can* think psychologically are having to unlearn it and need help to hold on to it.
- **Help teachers redefine the roles they enact in the school system.** In the current climate of working with many abused and neglected children, teachers are struggling with their roles. They feel they are being asked to be social workers or surrogate parents. It is helpful for them to understand that whilst they can't fulfil these roles, the work they do can be a respite from the trauma and neglect at home and can be of great significance to a child.
- **Support teachers in appropriate touch.** When my children began school, in the days prior to the abolition of corporal punishment, I stipulated to the school that I didn't want them to be hit. For those of you who are

parents and have trust in your child's teacher, maybe it would be helpful to give permission to the teacher to respond to his or her own instinctive desires re touch. Being comforted, congratulated, or acknowledged in positive ways maybe the only loving touch some children experience. Depriving them of this may be almost as detrimental as hitting them.

- **Support male teachers.** In the current climate male teachers are particularly under suspicion. I believe attuned male teachers have a vital role, particularly with boys whose fathers are absent, unavailable or unsafe.
- **Volunteer to sit on selection panels for colleges of education and schools.** Psychotherapists have a great deal to offer in this process.

I have to tell you none of this is easy. Do not expect that because you have crossed Kansas you'll be welcomed in. Your food is suspect and if it isn't the right flavour it will be spat out. At the same time teachers want to be told what to do. They want a 'strategy'. The notion that you firstly have to have a relationship with the child and hear what she is saying *before* you produce the strategy is not instantly gratifying enough for most teachers.

Changing the homeostasis of the paranoid dependent system requires a considerable psychological paradigm shift on the part of the teacher.

e.g. I have a collection of stories written by 12 year-olds. These are about being at a fun park in an unfamiliar city and getting separated from their parents. The stories are moving, heartening, disturbing and concerning. I used these with teachers in the in-service training course to help enable them to think about attachment patterns and what they might be able to learn about children through these separation and (usually) reunion stories. Some teachers were unable to do this and instead focused only on the spelling, grammar, story structure, and whether or not they considered the story to be imaginative.

I am aware that most of us are already overloaded with work. How much one actively seeks to have influence and how much one capitalises on opportunities which present, will, of course, be an individual decision. It may also be easier for those of you who have school age children to find ways to assist and influence the system.

I am anxious to tread the fine line between being critical of the education system and supportive of the teachers in it. The last thing teachers are needing is attack. What needs to be attacked, however, is the mindset that has infiltrated teaching. I believe the policy makers are doing a disservice to teachers and most of all to children.

I am conscious that for all of us, whether we are in the front line, or further back, holding children is a distressing and lonely place to be. I am aware of my need to share my therapeutic skills and passion in the field of education in the hope of in some small way bringing about some changes in the system. I also hope that some of you will find ways of directing your skills to this task. Gordon Lawrence states that “we are left with little choice but to expose the presence of psychosis in our social institutions, no matter where it may lead us. Let us not commit treason, once again, against the human role by remaining silent. Our silence will have catastrophic consequences” (1995: 8).

Psychotherapists, I believe, have a lot to say. We could both fire up the soup and at the same time soothe the palate.

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