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A Systemic Perspective of Solving Problems in the School

Administrators can solve some of the chronic, interpersonal problems they face daily by using concepts from the systems theory and techniques developed by systemic family therapists.

BY ALEX MOLNAR

THE FAMILY therapist's role as promoter of positive change in families is very similar to the administrator's role as promoter of positive change in schools. The family therapist and the principal are both *connected* to the system they are trying to affect, yet neither is a *member* of that system in the way a parent is a family member or a teacher is a part of the classroom social system. Because of this similarity, ideas from system theory and techniques developed by systemic family therapists can help administrators solve some of the problems they face day in and day out.

To clarify how and why an administrator might use systemic ideas when confronting problems, a few key systemic concepts should be explained.

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System

System is the central concept of system theory. Bernard and Corrales provide a straightforward definition: "At its most basic, the concept of system denotes a number of parts that are relatively organized so that a change in one or more parts is usually accompanied by a change in the other parts of the system."¹

Countless school examples illustrate the concept of system. For example:

- One student blurts out something silly during a lesson and, as if in a chain reaction, other students begin to misbehave
- A teacher is crabby and the students begin to be sarcastic to one another

1. Charles P. Bernard and Ramon Garrido Corrales, *The Theory and Technique of Family Therapy* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas, 1979), p. 6. For a more technical discussion of system, see: Ludwig von Bertalanffy, "General System Theory and Psychiatry." In *American Handbook of Psychiatry*, edited by S. Arieti (New York: Basic Books, 1966).

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- A student who is not normally moody comes to class obviously sad and students who might otherwise tease her seem to go out of their way to be nice.

Schools and classrooms are good places to observe the systemic axiom that everything is connected to everything else.

Multiple Realities/Punctuation

In systemic therapy, behavior is explained by the concepts of multiple realities and punctuation instead of the concept of cause and effect.

From a systemic perspective, instead of one cause (or even multiple causes) producing one effect, *all* behavior is held to cause every other behavior in a system and every behavior is regarded as the effect of every other behavior in that system.

This means that in a system there is no single cause-effect relationship that, when discovered, represents the single "true" and "real" explanation for a problem behavior.

Which behaviors are regarded as "causes" and which behaviors are regarded as "effects" is considered a matter of *punctuation*, the point at which one starts and the point at which one stops looking at individual behavior in a behavioral sequence.

For example, the sequence: teacher admonishes \Rightarrow student withdraws, means something different when it is punctuated as student withdraws \Rightarrow teacher admonishes.

The teacher and student involved in the admonish \Rightarrow withdraw/withdraw \Rightarrow admonish sequence would, typically, each believe that they knew *the* true and real cause of the problem, i.e., the behavior of the other.

In constructing a solution to this problem an administrator using the concept of multiple realities would attempt to find a new way of describing the situation that is (1) different than the description of either the teacher or the student, and (2) acceptable to the student, the teacher, *and* the administrator.

Cooperation

Most people in education are familiar with and have learned to use the concept of resistance. For example, teachers often regard students who repeatedly fail to do their homework as "resisting" learning just as administrators tend to regard teachers who persistently fail to implement some proposed change in the school's program as "resisting" instructional improvement.

The concept of resistance helps make it possible to see people as engaging in power struggles, being manipulative, or pretending to be helpless. It encourages people to look for a *negative* meaning and/or function of a behavior and leads logically to efforts to solve problems based on explanations of why a particular behavior is bad or wrong. A person who does not change in the face of these attempts at problem solving is usually labeled as uncooperative.

In contrast to resistance, the concept of cooperation holds that of the many possible meanings and functions of a given behavior, some may be regarded as negative and others as positive.

The concept of cooperation encourages people to look at the *positive* meanings and functions of a problem behavior. A cooperative perspective leads one to point out why a problem behavior might very well make sense under the circumstances.

Solutions constructed using the con-

cept of cooperation are, therefore, not based on a power struggle in which someone is the "victor" and someone is the "loser."²

Exception

A final concept, which is of particular significance, is the concept of *exception*. The typical problem-solving approach to helping people change only focuses on the problem behavior. In contrast, the concept of exception suggests that once a problem has been identified it is often helpful to focus not on the problem behavior itself, but instead attempt to find out what is going on in the system when the problem behavior is not present and to identify what is different about the system when the problem is absent.

The difference between the problem behavior and the exceptions to the problem behavior is the key to the solution of the problem.³ This difference illuminates what positive and constructive things the people in a particular social system, such as a family or a classroom, know how to do.

For example, when dealing with a teacher who is having problems, a principal using the concept of exception would learn to identify and build on that teacher's successes in order to help that teacher learn to function more effectively.

Moving from Theory to Practice: Some Key Techniques

During the past 30 years a number of techniques have been developed to implement systemic concepts, several of which have particular relevance to solving problems in school settings.

Reframing is the identification of several different meanings for functions of a problem behavior. For example: A teacher's failure to quickly implement the new reading program could be interpreted as stubbornness or unprofessionalism; however, the *meaning* of this same behavior could be reframed as the teacher conscientiously exercising his or her professional responsibility to assess curricular innovations before implementing them.

The *function* of the teacher's behavior could be reframed as helping to encourage the principal to understand the new program fully so that the principal could explain its strengths clearly to others when called upon to do so.

Positive Connotation

Reframing typically results in what is referred to by systemic family therapists as *positive connotation*.

Positive connotation is the selection and articulation of a positive meaning of a problem behavior and/or the selection and articulation of a positive function that behavior serves in the system.

Since system theory holds that there are multiple "causes" and multiple "effects," positive connotations are regarded as neither more nor less "true" than negative explanations of the problem behavior.

Positive connotation is *not* positive reinforcement. An administrator who provides positive reinforcement re-

2. For a comparison of the concepts of cooperation and resistance, see: Steve de Shazer, "The Death of Resistance," *Family Process*, March 1984, pp. 11-17.

3. For a lengthy discussion of a solution orientation in systemic practice see: Steve de Shazer, *Keys to Solution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1985).

sponds positively to a desired behavior in hopes of encouraging the continuation of that behavior.

Giving a problem behavior positive connotation means giving it positive meaning or function in order to encourage constructive change, either in the behavior itself or in the way in which the behavior is perceived.

A department chairperson used reframing and positive connotation with a kindergarten teacher who was slow to implement her school's new early childhood program.

The chairperson said to the teacher, "I appreciate your ability to continue to enjoy your creative approach to teaching and not be hampered by the new pressures," and commented that she thought it was wonderful that the teacher could enjoy playing the piano for her students and not feel forced to sacrifice it because of low test scores.

The teacher, pleased that the chairperson believed that she was "creative," began helping the chairperson, praising her, and acknowledging her support.

During the past few weeks I have made supportive comments about her ability to be relaxed in spite of all the new pressures in early childhood education. I said that some people would not be able to continue with their old patterns with so much pressure to discard them.

For the first time in my three years of working with her, she was present for parent-teacher conferences and was apparently prepared for them with art projects displayed, etc. I took the opportunity to comment on the large number of conferences she had and how wonderful she must have felt to be able to see all those parents.

Also, the art projects she displayed were the first ones she had worked on in almost a year. This was a great change for her.

It seems reframing and positive connotation have had some impact on our working relationship. She is moving toward working with me more, and working more on the prescribed curriculum.⁴

Perhaps the most interesting result of reframing and positive connotation in this example is the *change in the chairperson's behavior*. The chairperson's behavior change disrupted the usual pattern of behavior between her and the kindergarten teacher in such a way that the undesirable behavior of the kindergarten teacher changed.

Since system theory holds that a change in any part of the system will affect the entire system, a person who is able to change his or her own behavior purposefully is in a very powerful position.⁵

Consider the following description of how a middle school teacher's use of reframing and positive connotation when dealing with a student not only changed things in her classroom but seemed to promote a change in the family of the "problem child" as well.

Mrs. P.: Sue, you must get to school. Attending school is just like holding a job. Failure to get to school indicates a lack of responsibility on your part.

Sue: Ain't you a trip. I am sick. I can't come to school when I'm sick. I ain't gonna affect the whole school with my flu and cold symptoms. Call my mother and she'll tell you how sick I really am. Quit buggin' me. It's none of your business whether or not I come to school.

4. This case example (and every case example in this article) has been edited for clarity and all identifying characteristics such as names have been changed to protect the identity of the people involved.

5. For a description of how therapists change their behavior to help clients change, see: Steve de Shazer and Alex Molnar, "Changing Teams/Changing Families," *Family Process*, December 1984, pp. 481-86.

Mrs. P.: (Now beginning to become somewhat impatient with her flippant response) You are a very lazy girl, Sue. You're not too sick to come to school. You just don't want to get up early enough to catch the bus. Look at how often you are tardy.

Sue: I'm sick. This school makes me sick. It's like a prison, and we can't even go out of the building at lunch. You make me sick, too!

Mrs. P.: (Very irritated) Young lady, you are becoming very disrespectful. I think it is time for a little conference with the assistant principal. I will make out a disciplinary report immediately, and you can leave this room!

Student leaves—slams the door loudly (almost breaking glass). As a result of this "negative connotation" problem-solving technique, Sue does not return to school for the rest of the week.

Shortly thereafter, I learned how to "re-frame" and to use "positive connotation" in problem situations.

The next time Sue was absent, I tried this new approach with some trepidation as the new method was slightly unorthodox for the extremely conservative climate of my school, but I was determined to give it a chance so as to improve Sue's attendance.

Following is another dialog between myself and Sue after another two-day absence.

Mrs. P.: Why, Sue, I am really surprised to see you in class. I'm sure that whatever you were doing at home was far more important than what we studied in class. I think that it is really cool that you are mature enough to recognize that school is not for everybody. You probably stayed home so that you could really work extra hard on your assignments so that you would get straight As when you returned. Tell me, after you finished, did you get a chance to see any interesting segments of "General Hospital" or "Days of Our Lives?"

Sue: (Following a very nervous giggle) Yeah, I sure did, and it was great. Sure beats school that is dumb and boring, especially the teachers. I had a really tough time and no homework either.

Class roars. Restraining myself because of my strong feelings about disrespect from students, I continued (hoping that some student would not report me to the principal for promoting truancy). I was willing to try anything to get this kid to come to school.

Mrs. P.: Maybe you can give the other kids a report on what is happening on the soaps, O.K.?

I didn't expect an instant miracle, so I was not too surprised when Sue was absent the following Monday. On Tuesday, I spoke to her again.

Mrs. P.: Gee, Sue, I see you took some time off to rest up after the weekend. That's great! What a trip! I'll bet by staying home and studying that you are much better prepared for your classes than any of the other kids.

Sue: (Staring at me again in disbelief, but not quite so cocky as she was in our last encounter) Sure was a trip! I might stay home again tomorrow.

I restrained myself from shouting at her "Oh, no, you don't" and dropped the subject.

I was really surprised when she made it through the rest of the week without an absence, but I never mentioned it to her. I just kept my fingers crossed.

As we were instructed in class, I kept a very accurate record of her class attendance, the problem that I was attempting to conquer with reframing involving positive connotation.

The problem was not solved immediately. During February, she was absent two more times, but this was six days less than she was absent in January.

During the first week of March, Sue was absent one more day. Believing the problem to be practically solved, I casually mentioned to her that I was really disappointed in her because her attendance had been so good. She was not in school the following day.

When she returned, I "reframed" the problem, pointing out to her that I was sure she was staying home so that she could be better prepared for all of her classes upon her return. She has not been absent or tardy since. This is the first time since September that she has attended

school for 3-½ weeks without missing one day. Reframing problem behavior involving positive connotation worked well for both Sue and me.

Epilog. Parent conference day was held on March 17th. For the first time, her mother attended a conference without being summoned by the school. Her mother told me that she no longer has a problem getting Sue to school. She cannot understand what happened to bring about this positive change in Sue's attitudes toward school. But I can. Applying the "positive connotation" approach to problem solving works!

Symptom Prescription

A third technique used successfully in schools is *symptom prescription*, based on the concept of cooperation.

An administrator using system prescription might, for example, refrain from encouraging a discouraged teacher and instead say:

Given the situation I can certainly understand that you might be discouraged. It would be surprising if you weren't discouraged. Perhaps the best we can do is figure out how to make you as comfortable as possible while you're feeling discouraged. I wouldn't be surprised if it took a while before you stop feeling discouraged.

Symptom prescriptions such as this one often *appear* to be paradoxical because they run counter to common sense beliefs about what to do in such situations.

In our culture it is common sense to try to cheer up a depressed person, to encourage a discouraged person, or to prod a silent person to talk. Unfortunately, common sense responses very often not only fail to achieve their purpose, many times they actually seem to make things worse (e.g., the depressed person told to cheer up often seems only to get more depressed).

Symptom prescription assumes that discouragement and silence reflect a view of reality that can be understood and that should be respected and cooperated with.

Variations of symptom prescription include advocating *intensifying* the symptom and/or proposing that the symptom continue but in a *different context*.

For example, a teacher who regularly and annoyingly complains to the principal might be asked to come in to speak to the principal three times each day: once in the morning, once at lunch, and once after school. In addition to intensifying the symptom, this strategy also changes things in a number of other ways:

- It acknowledges that the teacher's concerns are based on a view of reality that can be understood and that is taken seriously
- It conveys the principal's interest
- It establishes definite times for the teacher to express his or her concerns (which alters the context of the complaining).

All of this changes the previous pattern of interaction between the teacher and principal. As a result of these changes, the problem behavior often diminishes or disappears. In systemic terms the behavior pattern has been disrupted and the system transformed in a way that no longer includes the problem behavior.

Storming the Back Door

Storming the back door is a technique designed to change a behavior pattern *without directly addressing the problem itself*. This concept is difficult to understand since the "solution" does not *ap-*

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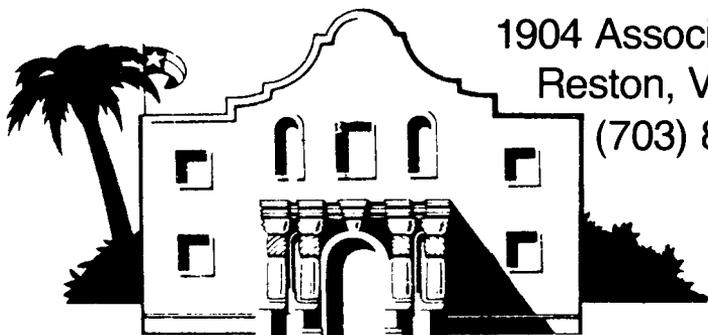
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pear to have any connection to the problem.

Perhaps this example of a teacher "storming the back door" with a girl who was constantly talking in class will help clarify things:

While various types of symptom prescription would work for a while, Claudine always managed to slip back into her old, talkative ways. One time I overheard her talking (of course) to some friends about the soap opera, "As the World Turns." It just so happens that I've been a viewer of that soap opera since college. I started asking Claudine if she knew about certain developments in the show's plot. We proceeded to have a nice discussion about the current plot and what she thought would happen next. We now have these informal discussions a couple of times a week. Her behavior in class has improved markedly.

The Need To Be Honest

Invariably, it seems, at some point educators learning the systemic approach will confuse one or more systemic techniques with "reverse psychology" and raise concerns about being dishonest. This is perhaps an indication of just how seriously educators take their responsibility to act ethically. Reverse psychology, which is telling a person one thing (which you don't believe) in order to get them to believe the opposite, sometimes works, just as it did for Tom Sawyer when he wanted to get out of painting the picket fence. However, it is dishonest.

Therefore, in using the concept of multiple realities to come up with re-

framings and positive connotations, it is important to select only those alternative explanations of the meaning and/or function of a behavior *that can genuinely be accepted as true*.

It is often very hard to accept the concept of multiple realities in the face of a difficult problem. At one workshop on systemic ideas, for example, a teacher asked how long it would take reframing and positive connotation to work with a certain "so and so" of a student. The answer? "Probably it will take until it is possible to *truthfully* describe that student as something other than a 'so and so.'"

Conclusion

Administrators can use the ideas presented in this article in at least two ways. First, administrators can learn more about them and encourage teachers to learn more about them so they can be used effectively in classrooms. In addition, and perhaps more important, administrators can learn to use these ideas to find solutions to problems in their own relationships with students, teachers, parents, support staff, and board members.

The ideas discussed in this article are currently being put into practice in a year-long administrator training program in a medium-sized midwestern city public school system.

The training program and its effect on the administrative behavior of program participants will be detailed in a future article.

Instruction enlarges the natural powers of the mind.—Horace
