Psychological approaches within sustainable and global learning

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Introducing a psychodynamic model to understand human behaviour

In this paper we explore what gets in the way of embedding a meaningful global learning curriculum and why some teachers and students find it difficult to engage with global issues. We use a psychodynamic model to try and make sense of what some global learning practitioners might find puzzling and frustrating.

A psychodynamic model of the mind underpins the Grow2Grow programme at Commonwork. It has helped us to understand why the troubled young people we work with sometimes do things that appear to go against their best interests – for example not attending, or attending but behaving in ways that are very challenging for other young people and the staff on the programme. We believe that similar psychological processes can affect the way students, teachers and whole schools do or do not engage with the challenging issues in a global learning agenda.

A psychodynamic model focuses on the way early infant developmental processes and experiences can affect our relationships, behaviour and choices. It highlights the way in which we all struggle with ambivalence and motivational conflicts based on a complex mix of desires, anxieties, defences and needs. We will start by introducing this model a little more, before exploring its implications for sustainable and global learning.

Unlike any other mammal the human infant is born highly immature and totally dependent at first on maternal environmental care. Sixty percent of brain development happens post-natally. What do we do as babies in the face of such total helplessness and dependence for survival on another? Psychoanalysts and child psychotherapists have observed that in the earliest phase of life infants utilise three basic defences to manage feelings of helplessness and terror:
-   the illusion of omnipotence (Winnicott 1960)
-   splitting (Klein 1935)
-   projection (Klein 1935)

We will briefly explain each of these because understanding these defences provides a way of understanding how as children and adults we manage any situation that provokes acute anxiety. We suggest that climate change, resource depletion, unjust economic practices and their consequences provoke just such anxieties because at some level we know our own interests and even survival is at stake and dependent on forces largely outside ourselves, just like the infant in the hands of its primary carers.

In the following narrative we frequently use the language of 'climate change' as shorthand for a much fuller understanding of the forces and issues faced within global learning.

In the earliest weeks of life, in order to manage acute anxiety about survival, the baby experiences an illusion of **omnipotent control** over the 'mother' (Winnicott 1960). (We refer to mother throughout this section, as it is usually mother who cares for the new born infant's needs, but of course this same theory applies to whoever is the infant's primary care giver). In this early phase, we are hungry, food appears and satisfies us; we are uncomfortable or in pain, caring hands sort it out, soothing words calm us down. If these things arrive in good time we believe we have the source of comfort and survival under our control - Freud referred to 'his majesty the baby'.

During this phase of weeks and months we also emotionally **project** and literally deposit our waste, rage, biting, greedy demands onto 'mother' with a sense of complete entitlement and no thought for the consequences. As no mother ever meets her baby's illusion of control 100% of the time, mother also frustrates us and for some, mother may not be mostly a source of comfort but one of unpredictability and fear due to any number of circumstances. We find ourselves with two mothers; idealised mother who is warm, caring, responsive and appears to be under our omnipotent control; and denigrated, bad, hateful mother who is filled up with **projections** of our rage and bad feelings and patently is not under our omnipotent control.

This process of projecting our feelings onto another and **splitting into very good and very bad** is a normal part of infant development and we all go through it. However, it is through having enough positive experiences of control and having our baby rage contained by mother, father and others in this early period that the next phase of development happens and our self-reflective 'social brain' develops.

Over time the baby learns through the right mix of good loving experiences, necessary maternal/environmental failures and through cognitive development that mother, father, siblings and all our loved ones are not really split into two beings. Rather, each human is one person who is sometimes wonderful and sometimes lets us down.

We learn that 'mother' is not infinite but can be depleted, depressed, tired, unavailable and preoccupied with other things. This leads us into the terrain of ambivalence, desire and guilt - all necessary for normal human relating. The one we love and adore is the same one we have treated with ruthless greed and red faced storming rage. Unconsciously we all have fears that we have done damage to the very one we love the most.

If all goes well enough we can come to terms with this and make a transition into what Melanie Klein called the **'depressive position'**. It is a reality-based position that reminds us of our own and others' limitations and the fact that we do indeed have a debt to our parental figures that needs to be repaid over our lifetime in the best way we can. This 'debt' is often transferred onto all sorts of reparative and life-enhancing work – creative work, teaching, psychotherapy, or taking action to address the issues that affect our planet and its resources, are all ways we pay back the debt to our parental figures.

For many of us and in many complex ways, however, things do not go well enough in the very early developmental phase of dependence and omnipotence. In situations that provoke acute anxiety adults may continue to use the strategies they used as a baby, rather than taking constructive action. A psychodynamic model is therefore helpful in understanding individual and societal responses to the challenges invoked in a global learning agenda, and why what we may believe is incontrovertible, eg climate change, is denied by others who are equally passionate in their position.

Extremism of any kind is characterised by splitting and projecting. An **'out-group'** is identified (for example the Jews in Nazi Europe, communists in 1950s USA), and this group becomes so tarnished with projections of bad, vulnerable, weak, dirty and greedy feelings that they stop being seen as equal humans with equal needs and rights. This mirrors the splitting process in infants. There is no doubt amongst

members of the 'in-group', no ambivalence, no guilt, but instead a sense of entitlement and a wish to dominate and control.

We all, to some extent, retain a residue of this baby sense of entitlement that cries 'I should have whatever I want, as soon as I want it, I don't want to know that anyone has suffered for me to get what I want because that will make me feel guilty'. We can see this particularly in some responses to climate change and resource depletion – for example, climate change deniers could be seen by climate change believers as unable to face depressive guilt, wanting to live in the illusion that mother earth is inexhaustible and under omnipotent control. However, climate change believers can also take extreme stances that allow for no doubt, and no mixed feeling. This rigidity would also be evidence of psychic splitting and not managing to live with more complex and less clear ideas that need further exploring.

What can educators learn from a psychodynamic model to help support learning about global issues?

At Commonwork, we think there is also much to be learnt from a psychodynamic model that can help us with the day to day issues that we face when teaching about global issues.

For example, one area of increasing concern and interest to those supporting sustainable and global learning is **differentiation** in education – ensuring teaching methods and materials are appropriate for individual classes and students. At what age is it best to introduce ideas such as climate change? Will we frighten young children with predictions for the future?

A psychodynamic model suggests that perhaps younger primary school children are closer than older secondary school children and adults to their anxieties about 'mother earth', because they are closer in time to their experience of dependence on their mothers. Young children may be less defended against the disconcerting experience that mother (or mother earth) has needs too, and can be exhausted, depleted and at the end of her tether.

This awareness may enable young children to engage with messages about climate change more readily than adults. However, the flip side is that this may stir up in children all their unresolved anxieties about their parental figures, their parents' capacity and strength, and worries about imagined and real damage they may have done with their ruthless demands.

It's therefore essential that teachers are aware that a child's readiness to critically engage in these issues may also stimulate anxieties, and teachers need to know how best to help a child to "work through" their worries by acknowledging and verbalising them in a safe and trusting environment. This process of having an adult hear and absorb a child's anxieties (rather than denying or avoiding them) is similar to the early maternal care described at the beginning of this paper. Containment may include providing the space for children to draw and play as well as talking. Working through their anxieties can enable children to take some age appropriate action in relation to their own environment, providing a sense of agency and control to mitigate anxious feelings about powerlessness and helplessness. It also helps children to develop their critical thinking capacity.

We believe that this process of facing and feeling anxieties successfully is dependent on several conditions being met in the school environment. The first is that children have positive and **loving experiences** of nature and supposed 'out-groups', such as children from other ethnic groups or from what are perceived as more vulnerable parts of the world. If children are only presented with knowledge of global challenges and expected to act out of duty without love, we find they want to turn away from a demand that induces guilt.

The second condition lies in **cohesiveness between home and school**. We suggest that when children receive very different messages at home and at school – for example having something they learn at school disagreed with at home, or vice-versa – children are likely to experience greater anxiety and paralysis. This issue of cohesion can also be a challenge for teachers, who may be unwilling to enter delicate territory and handle controversial issues. Can we engage parents, carers and the child's community without them feeling accused, blamed or persecuted by our agenda? This is a huge challenge for us as educators.

A third condition is that children need to be taught potentially frightening ideas in a **supportive community setting.** This goes beyond the classroom to the whole school: to help children process their anxieties teachers need support. This opens a huge range of challenging questions: How can emotional experiences be valued within a school? How can teachers be best supported to manage their own anxieties so they can contain the anxieties of the children they work with? Should we offer teacher development opportunities that work with the whole-school culture, whatever it is, or support 'positive deviants' (Parkin 2010), those individuals working as a sole voice or champion of change within an unsupportive and sometimes oppositional environment and culture? The latter individuals are often in need of support, but if they have no supportive school community to work with, they too face a lack of cohesion, making their own anxieties more difficult to manage. These are really complex questions that require us to challenge our own practice at every level.

Bringing all of this together, we believe that to effect change in perception, attitudes, feelings and behaviours requires providing real life positive experiences for children in a supportive culture that is not paranoid, over anxious or massively defended against reality. This is the culture we need to create in schools and in the wider community to enable any sustained action to be taken at a community, school and individual level. It is only with thoughtful containing environmental support that 'depressive guilt' about real and potential damage done can lead to reparative action in adults and children. We don't think this change can be brought about through stealth or by exposing children to occasional distressing information which is dealt with in what might be simplistic ways, for example having a bake sale and sending the money to charity. To engage with the complexity of issues in a global learning agenda requires teachers and whole schools to admit what we can't change and why, counterbalanced with meaningful change we can make. What that change is will vary according to the subject being taught, the age and stage of the child etc. This acknowledgement of reality allows the energy for creative, reality based action in us all.

Conclusion

At Commonwork, we have begun integrating a psychodynamic approach into our educational work. For example, we run an in depth residential training event for school leaders called Leading for the Future, and now encourage participants to consider their practice using a more explicit psychological approach. Participants have

largely welcomed this as very helpful for their understanding and subsequent practice, particularly where they are a 'lone' voice seeking change in their schools and energy and enthusiasm are fast depleted.

We think that questions that we have touched on here and many others need further exploration using a psychological perspective. For example, why do teachers who appear to be in sympathy with the need for sustainable and global learning not change their practice? How can we help them better to do so? How can we better understand and reduce resistance to change in the individual school and in the system as a whole? How can we avoid causing distress for the child and possible conflict with parents or community when they don't offer the same values as we are promulgating?

We hope that such questions can be explored further by the global learning movement in a collaborative way. If you would be interested in joining a dialogue about these or other questions, please contact us at:
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Commonwork, February 2013

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