



Narrative CPD Activity – Discovering the inside perspective

Introduction



Sharing the 'inside perspective' can overcome fragmentation problems

Children with social, emotional and mental health needs seldom have a functional understanding (appropriate to their age) of themselves or others. As a generalisation, they do not see themselves as valued individuals. Nor are others seen as individuals with distinct personalities worth getting to know.

They present different sides of themselves to different people - a strategy designed either to ward off imagined threats or to meet their basic needs - especially for security and belonging. They sometimes tell completely different stories to different people and it never occurs to them that their stories may be compared.

But often these differences are nuanced and laden with different emotions. A child may express dependence and anxiety to one teacher, and defiance and hostility to another. One sees an angry and spiteful teenager, the other a hurt and misunderstood child seeking proof that someone loves him.

Three students with more in common than one might think

Student A

Teachers are repeatedly having to sanction student A because of his use of abusive language. He has got into two fights with class peers, hitting them hard enough to bruise. He also encourages friends to misbehave when he is refusing to work, shouting at the teacher that he is not teaching him properly.



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Student B

Student B told his class teacher that he had no friends because he was shy and often tired because he found it hard to get to sleep. Home life is difficult and when he is upset by things that have happened he gets a funny feeling in his tummy. He would like to run away from home because he doesn't think things will ever change.

Student C

Lives at home with his parents, four sisters, and two brothers. His mother says he often doesn't understand instructions and frequently gets confused. One problem is that, apart from basic words for food and domestic activities, there is no common family language. His father and mother only speak Tunisian Arabic with a smattering of English words, whereas the student was brought up in the UK and only speaks English. His eldest sister acts as a family translator, having lived in both countries.

Each of these narratives is based on a genuine case but it is not obvious (though you may have guessed it from context) that these three descriptions are of one student – Younis – a ten-year-old boy whose family came from Tunisia.

In this case, the problem was that the school only saw Student A. When someone talked to the boy, with his sister in support, student B appeared. And when mother's version was obtained with the help of an interpreter (again, the sister) we had all three versions. With this information, the school took a completely different approach. Instead of pushing for his assessment and transfer, they implemented a home school liaison plan via the sister, and with her support Younis was able to remain in mainstream.

Fragmentation

The problem of 'fragmentation' is not limited to the narratives on separate sides of a clear boundary such as school, self-report, and home. Staff in the same school can disagree (sometimes emotionally) about what a student needs and what the best course of action is. That is because they think they are arguing about the same individual, but actually they are arguing about two different presentations of the same child.

As these conflicting presentations become entrenched, adults around the child develop 'fragmented' perspectives on the child. When staff are discussing what needs to be done, the conflict surfaces in the dialogue between adults around the child. Worse still, the emotional content of their narratives can surface, too.

The staff group can itself become fragmented, with other staff drawn into taking sides.



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The 'inside perspective'

The solution is for someone (a restorative practitioner) to gather the inside perspectives of everyone involved and to safely share their narratives in a way which brings them into a coherent whole.

An 'inside perspective' is an unexpressed narrative (and its emotional content) - a part of the picture belonging to one person. There are several reasons why it may not have been shared.

- something the person finds hard to put into words.
- thoughts and feelings which 'cannot' safely be expressed ('I feel like slapping her'; 'His mother is hopeless').
- thoughts and feelings held by someone who has not been given the chance to share them.
- thoughts and feelings held by someone who does not have the confidence to share them.

Inside perspectives provide planners with rich insight not only regarding the best way to understand 'the problem' but also pathways to solutions.

Restoring a unified perspective

If we are to truly understand the situation and intervene effectively we need to bring these inside perspectives into the open in a safe way, and 'de-fragment' them using a restorative justice approach.

Getting the inside perspective becomes easier when a relationship of trust has developed first.

Chico and the 'bitchy teacher' (her self-description!)

This is also a real-life case. The two perspectives on Chico were both held by the same teacher! One is her formal account for school records. The other is her rather more frank admissions made to me confidentially.





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Mandy's formal statement

'Chico would not settle down at the beginning of class and open his book. I asked him again and again but he still did nothing. He was distracting the other pupils. When I spoke to him he started to argue and refused to go to the withdrawal room when asked to do so. I called the Head of Year who took him to out of class'

Mandy's confidential admissions and insights

'He drives me mad. I feel myself being drawn into this role of the 'bitchy teacher'. I try to stop myself, but in the end I cannot. It's as if he wants to force me to do this. One time I gave him a real dressing down and he collapsed like a balloon and got on with his work. I could see his feelings were hurt, and it made me feel so guilty. I know I can crush him, but I won't do it. On the other hand, ... he's driving me mad!'

I had talked to all the teachers who taught Chico. Some had much more positive perspectives to share. They shared powerfully emotive vignettes which cast Chico in a different light, and Mum had shared her story of family poverty and deprivation, and a violent father. As Mandy shared her story with me, I shared these inside perspectives with her.

Chico's conduct now seemed more understandable to Mandy. I suggested:

- always talking to the deflated and anxious boy, regardless of the face he was showing her at the time.
- giving him less attention (if possible) when his conduct was disruptive during class and instead...
- talking to him before and/or after the class for a minute or two, to give reassurance and encouragement and discuss any issues 1:1.

Chico was the sort of boy who could never back down in front of his peers, but 1:1 would be much more approachable. Mandy's initial reaction was that she didn't have time to speak to him so frequently.

I pointed out that she was already spending several minutes in every lesson doing so, and not in a positive context. Might it be more effective to use those minutes by design in a positive way?

This strategy, together with shifts in outlook by other staff, changed the social environment for Chico. Over time, he came to feel he belonged in the school. He could still be a pain but the more tolerant and empathic responses by staff shifted the trajectory in a positive direction.

Optional further reading This CPD activity is based on a noncoercive teaching model:

The Relational Approach: User guide and manual, Amazon.com, 2018