The Story of Charles

Introducing Systems Thinking Tools
to the Harris School

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Autobiography in Five Short Chapters

CHAPTER ONE

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I fall in.
I am lost… I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes forever to find a way out.

CHAPTER TWO

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I do not see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place.
But it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

CHAPTER THREE

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I fall in…it's a habit…but my eyes are
   open.
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

CHAPTER FOUR

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk round it.

CHAPTER FIVE
I walk down a different street.

- Portia Nelson
There's a Hole in my Sidewalk

Introduction

In school year 1998-1999 at the Harris School in upstate New York where I am principal, a third grader named Charles successfully diverted incalculable amounts of professional time, energy and attention towards himself. Charles refused to be educated within the conventional structure of our conventional elementary school.[1]

Strategies and interventions of all kinds were initiated and implemented. Some lasted months, others only hours. In the end, none of them met Charles' social, emotional or cognitive needs; he managed to reject our every effort to help him access his education. In the end, all we were left with was a close-of-the-year referral to the Committee on Special Education and the hope that somewhere a better program for meeting Charles' needs existed.

After reading about and studying the concepts of systems thinking, it is my firm belief that systems thinking tools would have helped us ask better questions regarding how our traditional system could have responded to help Charles as well as other children. Systems thinking tools would have allowed us to move in more productive, useful directions.

While Charles may or may not be attending our school as a fourth grader this coming year, I am determined, as principal, to initiate the concept of systems thinking tools to the faculty. It is essential that we stop falling into the same holes year after year. It is time to stop blaming children for presenting behaviors to us that our school system's structure helps to create.

In our desire to reach all the children we serve, we all need to become better thinkers.

The Story of Charles

Charles was a third grader last year at the Harris School. He was a member of Mrs. Proctor's class.

While Charles had a reputation for being somewhat of a "behavior problem," the year started uneventfully as he, along with the rest of his classmates, settled in to their new grade level.

Sometime in October, Mrs. Proctor began reporting to me that Charles was experiencing difficulty learning in the classroom. She described episodes of his refusal to work despite her encouragement and her adjustments in his instruction. One morning in early November, Mrs. Proctor sent Charles to the office for being rude to her. The specifics of that first incident were not recorded, but it was the beginning of a sustained pattern in Charles' behavior: When frustration built because work became too difficult, he

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[1] Tracy Kidder (1989) expresses this phenomena in *Among Schoolchildren,* "It is remarkable how much of the time of how many adults in a school one child can command simply by being difficult."

would be provocative by calling an adult names ("You're an idiot"), swearing ("What the hell are *you* looking at?"), and/or by being impertinent ("You can't tell me what to do!"). Inevitably, he would be sent to see me, the principal.

My typical response to youngsters when they are sent to the office is to process their behavior by asking them a series of questions. The proverbial bottom line is to help them establish a plan of action so that, when a similar situation comes up again, the child makes a better behavioral choice.

I am certain that I processed with Charles on that first morning, although I do not recall exactly how I handled the situation. I could tell, however, it was not likely to be the last processing session for us. Charles insisted, actually demanded, that I change his teacher. His complaints about Mrs. Proctor were that she "yelled" at him and that she didn't explain things so he could learn them.

It is fair to describe Mrs. Proctor as a veteran teacher with a lot of successful classroom experience on which to rely. In many ways, she is an excellent teacher. She has great skill in working with children's cognitive behavior and their social behavior and it works for her most of the time. She also has a mental model which includes the belief: "Charles cannot be treated differently than any other child. He needs to learn like everyone else." Although she could express empathy for Charles ("I truly *feel* for this little boy," is something she repeated to me quite often), she did not have a specific way to modify her own behavior in order to influence Charles' behavior in a different way.

Charles returned to Mrs. Proctor's classroom that day of the first major episode, and over the weeks that followed there were further outbursts as well as incidents of his striking out at other children. By the third incident the school psychologist, Mrs. Cooper, was fully involved and consulting routinely with both Mrs. Proctor and me.

In an effort to help Charles stay in better control of his anger, a plan was devised to permit him to leave the classroom for a "time out" whenever he knew he was "going to blow." When this was not totally successful, the plan was changed, and Charles had permission to seek out either Mrs. Cooper or me in order that he could de-escalate.

By December there were daily conversations about Charles. He had changed some of his strategies to avoid doing schoolwork (which he obviously could not do). He would insist to the nurse that he wasn't feeling well and demand to be sent home. He also continued his strategy of being as provocative as possible, and engaged in full blown verbal battles with virtually every adult with whom he came into contact. Inasmuch as Charles is skillful at this, I have speculated that he experienced great gratification from these battles, and thus received consistent reinforcing feedback. I believe I was able to have more success in working with Charles' behavior because I accepted his state of anger and assisted him in shifting to a different state.[2] I never confronted him as other adults did. Unfortunately, I was unable to influence other adults to use this strategy.

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[2] In fairness, I should also point out that I never had to teach him in an academic setting. Chances are I would have made out no better than any of his teachers.

Meanwhile, Charles' mother, who was also a significant player in this story, was kept fully informed of all of these episodes. His behavior towards her was similar, and she experienced the same disappointment as the rest of us.

Charles' anger and acting out reached the limit in February when, in a rage, he threw a book at his teacher and physically lashed out at several children in his class. I suspended him from school,[3] and we had yet another discussion about how to work with Charles' needs.

A Child Study Team comprised of Mrs. Proctor, Mrs. Cooper, Charles' mother, the special education teacher and me convened. It was decided that, temporarily, Charles would spend most of his day with the special education teacher, Mrs. Marks, in the learning center. In the meantime, a referral would be made to have Charles tested for a handicapping condition.

Initially, Charles began to make academic progress under Mrs. Marks' approach, and she was able to give him the support and attention he needed to be successful. The provocative behaviors virtually disappeared, and we thought we had turned a significant corner. We reasoned that Charles obviously needed a special education type setting in order to access his education. We convinced ourselves that we had created a solution.

And then, in early May, Charles' frustration began to return, and with it all of the undesirable behaviors. A controversy swirled throughout the building over a decision I made to permit Charles to participate in a major field trip to the state capital. Mrs. Marks wound up rejecting Charles ten days before the end of the school year because of his absolute refusal to do his work. This resulted in Charles literally having no classroom in which to learn. He spent much of the final two weeks sitting outside my office, given seatwork to do for which he had no motivation to complete. And, on the next to last day of school, I wound up having to suspend Charles for cursing at his gym teacher.

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Retrospective

In retrospect, we had many formal and informal sessions in order to come up with a plan that would work for Charles. At the time, I intuitively recognized that the structure of our school's system was contributing to Charles' behavior, and I, working along with the other professionals, attempted to modify the structure of the system. Often, as might be expected, those efforts were met with resistance.

I realize now that what we basically accomplished was to implement a number of fixes that failed, along with several shifts of the burden. We also routinely managed to

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[3] It is interesting to note that Charles went into a rage when I told him he was being suspended. *"What are you going to do if I come to school, anyway?"* he asked defiantly. (And this was from a youngster who was spending a good part of his day figuring out ways to get out of school). My answer to him was, *"That's a good question. I have no idea. I guess I'll figure out what to do when you get here."* He did not show up.

blame Charles for what was happening, rarely acknowledging that each of us collectively and independently was significantly influencing his behavior.

I am aware that creating behavior-over-time graphs would have given us a better perspective about the patterns in Charles' behavior. Behavior-over-time graphs would have permitted us to develop a story-line, allowed us to more productively discuss what his behavior might have meant, and given us a better direction to find ways to alter it. Instead, we were caught up in the moment of each event, and while we could articulate "Hey, this is part of a pattern," we had no tools to evaluate or make sense of that pattern. Too, we recognized the need to seek out the causes of Charles' changing behavior, but were frustrated for lack of relevant tools. Our typical response to searching for a cause was to suggest having him evaluated for the presence of a handicapping condition.[4]

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The Problem

Charles' story is an extreme example of a child's inability to learn within the school's existing system. It seems obvious to me that the system's structure contributed to Charles' unacceptable behavior. It was not obvious to anyone else, however, with the possible exception of the school psychologist.

Nevertheless, many children continue to experience frustration and failure as participants in a system that remains unresponsive to their learning needs.
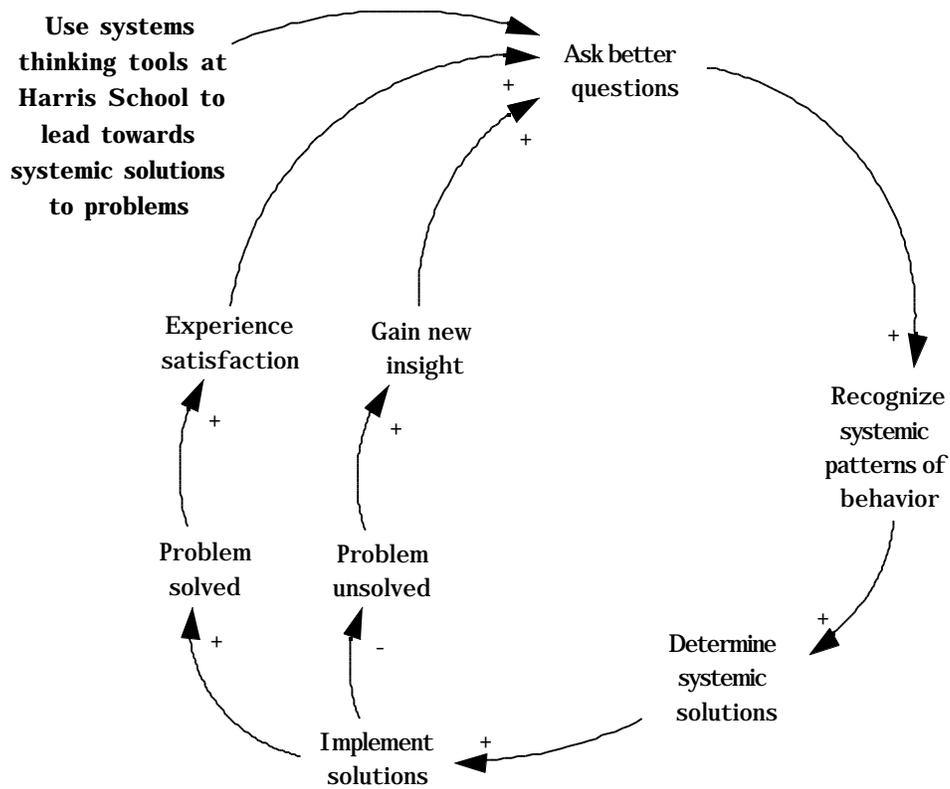
I believe it is the responsibility of the principal to initiate a process that will nudge the system into a different direction and towards a different, collective mental model. I further believe the means toward achieving that end begins with the introduction of systems tools to the faculty.

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The Desired Outcomes

- Using systems thinking tools, all of us at Harris School will become better thinkers. "Better thinkers" means we will:
    - understand the interconnectedness of teaching and learning,
    - understand that each of us is an active part of a system,
    - understand that our behaviors influence others, as we are concurrently influenced by the behaviors of others.
    - understand that *we* are the system.

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[4] Ironically, having a child tested shifts the burden of what "causes" a child's difficulty. If a child is deemed to have a handicapping condition, it lets everyone off the hook: the child can't "help" the way s/he is; the classroom teacher, not being a *specialist,* cannot be faulted for not having met the child's special learning needs; the parents cannot be blamed for doing a poor job of parenting.

- Becoming better thinkers will permit us to examine problems more productively because we will be asking better questions and we will be working together. We will gather information more effectively, develop deeper insight into problems, and produce systemic, rather than symptomatic, solutions

- Determining systemic solutions, and implementing those solutions, will promote feelings of satisfaction, which will reinforce our use of systems thinking tools…

Use systems thinking tools at Harris School to lead towards systemic solutions to problems

Ask better questions

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Experience satisfaction

Gain new insight

Recognize systemic patterns of behavior

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Problem solved

Problem unsolved

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Determine systemic solutions

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Implement solutions

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The Game Plan for Introducing & Implementing Systems Thinking Tools

Phase I – First Faculty Meeting in September

Building Awareness of Systems Tools Through Practical Use

- Introduce concept of systems thinking. Use NASA Iceberg Diagram to explain and illustrate. Use original CLD [above] on Using System Tools at Harris to further illustrate.
- Introduce concept of behavior over time graphs as a problem-solving tool. Introduce five to six examples involving real situations with children. Emphasize that use of this tool may ultimately benefit both children and teachers. Teach how to set up and use a BOT graph.
- Provide copies of *Steve's Dilemma* for teachers to read and discuss.
- Invite and encourage use of BOT graphs when referring a child to the Child Study Team. At this point, make BOT graph use voluntary.

Phase II – Child Study Team Meetings

The Current Format

Child Study Team meetings are held twice a month to assist teachers who are experiencing problems. The problems are usually regarding children who are having difficulty learning.

The Team is made up of the principal, the school psychologist, the speech/language therapist, a general education teacher, a special education teacher and the child's teacher. Sometimes the previous year's teacher attends.

The meeting generally runs like this: The child's teacher presents the problem anecdotally; group members ask the teacher questions; group members either make recommendations to the teacher about trying different strategies or the group reaches consensus about providing the child with intervention services (such as remedial reading) or it is decided that the child should be tested for the presence of a handicapping condition.

Revised Format Using Systems Thinking Tools

Teachers will be asked to prepare for the meeting in a different way:

1. What is the presenting problem? What is the problematic *behavior?*
2. Describe what's been done to solve the problem.
3. Graph the problematic behavior over a minimum of two weeks.

Members of the Child Study Team will be asked to respond to the presenting problem in a different way:

1. Discuss the pattern of the behavior recorded on the graph.

2. Brainstorm a list of reasons as to what is causing the behavior to change. Engage in a search for causal relationships.
3. Ask questions about the relationships.
4. Decide as a group what are the likely leverage points.

Phase III – Enlarging the Toolbox - Beyond Year One

As teacher interest in systems tools evolves:

1. After school workshops will be scheduled to introduce:

   • STOCK and FLOW diagrams
   • Causal Loop diagrams
   • System Archetypes

2. Articles and lesson plans about teaching systems thinking to children will be disseminated. Teachers will be encouraged to begin introducing systems to students.

3. Teachers will be encouraged to attend regional conferences and workshops on systems thinking.

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Conclusion

Working with Charles last year was a challenging experience. Working with the "system of Charles" was even more challenging.

Real change and growth will not take place in our school until we are able to acknowledge the patterns and interrelationships which are present. This, in turn, will point to the fundamental principles that create those patterns we want to understand. Then we will move beyond mere questions; we will move to a place of knowledge, and, ultimately, wisdom.

It is clear to me that, in order for a shift to occur in our school, it is up to me, the principal, to serve as the catalyst. I must influence teachers' thinking about problems so they take on a different perspective. For, as Donella Meadows writes in *The Global Citizen,*

> From a systems point of view leadership is crucial because the most effective way you can intervene in a system is to shift its goals….A single persuasive leader working directly on goals and values can shift the functioning of a massive system.

In order to create in our school a significantly better learning environment for Charles and for every child who enters the schoolhouse door, as teachers encounter problems I need to encourage them to reorganize their thinking. I must help them to find the wisdom of Portia Nelson, and support their use of systems thinking tools, so that they may, quite literally, *"walk down a different street.*

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Robert Kalman is the principal of an elementary school in New York State. The name of the elementary school, as well as the names of all the participants in the story of Charles, have been changed. Mr. Kalman has been an elementary school principal for twenty-three years."