

SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS AND DISABILITIES

THEME 2

CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

The term “special educational need” is, itself, a discursive artefact that represents some students as different or deficient.¹

How we think and talk about SEND matters. It shapes our collective understanding of events, how we feel about them and how we act - or, perhaps, choose not to act. In a later theme - *Personalisation and Inclusion* - our colleague Linda Jordan argues that the change needed to move away from a system that does to people to one that does with begins with truly understanding the deeply embedded values and attitudes that are held about disability.

“OTHERING” AND THE CONSTRUCT OF DIFFERENCE

In their recent article, *The problem of othering: Towards inclusiveness and belonging*², John A Powell and Stephen Menendian describe “othering” as a term that encompasses the many expressions of prejudice on the basis of group identities. It provides a clarifying frame for a set of common processes and conditions that generate and sustain group-based inequality and marginality.

The extent to which children with SEND are “othered” (or simply made to feel that they don’t belong) is apparent from the extent to which, for many, attendance at their local neighbourhood school, far from being a basic right, is conditional upon their ability to “fit in” within an environment and curriculum that was not designed with them in mind and/or the school receiving additional resources with which to support them.

At the heart of a system that “others” children and young people with additional needs is an understanding of SEND that locates the problem primarily within the child or young person (and sometimes their family and largely or entirely unrelated to their social or education setting.³ This, in turn, leads to processes and procedures designed to identify (and label) children with problems and to dispense technical, often resource-heavy, solutions.

Standing in the way of a more inclusive system, where schools are schools for all, are a range of forces that, together, perpetuate the tendency to identify and, however unintentionally, “other” children and young people with SEND, e.g.:

- **Clinical practitioners with a professional role defined by diagnosis, intervention and treatment**
- **Voluntary organisations who support the vested interests of particular groups, often focused around a specific area of SEND**
- **Organisations and services designed specifically around the provision of services and provision for children and young people with SEND**
- **A national framework of accountability, including the SEND Code of Practice and inspection regime that codify the system of processes and procedures that perpetuate the “othering” of the very children and young people whose interests they are designed to protect and strongly sanction headteachers and teachers who do not raise achievement in schools**
- **Experts whose *raison d’être* is to “help” local areas and schools comply with the national accountability framework and steer clear of sanctions resulting from a failure to do so.**

1. Anastasia Liasidou (2008) Critical discourse analysis and inclusive educational policies: the power to exclude, *Journal of Educational Policy*

2. <https://otheringandbelonging.org/the-problem-of-othering/>

3. See, e.g. Anna Wright: *Disrupting the prevailing discourse: a fresh effort of thought*, VSC think piece

BELONGING: THE ANTIDOTE TO “OTHERING”

Belongingness entails an unwavering commitment to not simply tolerating and respecting difference but to ensuring that all people are welcome and feel that they belong in society.²

In a companion set of materials, Schools as places of belonging, Professor Kathryn Riley argues that belonging – as sense of being somewhere you can feel confident that you’ll fit in and safe in your identity - lies at the heart of human existence and is an essential pre-requisite for children to be able to learn, succeed and be fully included as part of their community. She goes on to challenge us to look again at the role of schools and schooling through the “prism of place and belonging.”

As an antidote to “othering”, inclusive schools start by communicating unequivocally and unconditionally that all children and young people are welcome and truly belong within their school-community. However, this commitment to inclusivity and belonging while critical, is unlikely to be sufficient unless accompanied by the kind of adjustments and accommodations needed to overcome the barriers that limit or discriminate against children and young people with additional needs or learning disabilities achieving equality.⁴

FRAMING AND RE-FRAMING⁵

Frames are the lens or filter through which we gather and interpret information (why things are as they are and people behave as they do), determine what we think and feel about that and decide what, if any, action we need to take as a result.

Reframing on the other hand is the act of stepping back to take stock of the the frame through which we currently interpret our lived experience - to understand more deeply the beliefs and assumptions that sustain it and how far it helps or hinders our efforts to overcome a recalcitrant or intractable problem. It allows us to create an alternative, more positive, frame that helps shift the focus of what we think matters most to one that is potentially more productive. Examples of reframing from our day to day experience might include:

- **A problem as a possibility for change**
- **A weakness as an opportunity for development**
- **An impossibility as a distant possibility**
- **Unkindness as a lack of understanding**

We would argue that all too often the frame or frames that we use to make sense of the challenges associated with SEND are determined by a set of beliefs and assumptions that limit both our ambition and ability to make real progress. We suggest that an alternative and more productive frame is one that recognises that, even now, things work well most of the time and helps to rebalance the language we use to focus on what we think matters most:



4. See Theme 1: the politics of equity

5. For a comprehensive overview of the critical role of framing and reframing in sustaining or helping to resolve seemingly intractable problems see: https://www.researchgate.net/.../259558652_Frames_Framing_and_Reframing

A NEW NARRATIVE

To the extent to which frames may be used to conceptualize and interpret situations or problems, they can also be used to convince others to think and act differently.

One way to think about leadership is as the act of accepting responsibility for enabling others to achieve purpose, often in the face of uncertainty. Narrative can be defined as the way in which we learn to make choices and construct our identities – as individuals, as communities, as nations.

We need a narrative that highlights both the fundamental moral purpose that sits at the heart of our endeavour and describes the practical benefits of a more inclusive and just society.

PUBLIC NARRATIVE

Transformational leaders engage and energise others to act effectively on behalf of shared values to secure real change – in this case to help improve the lives and life chances of children and young people with SEND and their families. They inspire others by tapping into their motivations – **why** things cannot continue as they are – and illuminating the road ahead – **how** they can act to secure change.

Public Narrative is the “why” - the art of translating values into action. By using stories to express their values as lived experience, leaders are able to inspire and move others to act.

Drawing on an early career in social organising, Professor Marshall Ganz from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University developed the construct of public narrative as the bringing together of 3 core elements:

- **STORY OF SELF:** Experiences from the past that have formed the values and shaped the choices that bring the leader to this point.
- **STORY OF US:** Shared experiences and values that bring us together in common purpose - values give hope for the what we can achieve together.
- **STORY OF NOW:** The urgent and important challenge.



Marshall Ganz explains more about public narrative in this [short video](#). Examples of leaders who have used stories as a means by which to engage and motivate others to act are currently in development.

The way in which the predominant narrative reflects the way in which we think and feel about SEND informs and shapes how we act. Leadership is needed to reframe and shift the narrative, reconnecting our focus and actions with the inclusive values and principles that brought us to the work and giving hope that real change is possible. This will be developed further in Theme 4: Intentional Leadership.

