

Sense and Sensibility or a Parents' Night with a Difference

Jean-Jacques Ruppert

(slide: "Sense and Sensibility or a Parents' Night with a Difference")

As a guidance counsellor and as a parent I have been to many parents' nights and left most of them bored stiff, feeling that I had completely wasted my time. On the one hand you would have had the head teacher praise, as you would expect, the outstanding facilities of the school, you would sometimes have had a teacher emphasise, as again you would expect, the commitment of the teaching staff, and on a few occasions you might even have had a guidance counsellor briefly presenting his or her services. To me this type of parents' night constitutes a badly missed opportunity because today it is no longer sufficient to provide secondary school students and their parents with comprehensive information about school curricula, educational and vocational training possibilities and career choices, but in my view, a guidance counsellor should use such a parents' night to act as a catalyst, bringing new ways of thinking to his or her audience.

The traditional parents' night can indeed be an ideal way to initiate this process and is a chance to prevent future problems arising due to inappropriate expectations that students as well as their parents may have regarding the educational and vocational training choices open to them. A parents' night is furthermore the perfect occasion to confront both students and parents with a number of "unpleasant" realities they either may not have considered before or else may have preferred to ignore; as George Orwell once put it: "If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear."

This is certainly true in a prosperous country like Luxembourg whose inhabitants exhibit a strange kind of emotional and intellectual immobility, possibly best described by our national motto: "Mär wëlle bleiwe wat mär sin" – "We want to remain what we are".

(slide: "a Luxembourger")

Of course, we could always change it into “Mär wëllen haalen wat mär hun” – “We want to keep what we have got”! and yet despite a growing awareness that we might easily have become too comfortable for our own good, we are nevertheless not really as happy as we possibly should be

(slide: “I’ve got the bowl, the bone, the big yard. I know I should be happy.”)

and that furthermore we might want to change our beloved habit of trying, with some undeniable success, to solve most of our problems by throwing money at them.

So how do I propose to go about a parents’ night with a difference?

During such an evening, the guidance counsellor should first of all thank those parents who actually do turn up as we know all too well from experience that the people you really want to talk to are in fact the ones who never show up.

(slide: “Parents Evening”)

The guidance counsellor should also remind parents that they still do have real power these days, even if it does not come free.

(slide: “When my dad stopped smoking so did I.”)

You should furthermore make it very clear from the start who you are, what you do, what you can do and also and equally important what you cannot do. This is all the more important as it has become quite fashionable to blame not just an allegedly failing education system but also and above all “bad” guidance for whatever is wrong in today’s labour and employment markets.

(slide: “HomSap”)

You should also assure parents that you are not some fool living on a fantasy island, far removed from the ever more complex realities of today’s world and that you know very well that the social ladder no longer seems to function in those ways the politicians have always been telling us.

(slide: "social ladder")

Nevertheless, school or education still offers the best chance for social promotion. This however requires that we reinvent the old role of school and allow it (again) to be foremost a place of learning where young people acquire not only social skills but also and above all hard skills.

(slide: "Wilhelm Busch: Man must learn")

School no longer is the place where individuals are shown their God-given places in society

(slide: "All things bright and beautiful")

but school has got to be the place where students should be allowed to acquire those faculties that will allow them to look for their place in society, and ideally find it. Guidance should be a tool to help them in this search.

In my experience, most of the problems we encounter are of a social nature and are brought into the school environment from outside.

(slide: "I come from a broken home")

Then we must adapt ourselves to our clientele who is very varied:

First there are the students themselves: we have to feel sorry for some of them as they deal with parents who cannot ...

(slide: "Mummy and Daddy delivering parental excellence through guidance, ...")

... or do not want to assume their parental responsibilities.

(slide: "Don't worry son ...")

Parents often are not prepared for their new duties,

(slide: "What'll I do with it now? ...")

... or do not like the taste of these new responsibilities

(slide: "Exercise one: Try to visualise your child as your responsibility")

and sometimes even the best of intentions do not always constitute the right way forward.

(slide: “You never play with me, all you do ever do is read good parenting books.”)

Some parents seem to have lost all sense of reality: asked about how the kids were doing at school, Mrs Miller replied that the doctor was in 2nd year primary and the lawyer in 5th !!

They may also seem confused about what competences really matter in today’s world.

(slides: “No she can’t talk yet – but she can do her own makeup” / “He has a texting age of five!”)

Sometimes though, one has to have some understanding for parents who are often downgraded to mere service providers,

(slide: “Service Providers”)

and are ill equipped to deal with the age related problems of their youngsters,

(slide: “Mum, Dad ... I’m a teenager”)

Furthermore, rather than easing the pains of parents, the world of education sometimes seems to add to them

(slide: “Do you have to bring your homework home with you?!”)

occasionally leading to understandable despair.

(slide: “Think of the children...!”)

Most parents however are genuinely worried about their children and their future,

(slide: “How do you spell www.?”)

expressing legitimate concerns about all kinds of politically inspired initiatives

(slides: “Labour is desperate to reach its 50 % target” / “DEGREES-R-US”)

They rightly doubt the value of the qualifications their children are likely to receive

(slides: “I’ve got a Mickey Mouse degree” / “Congratulations, keep moving please.”)

leaving their children highly vulnerable in an ever more competitive employment market

(slides: “Graduate want’s work” / “English lit – how about you?”)

that requires ever better qualified people.

Some students are obviously and plainly not up to these new challenges

(slide: “ ... May I go home? I can't assimilate any more data today.”)

while others are extremely keen and ask for whatever help they can get

(slide: “ ... and give me good abstract-reasoning ability, interpersonal skills, ... “)

So during their journey through what often is an educational desert, students will look out for expert advice from us

(slide: “Thank God! A panel of experts!”)

The professional qualities of some guidance counsellors however can be questionable

(slide: “Ah, here's your guide now!”)

although some are more honest than others about their shortcomings.

(slide: “ ... ask him over there ... 'cos I've no idea”)

A good guidance counsellor should have empathy with his or her clients

(slide: “And I thoroughly understand the problems of the caveman, because I'm a caveman myself.”)

as well as have excellent communication skills.

(slides: “I can't put it into layman's language for you ... ” / “a policeman giving directions”)

For the guidance counsellor, the job can sometimes be very easy

(slides: “Ah, you're the boy who wants to be a stuntman” / “Ah, yes - you're the boy who wants to be a pimp”)

but most of the time it actually is quite tricky because students very often do not have a thoroughly thought through project

(slide: “An admirable plan, Mr Gribbs, but short on detail”)

or because they have too much choice – (a case for the “happy” few).

(slide: “Oh, Richard, the possibilities!”)

Our job can at times be quite unpleasant

(slide: “Billy’s father will see you now”)

or even “Mission Impossible” because having cut off one’s ear doesn’t equal painting like van Gogh.

(slide: “Toulouse Lautrec”)

There are some guidance counsellors who find nothing wrong with yielding to the unrealistic wishes of students and their parents.

(slide: “ ... We all keep a sharp eye out for those little clues that seem to whisper ‘law’ or ‘medicine’”)

This takes a lot of pressure off them, they can easily bask in the glory of doing the “right” thing and above all they can pass the blame onto somebody else, usually some allegedly uncaring teacher or, even easier, to the unjust criteria of an unfair education system. Such an attitude encourages students to feel like victims of circumstance: “I would have been famous, rich and beautiful and become an astronaut had it not been for that nasty history teacher!”

But effective guidance is definitely not about telling fairy tales or going along regardless with any dreams students may have, nor is it necessarily about killing such dreams but on the contrary, it is about trying to find a “home” for these dreams, I emphasise trying to find a home for them.

However, in my view the real dilemma of guidance is portrayed in the following drawing which I think neatly sums up our situation as guidance counsellors.

(slide: “ ... Climb up that tree !!”)

This drawing goes back to the 70s and looking at it, I often feel in very much the same situation as that unfortunate teacher. As society values “academic” qualifications more than others, those who do not have these qualifications will lose out. In order for the greatest possible number of pupils to acquire these qualifications, a “fair” educational system must

guarantee equality and justice of opportunity. This quest for equality and justice of opportunity however does not mean, future human genetic engineering notwithstanding,

(slide: “ Who designed yours?”)

that everybody who aspires to reach a given goal, will also attain it. Therefore, there will always be “losers” until society as a whole, reassesses its values dramatically. As this, however, is highly unlikely, guidance counsellors are very often faced with the choice of either lying and telling fairy-tales to their clients or of taking on the hard and extremely ungrateful work of persuading their clients to amend their decisions to the “real” world. In the case of our slide where all the “students” are supposed to want to climb up that tree, it is easy to satisfy the chimp and his parents because he will have no difficulty in doing so. On the other hand, it is very difficult for the goldfish and his parents to accept that he will just simply not make it up the tree. In an ideal world the fish and his parents would realise that, being fish, they have all kinds of other abilities that make them unique and which give them an advantage over other “competitors” in numerous tasks but “unfortunately” not in climbing trees. In the end, most parents and students accept this reality but only if the guidance counsellor is able to provide them with realistic i.e. “acceptable” alternatives. Otherwise the picture is not always a very pleasant one with the messenger getting blamed for the “bad” news.

Frequently students and parents complain about change and the increasing pace of change but forget that change is (and always has been) inevitable and unpredictable.

(slide: “What I like about the modern world is the way everything keeps changing all the time”)

Even the best guidance there is will not always be able to prevent bad professional choices

(slide: “Sacked for incompetence”)

never mind that there are also those you just cannot help

(slide: “Beyond help ... ”)

We should also try to give up our beloved obsession with soft skills, do some honest soul-searching and admit that the first thing that the workplace requires is hard skills and not “niceness”.

(slides: : “NATÜRLICH IST BILDUNG NICHT ALLES HEINZ - ES IST NUR ... “. “ABER IOCH LIEBE DIR” / “Of course education isn’t everything Henry – It’s just that ... “. “But I loves you ... ”)

Personally, I do not care if the technician coming to fix my washing machine or the surgeon who will operate on me are “nice” people; if they are then that is fine and good but foremost I want them to be competent at what they do, I want them to have the necessary hard skills to do their respective jobs well.

(slide: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, ... “(Adam SMITH))

Of course, we can go on blaming others for whatever goes wrong in our lives

(slide: “Popular Psychology: Blame Others – Unpopular Psychology: Blame Yourself”)

but in the end we will all have to accept ourselves the way we are, with all our potentials and our shortcomings.

(slide: “Clint Eastwood: A man has got to know his limitations”)

I am aware that to some of you I may have come across as a cynic but then again is a cynic not just an idealist who is a realist? Whenever I hear politicians talking about how “our” children are “our” future, I cannot help feeling that they are above all addressing parents and their voting intentions on election day. And whenever I hear parents demanding “more” and “better” education for every pupil and student, whenever parents ask for “equal opportunities” for all the children, what they are actually saying is that they want extra help and opportunities their own children. I give you a quote from Michael Young’s book ‘The Rise of The Meritocracy’: “to imagine merit and potential where none exists is the politically correct

sanctioned psychosis in thousands of family homes”, a lunacy that is unfortunately being encouraged by some people in education and guidance who should know better.

Finally, I think we should all be aware that an increasing number of our clients will not reach the goals they are aiming for. I remember a former US president whose impressive communication skills allowed him to convince people that in the future, 8 or 9 career changes within a working life would be perfectly normal

(slide: “Will you be my first wife?”)

but as only a very few of us have Bill Clinton’s charisma I’d rather take refuge in George Bernard Shaw who once said:

(slide: “There are two tragedies in life. ... ”)

Thank you very much for your attention.

References:

- YOUNG Michael: The Rise Of The Meritocracy, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick (U.S.A.) and London (U.K.) 2002.

The 50 cartoons come from various sources and where it was possible I will indicate them: all cartoons with a blue background are from the ‘Private Eye’ magazine, London, U.K., those with a green background are from ‘The New Yorker’ magazine, New York, U.S.A., some are from the ‘The Guardian’ and ‘The Observer’ newspapers (U.K.) and all the other ones with a pink background are of different origins most of which I could no longer trace.

The quotations have been collected over the years from a range of sources most of which could unfortunately no longer be identified.