

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Systems theory was first introduced around the middle of the last century. This theory (a combination of general systems theory, cybernetics and communication theory) caused a revolution and a paradigm change in the field of the social sciences and offered a new way to explain the world and to think. The isolated individual approach to understanding gave way to a more relational approach in which environment and context were considered of utmost importance. This new model for thought, the systems model, was conceived to be applicable to many disciplines (physics, biology, medicine, psychology, etc.) using a more real, complete and integrative approach.

The educational system was not left out, and although it always seems to lag behind when it comes to innovation, there are examples of the application of the systems model to teaching and educational situations (Colom 1982, Escudero, 1981, Berbaum 1982, Gimeno 1981, Titone 1982). UNESCO even recommended the promotion of the systemic approach in education in 1979.

Systemic thought, as opposed to reductionist thought, is based on the idea of a system, an entity whose functions and existence are considered as a "whole" through the interaction of its parts. This approach, which went beyond what is understood as an "isolated" event, made it possible to use more complex and profound patterns and models. Its goals was to study relationships, patterns of interaction, and the structures that maintained them in order to understand their complexity and be able to modify them.

Today more than ever, we live as systems in a world of interconnected systems, where it is increasingly likely that we will be affected by events that are far from us in terms of time and space. Linear causality and deterministic thought cannot explain the majority of the things that happen.

We have been taught to think logically, to analyze and take events apart to better study them so that we can put them back together again later. But this approach to thinking is inadequate when we work within systems (families, schools, etc.) where certain properties emerge that could not be found in their isolated components. We can never understand these properties if we only analyze their parts. Events and behaviors are never isolated phenomena and must be understood according to the situation and the context in which they develop. Understanding a specific behavior requires understanding its context; studying an isolated behavior can only lead to a static and individualized view that does not contemplate the dynamic and relational elements that are involved.

Back in 1981, Watzlawick, a specialist in human communications theory, pointed out the importance of context for understanding any human behavior: "a phenomenon cannot be explained if the frame of observation is not broad enough to include the context in which that phenomenon takes place." Bateson, an anthropologist, introduced the concept of "context marker" to refer to the set of signs that make it possible to differentiate contexts and respond in different ways to the same stimuli in different situations. Therefore, behavior, violent or otherwise, is so complex that it cannot be understood without a complete and detailed study of context and relationships.

To understand any interpersonal relationship we must always keep in mind the context in which it developed. Any disruptive, problematic or dysfunctional behavior that emerges in educational settings can only be understood from a relational point of view and as an adaptive response to the characteristics of the context (family

and school). The more we can contextualize a symptom, the more information we will have about the problem. In this way we can better understand a situation and subsequently respond more effectively to try to modify it.

This new systemic perspective requires a change in methodology. The research being done in this area studies relationships both inside and outside of the system since they are, after all, responsible for keeping the symptoms of dysfunction alive. In 1981, P. Watzlawick referred to this change: "... if a person exhibits altered behavior ... and we broaden the scope of our research to include the effects of this behavior on others ... the observer would go from a deductive study of the mind to the study of the observable manifestations of the relationship ... ." This model would lead us towards perceiving violent and dysfunctional behaviors as relational. Their origin would no longer be considered to be within the persons but rather between the person and the systems, in other words, in the "relationship." Adolescents, their teachers and their families are not isolated social entities, they are systems that are required to interact. The purpose of our research has been to define the structure, rules and values of the systems as these are the only tools that we have to try to modify relationships and relieve suffering.