

THEORY AND PRACTICE

Person-centred approach in schools: Is it the answer to disruptive behaviour in our classrooms?

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Abstract

The person-centred approach based on the work of Carl Rogers (1902–1987) was designed to promote openness, growth and change in understanding the counseling processes. It is an approach which is practical and helpful in education, because it can solve some of the problems outside the curriculum faced by students. For example it provides a way of understanding and solving issues of relationships, emotional development and ethical behaviour that seem to be at the root of most of the problems in school and society at large. However, it is essential to incorporate some accelerating ingredients to inform conditions which facilitate growth. These include acceptance, empathy and positive regard from others. For example it has been realized that if an individual is denied acceptance and positive regard they fail to relate the meaning of their experience to themselves and positive growth in such a relevant way is inhibited. However, the approach is faced with some drawbacks which will be explored. Teaching today in British schools is a very challenging job. It is becoming increasingly difficult to establish a classroom environment that is free from disruptive behaviour. The person-centred approach, where the student as the client is made responsible of his or her own behaviour, could be part of the solution. This could be the focus of an educational yet assertive discipline program. This paper will discuss the person-centred approach in counseling touching on the process of the helping relationship, empathy, congruence, unconditional positive regard as important concepts of the approach and some suggestions on classroom management.

Keywords: *Person-centred approach, disruptive classroom behaviour, counseling*

The person-centred approach

As opposed to the other therapeutic approaches, the person-centred therapy is founded on the principles of attitudes, and based on the three “core conditions”

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of congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard, which were reduced from the original six and which the counselor alone brings to the relationship (Carkhuff, 1969a, 1969b). The person-centred approach is not concerned with finding out the causes of the problem and finding the best solution possible. It is the individual client, in an open and accepting relationship with the therapist, who is empowered to take control over his or her own healing. Healing is then seen as something which must originate from the client and not from any professional technique provided by the helper (Barnard, 1984). The helper is only meant to be a useful companion in the process. Person-centred therapy does not therefore have any specific techniques which are applied in every situation; each helper chooses what is most appropriate according to the case at hand (Clarke, 1994, p. 1).

Empathy

One of the most important core conditions is empathy. Although congruence and unconditional positive regard sometimes take an important position, empathy takes the highest priority (Patterson, 1980). Empathy basically is the attempt by the helper to enter the world of the client and really come to know it (Thorne, 1984). The helper therefore in a sense enters into the “shoes” of the client. And according to Rogers it is “to sense the client’s private world as if were your own, but without losing the ‘as if’ quality” (Rogers, 1957, p. 99). It is not an easy task to get as close as possible to another person’s way of seeing reality or construct system and here lies the difficult part for the helper. It even becomes more difficult especially when one still wishes to hold onto one’s own reality. True empathic understanding development can take a long time to achieve.

It is important for the helper to feel comfortable in their own identity for them to give empathy (Mearns & Thorne, 1988). It is thus basically important for the helper to hold on his own identity, because this will be necessary in creating the needed growth in the client’s self-concept. An important condition for empathy is that it must be accurate and that it must be made known to the client. Both of these skills can be learned and they have been known to make a big difference to the existing relationship between a client and the helper (Clarke, 1994, p. 2; Nelson, 2000, p. 43).

Congruence

Congruence, sometimes called genuineness, is a characteristic of being transparent, real, and honest in a helping relationship. In simple terms, the helper must be able to be genuine about the way he is feeling and let the client be aware of this, rather than play professional and keep the feeling to himself. Dryden (1990) argues that “the helpers should be ready to be as ready as is therapeutically desirable to their clients to a level of displaying their personal and private experiences to their clients, if the situation demands” (p. 17).

Normally empathy is conveyed through active listening to the client while genuineness is about listening to oneself, i.e., being aware of everything that is

going on inside oneself. It means being open to one's own experience in total and also ensuring that the client is aware of it and so benefits from it. The helper therefore should be open to his feelings as much as possible, be himself and put up no professional mask in the relationship. Counselling will be inhibited if the helper feels one way about the client but acts in a different way. He must never pretend but be genuine because this makes the client feel safer. This increases the chances of the client being more ready for self exploration (Clarke, 1994, p. 3). However, congruence does not imply that the helper completely denies his own feelings, but is only willing to risk sharing his feelings when they can improve the relationship because they are expressed genuinely (Rogers, 1962).

Being genuine does not mean disclosing to the client negative feelings on the helping session. It would therefore not be in order for the helper to express feelings that he genuinely feels at any one time, as this may not be of benefit to the client. Congruence is perceived by professionals as the most threatening amongst the core conditions especially to those professional who may be used to well-rehearsed techniques and thus feel uncomfortable behaving in such an open and honest way with clients. Congruence cannot be acquired through reading (Clarke, 1994, p. 4). It is important to acknowledge that a person will struggle to work with integrity to the degree that there is a conflict between the values he/she holds and the values that drive the approach.

Unconditional positive regard

This is a non-judgmental warmth or acceptance. This is the skill of communicating with a deep and genuine caring for the client as a person. This means that the client can feel received in a humane way which is non-threatening. There is no judgment of the client's feelings, thoughts, and behaviour whether good or bad. Though it is not possible to force affection (though we can pretend if dishonest) it is possible though to feel for the client, see them as having the ability to direct their own life and behave towards them accordingly. This shows trust in the client's capability and tendency to actualize (Tudor et al., 2004, p. 43).

Helpers communicate via their behaviour that they value clients as they are and therefore can feel free in expressing feelings and experience without risking the loss of the helper's acceptance. The helper will accept and respect the client as a person without regard to race religion, political, sexual or personal background. According to Rogers this condition is summarized thus: "to the extent that the therapist finds himself experiencing a warm acceptance of each aspect of a client's experience as being a part of that client, he is experiencing unconditional positive regard" (Rogers, 1957, p. 98).

Consequently, even though it may not be an easy step to take initially, the helper should be able to accept the client without seeking to approve of his or her behaviour, accepting the client as a person of worth. Liestaer (1984) argued on the obvious difficulty of total unconditionality. Total unconditionality was seen as impossible to achieve (Clarke, 1994, p. 3). Even if it were possible, it would be likely to be dysfunctional.

Advantages and disadvantages of the person-centred approach

In the person-centered approach no condition is attached. Therefore, a helper should display a caring respect for the clients, which allows them to be themselves and overcome the temptations of criticizing their behaviour or suggesting to know a better way of solving their problems. There should be respect and no judgment, however bad the behaviour, thus separating the person from the bad behaviour. But the respect is not a condition for an acceptable behaviour and neither is it an approval of bad behaviour. Therefore drawing a line between what a person does and who they are, it becomes possible to show warmth at the same time as setting boundaries, and expressing different opinions and wishes.

The core conditions stated above of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard are very important qualities that any person would desire to receive from fellow human beings. All human beings wish to have an environment where there is acceptance, non-judgement and warmth. The core conditions enhance effective and caring relationships. They are not only useful and applicable in counselling but to all dealings with human beings outside the counselling room. In such an environment a person will reduce the need to defend his/her self concept and begin to accept and value him/herself. He/she now has the capability of re-evaluating him/herself and is relaxed. Therefore he/she feels the motivation to focus on the present and ready to make use of the helper.

However, a helper is in an awkward position because he/she is not supposed to seek to guide a client to a particular goal, while at the same time he/she is explicitly and actively guiding the client towards contact with his/her client organismic self and away from external authorities. Therefore, the person-centred approach is not a neutral method, as is claimed to be. If it is taken as a philosophy of life and not just a psychotherapeutic approach chances are that it will foster a quasi-religious movement or a sect with all the dangers of dogmas and rituals. This would reduce it to the level of faith, magic and religion (O'Hara, 1995; Vitz, 1994).

Use of this approach in the classroom

The Assertive discipline plan was first developed in 1976 with the aim of managing classroom behaviour. This plan has today taken the centre stage in managing the challenging pupil behaviour by holding pupils responsible for their own action. Such a proactive approach would help the teacher create a cooperative environment, where pupils learn to make the right choice of behaviour. This choice would then allow effective teaching and learning, together with academic and social growth of pupils.

The teacher and the pupil are always in contact, and this is very important for effective teaching. The classroom can be referred to as a socio-technical system in organizational terms, where delivering the curriculum interacts with the social needs of the pupils (and teacher) to form an interdependent system. Egan (1990)

gave very useful ways of showing concern for pupils. He identified respect, genuineness and empathy as important skills of building good relationships.

These skills can be demonstrated when teachers interact with pupils. Here two persons are in contact, teachers show respect for pupils, when they value them, care about their well being and feel that each pupil is worth the time spent with him or her. Teachers should also show genuineness by not playing roles or putting up unnecessary barriers between themselves and pupils, thus teachers should be open, honest and willing to share their own experience with the pupils. It is also important to be consistent in values and behaviour, and not for example saying one thing and doing the other. Empathy is shown when a teacher appears to understand how a pupil feel, so the teacher is able to see the world as the pupil see it. The more the teacher is able to see the world from the pupil's perspective, the more likely the teacher is able to help.

These three skills when used by teachers impact well on showing a concern for pupils when teaching. Finally the Rogers' concern of unconditional positive regard is very important in this relationship. Pupils should believe that the teacher feels positively towards them. This should be unconditional and not depend on the pupil fulfilling all the things a teacher likes, for an ideal pupil (Fox, 1993).

As previously mentioned, the person-centered approach is founded on the belief that individuals can be trusted to solve their own problems without the helper directly getting involved. This is assumed possible because the individual is the only one who really understands the problem better than anybody else. In secondary schools, this approach does not go down well with the premise of the helper's purpose. However, the relationship between the helper and client in this approach is very crucial and accommodative.

An important physical feature in many classrooms is the decorations in many forms of paintings, and pictures on the walls, potted plants and flowers. All these have important roles in welcoming the students and making them feel comfortable in the classroom environment. The classroom sitting arrangement takes care of individual territory. The quiet atmosphere in the classroom is important for concentration. They also feel needed and valued.

However, the way both teachers and pupils relate to each other is more important, for example if a teacher wants to make an acceptable standard of behaviour it is important that he or she lets pupils know their feelings and why standards are important. The teacher should then seek the opinion of the pupils through allowing them to set their own standards. What is agreed upon includes action to be taken in case of defiance and the consequences, but this should not consist of rules cast in stone, they should be flexible to accommodate new experiences.

Also it is important that pupils learning and teaching is student-centered so that their views are taken into consideration on matters regarding their education. When pupils are part and parcel of decisions made they feel they have a role to play and the responsibility attached. It is also good to allow democracy to grow in schools which allows pupils to freely raise their concerns and worries, after which remedy is sought. This has the result of the pupils acknowledging and respecting

their own perceptions. There is a feeling of security and worth by the pupils when their views and ideas are taken and respected. This works well for example by bringing objectives to the open, agreeing how they could be achieved, methods or approaches to use and allowing pupils to express their wishes and their fears (Hill, 1994).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship that exists in the person-centered therapy between a helper and a client is such that the client's world is the central context for being in the relationship. Ideally it is hoped that upon entering the person-centered therapy, clients will experience the three core conditions of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy. A teacher can approach the management of student behaviour in a more proactive manner through building a positive and a trusting relationship. The teacher establishes himself/herself as a teacher who cares about the pupil's well being in and out of school. This can help create an atmosphere in which the student self-esteem can flourish.

The core conditions then interact with the clients conditions of worth, which kick start a helping relationship within which change and growth can then occur.

What is of importance to the helper is the establishment of an appropriate environment under which the self-healing process occurs. Therefore, the person-centered helper is not likely to offer ready made solutions or to direct the client to follow a particular coping strategy. What the helper does is capitalize on a trusting relationship through which the worth of a client is recognized and therefore issues which are of concern are sorted out. Overall, the client is assumed to possess the ability to come up with a solution to their problem, the helper only acts as an important companion in the healing process.

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