

WHERE HAVE I HEARD THAT SONG BEFORE?

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Abstract

This article is a personal response to the theme of this issue — a theme which is not entirely “new”. The writer remains unconvinced that counsellors should become more like teachers, but rather suggests that they continue to relate to their clients in a very special way that helps to release their potential not only to do their own thing but also to make someone else’s thing their thing. Counsellors are urged to discover themselves first, then turn their attention to ways in which they might effectively help others.

Résumé

Cet article représente une réponse personnelle au thème de ce numéro — un thème qui n’est pas nécessairement nouveau. L’auteur n’est pas convaincu que les conseillers doivent devenir davantage des enseignants. Plutôt, il suggère que les conseillers doivent continuer à favoriser l’actualisation et l’épanouissement de leurs clients et à les encourager à s’intéresser activement aux projets de leurs proches. On encourage d’abord les conseillers à se mieux connaître puis à diriger leur attention aux modalités de leurs interventions pour aider les autres.

One lesson history has taught the writer is that much of what is considered to be “new” is really quite old, especially that which we consider to be new in the areas of human behavior, human development, and human growth. Even in the physical sciences most of our “discoveries” are merely observations of what was always there. Usually we are so busy looking for something else that we often fail to see what is simply there to be observed. Certainly Rontgen did not seek to discover X-rays. He observed something that had happened unexpectedly, as did Fleming in the “discovery” of penicillin.

In reading the guidance and counselling literature of the last few years, it appears that much of what is being presented as new is basically a rehashing of where we were several decades ago. The writer is especially interested in these occurrences because he was one of those presenting something “new” at that time. It was, of course, no more “new” than what is now “new”.

In the last few days the writer has had three experiences which buttress these feelings. They will serve as a jumping off point for this paper.

1. The first and last few lines of the writer’s first major book, *Teacher Counselling*, published in 1950, seem to stand out. The first paragraph states that “This book was written for teachers — a group of people who, in an undramatic fashion, daily leave a major mark on the structure of our American society. A good teacher is often the

deciding factor in making a child a positive influence for social betterment. On the other hand, a neurotic, poorly trained teacher may warp the minds of many children beyond repair.” The final sentence in the book said “The key figure in the school personnel program is the teacher, and the training of every teacher must be such that he can function effectively as a personnel worker.”

2. The writer and his wife, as co-therapists, see a number of couples for psychotherapy. Last week one of the women, a special education teacher, said, “Dugald, can’t you make John (her husband) understand that I have to work with Joe (an emotionally disturbed boy), and there is no point in referring him to a counsellor because all counsellors do now is fill out forms, reschedule classes and all that stuff. The only people who really work with the kids are some of us teachers, especially the teachers in special education.”

3. In the invitation to write this paper an associate editor of *The Canadian Counsellor* is quoted as saying, “It appears to me that we are shifting away from an emphasis on the counsellor relating to clients in a special way that will release the clients’ potential so that they can do ‘their own thing’. In shifting away from an emphasis on relational and process factors more emphasis seems to be placed on what the writer calls the content of counselling activities. Clearly there is a trend toward the counsellor functioning more as a teacher who helps the client re-examine values,

learn interpersonal skills, and develop understandings. This, then, becomes the content of counselling."

These three examples, it seems, say something about the past and the present in American and Canadian schools and what they say makes our so called progress in education seem somewhat doubtful. The writer agrees pretty much with what he wrote well over a quarter century ago (although he now would use the pronoun "they" instead of "he"). He sees little change in the education of teachers so that they might be able to work more effectively, in a human relations sense. The comment of the afore mentioned client is one that the writer now hears as often as he heard years ago. In other words, counsellors do very little counselling, and their functions are not distinctly different from those of teachers and administrators, as are those, for example, of school nurses and school social workers. The comment of the editor is a "Catch 22" sort of thing. The writer does not see teachers doing much to help children "re-examine values, learn interpersonal skills, and develop understandings." The writer had *always* thought that these were among the primary functions of counsellors. The counsellor, it seems, is to become a teacher of something which is currently "taught" by neither counsellors nor teachers!

By expanding upon these three experiences it will be possible to illustrate the writer's feelings and thoughts about where we have been and where we now are in the field of counselling in American and Canadian schools.

1. We are still cursed by a teacher-counsellor dichotomy which is based on the assumption (which the writer once shared) that teachers have discernable functions quite different from the equally discernable functions of counsellors, but in actual practice "teacher" cannot be distinguished that easily from "counsellor". The content of the high school teacher of European history is, understandably enough, history, and the skills and knowledge that such teachers acquire are not those acquired by an effective counsellor. On the other hand, the special education teacher who works with a small group of emotionally disturbed children (like the aforementioned client), is very much like a counsellor, and the skills and knowledge that she should acquire differ little from those of a counsellor. Then there are counsellors who literally teach vocational and educational information, with minimal attention to the well being of the student. They are not much different from the history teacher who lectures to a large class on history.

In *Teacher Counselling* teachers were viewed as becoming more like counsellors in that they would be working with children rather than with subjects. Their basic goal would be to help

children become more knowledgeable, more effective, and more caring human beings who had a positive impact on the society of which they were a part. The subjects such teachers taught would be vehicles by which these goals could be achieved. This was obviously an unrealistic goal, since the functions and the education of teachers are centered on a content which is not that of human behavior, deviations in human behavior, empathy and understanding in human relationships, interpersonal skills, coping with society, learning how to grow and develop, and so on. A history teacher has neither the skills, the understanding, nor the time to work with an intelligent boy who is failing in every subject, a pregnant girl who doesn't want her mother to know about her condition, or a withdrawn boy who rarely speaks to anyone. Yet there are some teachers who are more capable of working with, and who spend more time with such children than do some counsellors, many of whom immediately refer the child who really needs counselling. Thus we should probably soft pedal the "teacher becoming like a counsellor" and "counsellor becoming like a teacher" and give greater attention to just who these people are, what their professional education was like, and what they consider to be their professional tasks.

2. Possibly the real issue behind the hassle about teachers becoming counsellors or counsellors becoming teachers is the broader question of the basic purpose of the school, and how different school personnel try to implement (or impede) the policies and goals of the school. Surely all would agree that the school should, among other things, help children learn to read and write, communicate with and relate to other people, gain some understanding of themselves and others, develop personal and vocational skills, appreciate and understand other societies as well as their own, and develop a sense of responsibility for others as well as for themselves. Yet there are millions of adolescents and young adults in the United States and Canada who read only inadequately, if at all; who are incapable of communicating in an intelligent fashion, especially in writing; whose knowledge about themselves and the world around them (gleaned more from television than from the school) is totally inadequate; who relate poorly with other people; whose perception of themselves is largely negative; and who are woefully unprepared for any kind of occupation. The writer is far from convinced that the modern school, with all of its psychological knowledge, with all of its technology, with all of its physical plants, with all of its better educated teachers, with all of its vast multitude of theories and concepts about children and behavior and learning, is doing any better job than it did several years ago.

Counsellors then, must make up their minds as to just what it is that they can do more effectively than can other school personnel. They often appear to be much more willing to perform non-counselling functions in the school than teachers are willing to perform non-teaching functions. They sometimes seem to bob around like yo-yo's doing whatever superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and university professors ask them to do, regardless of whether they are capable of or interested in doing what is asked. Children are the primary customers of counsellors, but it is very rarely that counsellors check with children when they are trying to determine their professional functions.

3. It is hoped that counsellors will continue to "relate in a special way" with children, adolescents and young adults. The pregnant girl, the failing boy, and the withdrawn boy that were mentioned earlier, need someone to relate to in a special way. It is possible that they are in difficulty precisely because they have never been close to an adult who was able to relate to them in such a way. Counsellors do not "teach" individuals, but rather help them to learn. They have the time, or at least they should have the time to relate to children in a non-teaching way. The fact that teachers sometimes, in addition to teaching a few courses, do this sort of task says much about the quality of the teachers and the quality of the counsellors. It is as if some counsellors had to start teaching history because the teacher was busy doing something else. There appears to be more teacher-counsellors than there are counsellor-teachers!

It is also hoped that counsellors will continue to help children to release their potential not only to do their own thing, but also to make someone else's thing their thing! One of the great mistakes that we make in school is to assume that we much "teach" in order that children will learn. Possibly the reason many children learn so little is because we spend all our time trying to teach them rather than finding out who they are and where they are in order to help them learn what they want to learn. Young children *learn* to speak and to walk at a very early age, and their parents do not *teach* them. Some children, however, will learn faster because their parents provide a milieu in which their potential capacity to read and to walk can be realized more easily.

The writer can remember years ago, while working in a school in a mining town in the Canadian Rockies, trying to figure out how to get Grade V children to have some appreciation of Shakespeare. The approach used was to point out to the children that while they might think that Shakespeare was a funny sort of Englishman of long ago, who wrote equally funny things, he actually was quite a tough customer who used some pretty dirty language, even though we might

not recognize it as such. Pretty soon the whole class was poring over Shakespeare trying to find the dirty words and the words or phrases that might mean something other than what one might think. Some of the children started quoting Shakespeare, and we ended up doing some rather comical and abbreviated versions of Shakespearean plays. These were children whose parents could barely speak English, who thought of poetry or plays as something for unreal people. Did the writer teach them? No, of course not! What he did, however, was provide an atmosphere in which they would develop their own interest. By opening the window for them they could look out and say, "Hey, that looks great — let's do something about it." He was called a teacher, but he was being more of a counsellor because he was trying to help them to expand their world, to realize that there is excitement in the world of books and poetry and plays, and that one must be able to read in order to sample that excitement.

The children were also helped in re-examining their values — but re-examining does not mean assuming that the writer's values are to be emulated, and that the goal is to get them to accept his values. Some of the children showed no interest in Shakespeare, and that was their right. Some girls who sleep around with boys may re-examine their values and keep on sleeping around; an adolescent boy may look more closely at just why he smokes marijuana, and keep on smoking it; a student who wants to quit high school as soon as possible may become even more certain that what she wants to do is quit; a pregnant 15 year old girl who wants to keep her baby may become more happy with this decision. Too frequently both teachers and counsellors impose their values rather than help children to re-examine their values, with the choice of what they do afterwards left up to them. It might be beneficial for some teachers and counsellors to do some personal re-examining to find out if they are capable of helping children really "examine" values.

It is doubtful that a day goes past in a school in which there are not numerous non-curricular incidents which might be utilized to help children develop broader understandings about themselves and others, and to re-examine their values. Boys may be overheard taunting girls about being ineffective because they are girls; racial and religious slurs may be thrown at some children; a child might be noticed sharing his lunch with another child; some children may ask, "Why do we have all these stupid rules at school?"; several children may talk about seeing a dog injured by a hit-and-run driver; some adolescents may make it clear that they believe the only way to be really "in" is to smoke dope; some girls may indicate that they believe the new sexual freedom means that they are available for any boy who wants them;

some students may obviously be embarrassed and uncomfortable at a school dance.

There are hundreds of simple examples like these, where the needs of children are clear. Who does something about it? Too frequently teachers do not have the time, even if they did have the requisite understanding, skill and interest. These are not the basic tasks that teachers are paid to do. They are, however, the tasks for which counsellors should assume some responsibility, but often nothing is done. The crucial needs of the children in American and Canadian schools have gone unanswered, and they still go unanswered.

In all of these examples, of course, children could be helped to develop understandings and to re-examine their own values. An algebra teacher should be able to help a child have a better understanding of the relevance of algebra and a counsellor should be able to help a child have a better understanding of his anger toward his mother. Both would be "developing understandings", but they are different kinds of understandings, and a teacher who might do a fine job of developing a rationale for the study of algebra might do a very poor job of developing a better understanding of the reason for anger toward mother.

The "skills approach to counselling" seems chilling. The writer has no argument with the child's need to learn coping skills and knowledge or the counsellor's role in helping children learn these essentials, but somehow the "teaching" of these "skills" sounds too much like what has been wrong with schools far too long. The various packaged means of instant mental health are as suspicious as the various drugs which give us instant cures for whatever ails us. There are certain basic human values that have helped us for centuries, and will continue to help us, not only to cope (which has a certain negative connotation) with what is out there, but to expand ourselves so that we can do something about changing it. "Coping" is merely survival. It seldom does anything to modify or change that which has to be coped with. Children, of course, must learn how to cope but more must be done to help the school to do some changing so that a greater number of children will learn and grow as a result of their contact with it. At present we waste untold thousands of British Thermal Units of energy and an equal number of hours in coping with its nonsense.

Compassion, kindness, courage, integrity, sensitivity, fairness, patience — these characteristics are learned, not taught, and they are learned primarily by being in contact with individuals who reflect these traits. It is hoped that counsellors and teachers will do more to examine themselves, and if they see their function as helping children to become self-actualized, free human beings, in whatever they are doing, they will consider the example they set as a fellow human as being a crucial factor in human development. We do not learn courage from a teacher who refuses to speak up about the glaring evidence of racial bigotry, we do not learn tenderness from one who is afraid of her own feelings, we do not learn integrity from the counsellor who shares private and confidential information with school administrators, and we do not learn sensitivity from one who hears only the sound of his own voice.

If children are to develop into the decent human beings that they can become, they must experience the human touch. Thousands of children, unfortunately, do not get this special kind of relationship with their parents, many of whom are still children themselves. Some forty years ago the writer was convinced that the most glaring omission in schools was the presence of teachers who were warm, loving human beings. The reason the writer moved in the direction of counselling was because he felt that he could have more time to devote to that which he believed was most crucial. But despite all the specialized personnel, counsellors, psychologists and remedial people, children are still saying, "They don't hear me — they don't like me — they don't think I'm worth much . . ." The basic and essential characteristic of those who call themselves counsellors, far more important than their degrees and their skills, is an answer to the question, "What kind of human being are you?" That question should be given primary attention in the education and the evaluation of counsellors.

Let us make sure that there are at least some men and women in our schools, who, regardless of their occupational title, put the physical and psychological well being of the child as their primary concern, and let us be even more certain that these people possess the requisite skills, knowledge and personal characteristics. Counsellors and other school personnel must find themselves first, then turn their attention to ways in which they can help others to find themselves.