

Counselling – A key part of the work of an itinerant teacher

"First of all it is simple. A very simple approach, actually. But I think it is not easy. I think people make especially Westerners, the false equation between being simple and being easy. It is not easy." (S. de Shazer in the Interview with J. Hargens)

Counselling makes fundamentally different demands on teachers than classroom teaching

"I do counselling", or "I am a counsellor"; sometimes, we even come from a "counselling and learning support centre" - whatever we call it, counselling work is an established part of special needs teaching. It is made clear to newcomers to the profession that they will have to spend some of their lessons – wherever they are employed – on counselling. Whether by accident or design, the development of special needs facilities is also a trend towards counselling centres. The identification of special needs in particular support areas no longer leads automatically to education in a special school. Special needs teachers venture out into ordinary schools and other special schools to focus on particular aspects of the support issue.

The State School for the Visually Impaired has been active as a special school and counselling centre in Schleswig-Holstein for over twenty years. All the staff at this establishment would agree that counselling and support – in any type of school – impose different requirements from teaching. Teachers learn how to prepare good lessons and how to present material in such a way that pupils absorb and retain it. They study various ways of communicating knowledge. But does this make them good counsellors?

We can provide information on the design of media and materials for the visually impaired. We know what aspects have to be considered for visually impaired pupils to be able to participate in lessons. We are (or should at least strive to be) specialists in teaching the visually impaired, and our cooperation partners in the schools expect the "expert" from the "blind school" to come and tell them how to manage their teaching properly. Of course, parents and staff at kindergarten level also expect someone to come and show them the "right" way to deal with a partially-sighted child. We are in a position to assess the activities of our cooperation partners in terms of their educational quality for visually impaired pupils.

If a special need is identified in relation to "sight", contact will be established even where no counselling need has been registered. As "experts" in teaching the visually impaired, we have a responsibility to

ensure that the necessary information on visual impairment “reaches” the teaching staff.

Now it is one thing to know what is the “right” approach to working with visually impaired children and young people, and quite another thing to implement this advice. This is where the real counselling activity begins: finding out from our partners what constitutes the “right” thing in the particular situation, and what is helping or hindering the implementation of ideas for teaching the visually impaired. This requires not only information, but also skill and empathy. We operate in this area of tension between the transfer of knowledge and expertise on the one hand (where we teachers feel more at home) and counselling on the other.

I do counselling - somehow

We often work with our colleagues in ordinary schools or cooperating special schools over a long period of time. We have developed good relationships, stable and based on trust. In this context, counselling can easily take on the character of a friendly conversation. In a somewhat intuitive way, we try to balance professional behaviour with public relations. We know our colleagues “on site”, we know their strengths and weaknesses, and we have our favourite colleagues, with whom we know the pupils are in good hands. But we also have our “bêtes noires”, who “never apply anything” and “accept nothing”.

With this way of working, it is hard to tell why our counselling succeeds in certain cases. Was it because of our good relationship with our colleague? Were our suggestions so skilful and persuasive? Was it perhaps just a case of the right people in the right place at the right time? The situation is aggravated by the fact that we only rarely establish criteria for “successful” counselling before the event. Does success mean our partners implementing our suggestions on a one for one basis, or the pupils responding “well” to the teaching? With such an intuitive approach, it is difficult to identify useful working strategies or to avoid unproductive measures. It is much easier for us to identify ineffective counselling: ideas are not taken up, changes are rejected or important aspects ignored.

Newcomers to the profession have a problem starting out in counselling work without many years of experience. The successful activities of more experienced colleagues can seem like an unattainable miracle. It is hard to train younger colleagues if we are unable to pass on any strategies or techniques.

Can counselling be learnt?

Is it possible to acquire counselling expertise: are there concepts or methods to enable even new teachers to gain a foothold in this field? Is it practical to offer tools for counselling?

Just as a good teacher needs a plan for his teaching, and knowledge of tried and tested materials, a counsellor needs a counselling plan. This includes ideas on how to arrange successful counselling discussions, knowing what conversation techniques are useful, and how to describe our role in supporting a visually impaired pupil. In the past, conversation techniques have shown themselves to be valuable tools for avoiding the faults and inadequacies of a more intuitive approach.

There are various approaches to counselling work in an educational context. For many years now, the staff of the School for the Visually Impaired have been involved with the application of resource-oriented counselling. Alongside presentations to the whole teaching staff, there is an opportunity to attend further training with Jürgen Hargens roughly four times a year. The methods applied with this approach, and the underlying concept, have been of practical help to a number of our colleagues.

A detailed description of "resource-oriented short-term counselling" can be found in the literature. For example, Spiess (Dortmund, 1998) presents this concept in an educational context. This is a good point at which to bring together the aspects that are important for our practical work.

What am I now – a teacher or a counsellor?

In contrast to a "classical" counselling situation, the educational counsellor comes in even when the "client" does not call him. He is the special needs teacher, the "expert" in teaching the visually impaired, providing information on visual impairment, the necessary changes to teaching techniques and methods, and the established materials. He is responsible for ensuring that this information "gets through" to the teaching staff or the parents. As I understand it, however, "getting through" does not (yet) mean being implemented. It is a matter of making the available information accessible to our cooperation partners, to broaden their scope for decision-making. For example, they need to know what aids there are, how materials should be designed or what light is appropriate for a visually impaired pupil to be able to take part in the lessons. They need to be told – in a comprehensible and accessible way – what insights and theories we have concerning the functional vision¹ of the pupils.

To meet this objective, it is very helpful to be a teacher. It is a question of diagnosis and of communicating content and information – tasks that teachers are trained for.

This definition says nothing about the impact on teaching or the domestic situation. The responsibility for teaching and for caring for the pupils rests with the teachers and the parents. They need to know what the "expert"

¹ The term "functional vision" is used to describe how a person uses his/her sight under everyday conditions, what functions are used and what aids might be useful.

suggests, but they need to decide for themselves how to behave in their own areas of responsibility.

The difference between the roles of *expert* and *counsellor* is an important factor in helping the day-to-day process. It makes an important distinction between responding to requests for advice and suggestions and using particular questioning techniques to support cooperation partners in defining their own goals and ideas. Both can be either helpful or useless: the decisive factor is to be aware of acting in one or other capacity.

Basic assumptions of the expert :	Basic assumptions of the counsellor :
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The expert is responsible for providing information• There is the "right" approach and the "optimum" approach• The expert helps to diagnose and assess• Suggestions are made for optimising the situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• The cooperation partners are responsible for their actions• What works in our dealings with the child?• What are the goals of the cooperation partners?• What options do the cooperation partners have in view?

There is no doubt that these two dimensions become mixed up in contact situations, and are often hard to keep apart. But nothing could be easier than asking people which "person" they would find more useful in answering their own questions – the expert or the counsellor?

Does the model fit the work of a teacher?

Tackling the model of resource-oriented counselling also requires us to look at the underlying human element. Is the model at all suitable for the context of "counselling of teaching staff by special needs teachers"?

The philosophical background and the constructivist ideas behind it have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Spiess, 1998; Eberling / Hargens, 2000). We will mention here only those aspects that are important for the work of educational counsellors.

All educationalists working in counselling situations will be only too aware that cooperation partners are generally very happy to talk about problems, difficulties and insoluble issues. The question of the causes behind the greatest obstacles to work, the most negative situations and the most urgent problems are usually discussed in detail. The idea that when you know why a problem exists, you can also resolve it is known as the "problem/solution approach" (DeJong, Berg, 1998). "The key assumption here is that *there is a necessary connection between a problem and its solution*" (ibid. p.29). This contrasts with the model of resource-oriented counselling, where the focus is less on problems and more on solutions and the strengths of the partners. The first question is not "what is not working?" but "what is working well?"

This idea of “finding solutions” is closely linked to another very helpful aspect of the model. Directing attention at resources and opportunities also means agreeing what goals the partner is trying to attain. Just as it often seems much easier to talk about problems, it is easier for many people to talk about what they do not want. Getting into a discussion about what people do want to have or achieve shifts attention to the “desired future” and increases the sense of responsibility for a person’s own actions. The task of the counsellor is to support the other person in realising what situation they want to be in, and to draw up some initial steps.

In the context of resource-oriented counselling, the other person is always the expert on his/her own actions and questions. As counsellors, we can use appropriate conversation techniques to support the process of “finding solutions”, but the solutions belong to the other person.

There is a useful distinction between acceptance and respect. It is next to impossible to accept all the opinions, attitudes or actions of our cooperation partners, but it is essential to respect them. This attitude implies an assumption that my partners have good reasons – even though I may not always understand or accept them – for acting as they do.

Practical effects

Some questioning techniques from resource-oriented counselling, such as the “miracle question”, are already quite familiar. Conversation techniques are the expression of an attitude that I have described in some aspects. These techniques can be understood and used in conjunction with the underlying philosophy.

They can come up in a variety of situations and help to support our cooperation partners in finding solutions to their questions. For this, it is important to practise using these techniques. As with driving a car, many aspects of counselling need to be both done and observed. For most people, these actions – when they have been practised enough – become second nature and happen automatically.

- Compliments and respectful, appreciative remarks – Complimenting cooperation partners on their efforts on behalf of the child, or expressing appreciation to parents for the way they care for their child, are essential factors for successful counselling. The effect is twofold: the partners’ efforts to improve their situation are acknowledged, and counsellors turn their own attention to the positive aspects.
- Questions about exceptions – This question directs the partner’s attention to situations in the past where the problem did not exist, to investigate more closely what characterised these situations.

- Miracle questions – The miracle question is the classical question in short-term consulting. The aim is to stimulate the cooperation partner to outline a desired future.
- Scaling questions – These questions invite the partner to rank certain aspects on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing the worst situation and 10 the most desirable. Rankings are a useful way of making complex aspects more concrete and accessible to the cooperation partner and the counsellor.
- Reframing – This method “offers” other points of view, assessments or interpretations of a question. This should not be confused with simple “positive thinking”, regardless of the context and the questions in hand; rather, it is intended to provide a change of perspective.
- Coping questions – These questions aim to identify the strategies that have helped the partners to deal with the situation, even though it seemed so hopeless.

Viewed as aids and tools, these conversation techniques have shown themselves to be very useful for counselling by special needs teachers, as happens at the State School for the Visually Impaired. They support a goal-oriented approach, which I can prepare for. They arm me with methods to help me in my work – in a complex situation, I no longer have to “think up” something spontaneously, but can fall back on a repertoire of techniques. It is possible to practise them and train in using them. This allows newcomers to the profession, who cannot draw on years of experience, to support their cooperation partners in “finding solutions”. And it opens the way to reflecting on one’s own actions. Successes have not come about just “anyhow”, but are the outcome of effective counselling techniques.

And where does it all end?

In the field of counselling and support, there are aspects that are not “susceptible to counselling”, where the influence and the opinion of the expert are called for, and information on the “right” thing and the “optimum” approach is required. In these cases, it is part of the responsibility of the “specialist in teaching the visually impaired” to communicate this information to cooperation partners and hence to make transparent the criteria behind this decision. Counselling does not mean persuading others – by the back door, so to speak – of things that they actually see differently.

We cannot hope to respect and to reinforce the sense of responsibility of our cooperation partners if we are not conscious of our own responsibility for all aspects of the work. There are questions in counselling that go beyond our objectives as teachers at a counselling centre, and it is our responsibility to make this clear.

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