

***“I heard the owl call my name ....”***

***Faryal Ahmed***

### **Abstract**

This paper has basically grown out of a personal experience. Its focus is the basic helping skills and strategies in counseling that teachers who have just become conscious of their role as counselors can use with their students. It does not propose a model of counseling or posit a detailed workshop on developing counseling skills and strategies. Its purpose is simply to create awareness amongst teachers of one of the much-neglected roles.

***“What is important to recognize about the counseling task at this time is that there is an increase in demand for counseling from young people... there is a great deal of frustration, anxiety, stress and distress.”***

***Murgatroyd (1983)***

### **Preface**

As undergraduates at Kinnaird College (Pakistan), many students were unfamiliar with the campus and were consequently late for class. I, however, was particularly intolerant of tardiness. So, when a student stumbled into my class late one morning, she should have expected the worst.

Obviously upset, I demanded the reason for the student's tardiness. "I was waiting in line to buy your new text book," she replied nervously. Thinking it was an excuse, I turned to the rest of the class and asked, "Well, why weren't the rest of you late?"

Having said this, I began the routine. It was in the middle of the lecture, most probably, that I became conscious of a tear-stained face. It was the same student whom I had taken to task a few minutes ago. When the lecture was over this particular student came to me and said, "I thought that you would have understood but I guess I was wrong, anyway I am sorry, I was late." It's not what she said but how she said it that got me thinking – what was it that she expected me to understand?

Was there something wrong? Did she have a personal problem? Perhaps in trying to create an impression I had stretched myself a bit too much and in the process disillusioned her. In the beginning it was difficult for me to accept this, it's just that every time I walked into the lecture hall I became conscious of a pair of doubting eyes.

Disturbed, I called a friend who was working as a psychologist, and told her what had happened. My friend said, "Why is it taken for granted in our culture that

students don't have problems? Why can't you teachers see yourselves in the role of the mentor – why must you always face students with a stick... try a carrot for heaven's sake!" She gave me a booklet – "Seven things smart teachers should know" by June Webster (1990), one of which was "When kids don't get help, the consequences can be grim." Thus began my journey with counseling.

***"The counseling process helps individuals change their attitudes and behavior so that they yield more satisfaction to themselves and others in their life space."***

***Hamblin (1989)***

## **Section 1**

***"The way we relate to each other is affected by the way we relate to ourselves and particularly how we perceive ourselves."***

***Eric and Carol Hall***

### **What is counseling?**

'Counseling? Of course we know what it is. It's giving advice (especially when the grass is greener on the other side of the fence).

The truth is that counseling is not at all that comfortable a process. The problem is further compounded because many teachers remain confused about the nature of counseling. They may lay claim to the counseling role, but whether in fact they really do counsel, or merely think they do, will depend on many factors. The kind of help called counseling may in fact range from advice giving to psychotherapy.

Adolescents in schools and society have to face many problems of adjustments and identity. They have to learn to be independent, to make decisions for themselves, to take responsibilities, to go through a crisis and to brave a difficult situation. Most adolescents survive without needing to talk about their problems. There is a chance though that there will always be some who need to talk to somebody about their problems. The counselor's role is to give support to those adolescents who feel insecure, threatened, overwhelmed, misunderstood, unsure of their role, undecided about what they should do and who to ask for help. The counselor's role is not to cover the adolescent's problem but to help him/her face his/her problems and grow to greater maturity through them. This will lay the foundation of a more integrated and balanced adulthood. School or college counseling is, therefore, appropriate for adolescents, who are basically sound in mind and body, but who need help. This is not to say that their problems are not serious or 'real'. For example, conflict at home, or between parents, may cause

depression and despair in a student, which may prevent her/him from doing her/his task properly.

### **Theories of Counseling**

There is a vast body of literature on counseling theory and techniques. But the main debate between the theorists concerns the amount of direction the counselor should give the content of the interview. It is generally agreed that the quality of the relationship between counselor and client is of fundamental importance; those among the goals of counseling are self-acceptance, self-determination, self-understanding and self-awareness. But are these goals best achieved by non-directive, directive or eclectic counseling techniques?

**Non-directive counselors**, inspired by the work of Carl Rogers, who put the onus of direction very much on the individual: the client must be allowed to talk about what he/ she wants to talk about. The relationship in this context between the counselor and the client is therapeutic, in which the client has the freedom to make his/her decisions and come to maturity.

**Directive counselors** are more purposeful. They lead the client through an examination of his/her problem, go through the possible consequences of various courses of action, and help the client try out various new solutions. Although the client is still making the decisions, the counselor mostly directs the choice.

**Eclectic counselors** use whatever method they feel best suits the needs of the clients. For example, arguing that some students, because of their age, inexperience or personality, need more specific help than others.

More recently, clients' problems have been seen as learning problems and the counselor's job has been defined as "helping the client learn more effective ways of solving his/her own problems", that is, making the client more "self-reliant". I know from my own experience as a teacher how confusing it can be when one first comes across the highly technical literature about counseling theory and secondly, tries to integrate it with one's own philosophy and personality and thirdly, relates what one has learnt in theory with what one does in practice. Theories of counseling have much in common and their differences are mostly in emphasis. The basis of all theories is the interaction between two people, one of whom is trying to help the other.

### **Who should counsel?**

As teachers we have all had systematic education in the materials and methods of pedagogy in constructing lessons or lectures, completing individual progress reports and in using audio-visual and computer technology. But have we ever thought about training in the other roles we are destined to play in our students' lives - as models of personal effectiveness? We forget that teachers are not just

oracles of knowledge like Socrates, endlessly questioning and answering text-based questions. We must remember that by choosing this profession we have dedicated ourselves to influencing students' lives. To accomplish this role, we are expected to do more than just stand in front of a class of attentive eyes and ears. We have to develop relationships with the students that are built on trust, mutual respect and affection. It's from these alliances that students will come to us with their problems. More often they will ask for help in more subtle ways and our job is to develop ourselves as skilled helpers, a task that will involve mastering a number of counseling and consulting skills. This would help us to observe and make sense of what students are thinking, feeling and doing. It will allow us to gain access to their inner worlds, to earn their trust and to truly understand their experiences. From such an empathetic position we will help them reach greater clarity and they will listen because we will have a genuine interest in their welfare.

### **Why teachers as counselors?**

The answer is that it is about time that management realized that teachers are the ones who are best positioned to serve in counseling roles because it is teachers after all who interact with students on a daily basis. The teacher who spends so many hours working with students will be sought out as a confidante by at least those students who have nowhere else to turn, and if a teacher is equipped with some counseling skills, just some basic helping strategies like listening and responding, the teacher will be amazed at the services he/she can render in helping students change their behaviour for the better. Adding these basic counseling skills to his/her array of educational techniques, will help him /her in a number of ways.

- a) He/she will notice an improvement in personal relations because learning these basic counseling skills will increase a teacher's sensitivity and responsiveness. This training will affect the ways a teacher relates to other people.
- b) He/she will become more respected with his/her colleagues in his/her institution. The teacher will forge more constructive alliances with the management and other teachers in his/her institution. When a teacher learns to speak the language of counselors, he/she will be able to make more appropriate referrals of students in need of help.
- c) He/she will become more influential in his/her work in the classroom. Students respond best to teachers who model what they themselves would someday like to become. Counseling skills will quite simply help teachers create better relationships with students in a shorter period of time.

- d) He/she will be able to address students' most important concerns and at the same time counteract his/her own fears of ineptitude and failure. Counseling skills will help a teacher neutralize his/her own fears of failure in trying to be helpful to students. That is the wonder and power of the training. As a teacher becomes more skilled and accomplished as a helper of others, he/she becomes more proficient at applying what he/she knows to his/ her own life.

*“Are we ready? Shall we begin with the basics “?”*

***“If an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding and respect is the most effective basis for facilitating the learning that is called therapy, then might it not be the basis for the learning called education!”***

***Rogers (1951)***

## **Section II**

So you have decided to become a counselor. Welcome to the club. (One hopes it's not a case of “One flew over the cuckoo's nest.”)

***In order to arrive there***

***To arrive where you are***

***To get from where you are not***

***You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy***

***In order to arrive at what you do not know***

***You must go by a way, which is the way of ignorance***

***You must go by the way of dispossession***

***In order to arrive at what you are not***

***You must go through the way in which you are not***

***And what you do not know is the only thing you know***

***And what you own is what you do not own***

***And where you are is where you are not.***

***T.S. Eliot***

## **Some Basic Helping Skills**

The focus of discussion in this section will be the basic skills of helping. First of all, success in this endeavour will depend on how a teacher monitors his/her own internal attitudes. Counselors are helpful precisely because they are perceived as non-judgmental, accepting and not critical. Once a teacher has made a decision to function in a helping role, he/she is making a decision to suspend temporarily that part of himself/herself that judges others. Judgement interferes

with one's ability to respond compassionately to what one hears. If the student senses even a little bit of teacher-centred criticism, all trust could be lost. In this initial stage of making contact with a student, before a teacher even opens his/her mouth to say anything or apply his/her first helping skills, he/she is already setting in motion a set of helping attitudes to help himself/herself be maximally accepted and responsive to what he/she will hear.

*Let's begin with the first of the basic helping skills, which are a beginner's tools.*

### **Attending**

*"Being There"*

Easier than it may sound, appearing attentive to students is the first and most basic task in being helpful. If a teacher would simply monitor himself/herself and others during most interactions he/she would notice how rare it is that people are fully attentive to one another. Attending to someone means giving them one's total, complete and undivided interest. It means using one's body and one's mind to say, "nothing exists right now for me but you." It is surprising how healing this simple act can be. Students who in particular are used to being ignored by adults can instantly tell the difference.

### **Listening**

*"Gone with the Wind"*

Attending skills involve the use of non-verbal behaviors (nods, smiles, eye contact, body language) and minimal verbal encouragement to communicate interest in what a person is saying. These skills, though a requirement, are relatively empty gestures unless the teacher as counselor is actually and sincerely listening.

This presents an interesting scenario. How does one show a student that one has not only heard what was said but also, surprisingly, one has understood what was meant. There are two ways to show evidence of such a happening – passive listening, which has already been described in the context of non-verbal and verbal attending, and active listening, in which the teacher takes a more direct role in responding to what she/he hears. Ultimately, listening is communicated by the way one responds to the speaker.

### **Empathy**

*"The Caretaker"*

This is the ability and willingness to crawl inside someone else's skin and to know what he/she is experiencing. It is where attending and listening come together in such a way that the teacher is able to get outside herself/himself, so that he/she can sense what the student is feeling and thinking.

At its most basic level, beginners in counseling are taught to use the stem,

'to feel' or 'to respond' to each client's statement. Although this may sound contrived, it does help to get one in the habit of focusing on and resonating with a client's felt experience.

Let's put together these first three skills in a dialogue with a student who is upset about a poor grade she received on an exam.

**Student:** You gave me a D on this test. (She said accusingly, with tears in her eyes.)

**Teacher:** {Puts down the papers she is grading. Turns the chair to face the student fully, softens her face and waits patiently (attending)}. Yes that's true. You did earn a D on the exam (Note the way the statement is re-worded – placing emphasis on student's responsibility).

**Student:** Well, I don't think that's right! This test wasn't fair.

**Teacher:** {Nods (attending)}. You don't think the test covered the stuff you had prepared for. (Active listening)

**Student:** Well, it didn't. And now my parents will kill me.

**Teacher:** You sound more concerned about your parents' reaction than you do about the test itself. (Emphatic resonance)

**Student:** They just expect so much from me.

**Teacher:** {Nods her head (attending). Smiles reassuringly (passive listening)}. Yes, I can see how difficult this is for you. You are really feeling under a lot of pressure. (Emphatic resonance)

### **Kottler & Kottler (1993)**

As is evident from this helping encounter, these first basic counseling skills are connected to one another in that they all attempt to build an open, trusting and accepting atmosphere. This is something that Carl Rogers regarded as "unconditional positive regard" which emphasizes acceptance of a person as a "unique individual". Open-communication or genuineness is necessary for effective helping. A non-judgmental climate is of utmost importance for students to feel comfortable disclosing and exploring their feelings.

## **Sub-Skills**

### **Exploration Skills**

#### **Questioning**

*"All the President's Men"*

The most obvious and direct way to gather information or encourage a student to explore a particular area is to ask him/her a series of questions. For example, reading the previous dialogue would bring to mind a number of questions.

- Why do you feel the test was unfair?
- How much time did you spend studying for the test?
- How are you doing in your other subjects?
- What would your parents say when they find out?
- What do your parents expect from you?

**Kottler and Kottler (ibid.)**

Questions should be used as the last resort because there is always the fear that questioning will put the student in a 'one down position' and the teacher comes across as the interrogator. The teacher should try to cover as much territory as he/she can by direct methods of exploration. But if the teacher wants to ask questions then they must be worded in such a way that they are open-ended, that is, the kind that cannot be answered by a single word.

<b>Open-ended</b>	<b>Close-ended</b>
What are you feeling right now?	Are you feeling upset?
What are you going to do?	Are you going to tell your parents?

**Kottler and Kottler (ibid.)**

It is obvious that open-ended questions encourage further exploration. Close-ended questions should be asked only when specific information covering a potentially threatening situation is required.

**Reflecting Content**

*"The Stranger in the Mirror" Pt 1*

An indirect way of helping someone explore further his/her problems is to use listening and empathy skills to reflect the content of what is said.

The teacher as a counselor should not sound like a parrot. The point is simply to re-word what the teacher has heard. Restatements help people clarify what they are saying and facilitate further exploration into the issues. For example:

**Student:** Ali keeps teasing me about my weight. He doesn't leave me alone.

**Teacher:** Ali won't get off your back no matter what you do?

In this, the teacher acknowledges what was heard and guides the student to focus on his own behavior as well.

### **Reflecting Feelings**

*"The Stranger in the Mirror" Pt 2*

This skill is quite similar to the previous one but the emphasis is different. It is on feelings rather than on content. The purpose is to identify feelings underlying a student's statements. It may seem easy but it is a complex and difficult task for counselors to reflect feelings, sensitively, accurately and helpfully. The teacher must be able to

- Listen accurately to subtle nuances of what is being said.
- Decode the deeper meanings of communication.
- Identify accurately the feelings a person is experiencing
- Communicate this understanding in a way that can be accepted

### **Kottler and Kottler (ibid.)**

**Student:** My friends think I should talk to you.

**Teacher:** You are feeling pressured by your friends but a part of you needs to talk about something that is bothering you (the first part reflects the content, the second part identifies the apprehension).

**Student:** Yeah, I do need to talk about this, I guess (silence).

**Teacher:** It's hard for you to do this. (Even silence can be reflected.)

**Student:** (taking a deep breath) My father wants me to leave my mother and go and stay with him. My parents are separated. You see -----

**Teacher:** You are supposed to be happy about it. Yet, you don't feel comfortable about the idea.

**Student:** He says he would send me abroad for education, which my mother cannot do.

**Teacher:** It's just more complicated for you. You are excited about going abroad but you cannot leave your mother. It's a very difficult choice...

And the dialogue continues. The teacher depends on reflection of feeling to help the student explore his deeper feelings, to help him clarify what he wants and help him resolve the problem – to make his own decision. The teacher's role is that of the helper.

### **Self Disclosure**

*"Comedy of Errors" Pt 1*

This is the skill in which the teacher demonstrates genuineness and humanness to a student. It is helpful for a student to hear the ways in which a teacher, too, has struggled in the past with similar problems. This helps them to 'connect' on a more 'intimate' level. However, the teacher should be careful of not going overboard as this intervention has the potential for abuse (the teacher might talk too much, too often and at inappropriate times, revealing inappropriate material). Self-disclosure should be concise and devoid of self-indulgence. Self-disclosures are best to bridge the distance and initiate openness. For example:

**Teacher:** I know what you are going through. My parents were divorced and I struggled a lot before I could get my bearing right."

Another variety of self-disclosure is immediacy. It involves sharing what you are feeling for the student at that moment in time.

**Teacher:** I feel honored that you trust me. I feel closer to you and admire you for your courage.

### **Summarizing**

*"A Midsummer Night's Dream"*

It should be used once at the end of the conversation but it can be inserted any time a wrap-up is needed. The summary ties the themes of the discussion and puts things in perspective. The teacher can summarize after having asked the students to do so first. For example –

**Teacher:** So what are you leaving with?  
(The teacher can then fill in the gaps)

A good summary provides a bridge between exploration and strategies of action for making change. Strategies are the other side of the coin. If a skill is a special ability in a task acquired by training, strategy is the act of using that ability or skill.

## **Action Strategies**

*“For your Eyes only”*

A teacher’s role will obviously limit the number of action strategies he/she can use. Most often the teacher’s helping role will be to listen, to understand, to empathize in helping the student to clarify issues. At times, however, the teacher will have the opportunity to help the student translate what has been discussed into some constructive action. The following strategies are described with a note of caution. Training and supervision is required before attempting any intervention strategies.

## **Advice Giving**

*“Comedy of Errors” Pt 2*

This is the single most abused strategy. A teacher should resist her natural tendency to offer advice, since telling people what to do is the easiest thing. Exceptions are allowed only when a student is tempted to do something potentially dangerous.

## **Goal Setting**

*“No Man’s Land”*

This is an action strategy that translates an ambiguous issue into concrete results. The teacher will have to take a longer route of helping the student define and follow his/her goals instead of telling him/her what to do. A student will then most likely accomplish the task.

- Make sure the goal they identify is really related to the central issue they are struggling with.
- Construct goals that are realistic and attainable.
- Make them as specific as possible like –
  - . What the person will do
  - . Where he/she will do it
  - . When and how often it will be done
  - . For how long it will be present
  - . With whom, who will be present
  - . What contingencies will be in place if she/he should falter?

**Kottler and Kottler (ibid.)**

Sometimes by just letting them talk things out can make a tremendous difference.

## **Problem Solving**

*"The Phenomenon"*

This is a more elaborate vision of goal setting involving a series of steps. For example, a student wants to enter a professional college but he does not have either the finances or the academic record that would help him/her qualify for a scholarship. The student feels frustrated. The problem solving strategy should –

- Help define the problem
- Specify the goals
- Develop alternatives that might be constructive
- Narrow choices down to the most realistic
- Put the plan into action

### **Kottler and Kottler (ibid.)**

With the help of the teacher, the student can generate a list of possibilities ranging from going to summer school to finding a better paid job to saving money.

## **Reframing**

*"The Beauty and the Beast"*

If a nice picture is placed in an ugly frame it loses its appeal. A good frame will enhance its beauty. This is a difficult strategy. The task of the teacher is to take a problem that appears insolvable and reframe it in such a way that solutions suggest themselves more readily. For example:

<b>Statement</b>	<b>Reframing</b>
I'm shy	You feel shy when you are in a new situation without your close friends.
I hate school	You don't enjoy structured learning very much, but you like school when you can enjoy.
My child says that all his teachers say that he is disruptive. But he is not disruptive.	Your child has a great sense of humor but he is performing for the wrong audience.
Your lectures are boring.	You find it hard to concentrate on content presentations.

In each reframing, the problem is seen in an optimistic light.

Reframing is a cognitive intervention, which shifts the way they view their problems. It is based upon rational emotive techniques developed by Albert Ellis, and cognitive techniques developed by Aaron Beck.

The rationale behind these techniques is quite simple – what we feel is based on what we think. The teacher's job is to make the students realize that very little is intrinsically bad or annoying or frustrating. It is our perception of these experiences that define our reactions. The cognitive therapist, Aaron Beck, says if you don't like how you are feeling then change how you feel about it. This approach to helping is easy to learn and as it is a problem-solving approach, it can be applied immediately to a teacher's own life. In fact the more a teacher works on his/her own internal thinking patterns, the more proficient he/she would be in helping others with theirs – and the more he/she practices helping students confront their irrational thoughts, the more he/she will notice profound changes in his/her own personal effectiveness. By using these strategies he/she can make a difference to a student's life in a very short time. The process of cognitive helping follows a logical sequence in which the teacher first helps a student to talk about the feelings that are bothering him/her.

The point of this helping procedure is that it is not other people or events that make a person feel anything. A person makes himself/herself feel things based on how he/she thinks.

## **Confrontations**

### *"The Terminator"*

There are times when people have to be harnessed. They need to be reminded of the disparity between what they are doing and what they said they want or what they are saying now versus what they said earlier. The secret is to confront them in such a way that they are not put on the defensive. The best confrontations are put across neutrally. The task of the teacher is to make the student feel that he/she has noted something interesting which might be helpful, for instance:

**Student:** Gee, I'm confused...

**Teacher:** You are saying that you want good grades in school, yet you mentioned earlier that you never study.

**Kottler & Kottler (ibid.)**

In this exchange the teacher is putting the observation before the student and letting him/her decide what he/she wants to do about it. The key for the teacher is to ask himself/herself whether he/she is intervening out of care or out of the urge to snub.

## **Encouragement**

### *"Casablanca"*

Sometimes students experience problems about which a teacher can do nothing except offer support. Encouragement is an action strategy. The teacher needs to make an intentional effort to foster hope. Imagine a student whose parents are separating and he/she has to decide to live with one of the two. In such a situation a teacher's support is very helpful. Sometimes support is all that a teacher can give and perhaps it is more than enough.

***"Here's looking at you kid"*      *Casablanca***

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would like to add that if students spend six hours a day with teachers, wouldn't it be better if they turned to the same teachers for help? After all, given the time span each group becomes conditioned to the other, and bonding at a certain level cannot be ignored. In other words, they learn to become comfortable with each other and the students find it easier to 'open up'

and trust a teacher with whom they interact daily rather than start from scratch with a stranger – the outsider counselor.

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