Finding oneself in the crowd

Lennox Thomas considers some key factors in student self-discovery

Despite being involved in education as a lecturer, tutor and examiner, it has only been in the past four years that I have been a supervisor of therapists who counsel students in further education (FE). From conversations with the late Ellen Noonan I was aware of the importance and value of student counselling but at these closer quarters I have been able to see the counsellors moving through a repertoire of skills not frequently required in a general counselling practice with a more mature population.

Change and emotional vulnerability

Separation from home and standing alone without the emotional backup of friends and family, probably for the first time, can be daunting. Feeling cut off exacerbates feelings of low self-worth and insignificance in the face of seemingly more confident popular young people. Students have often talked about their experience of having been among the brightest at their school, only to find that they are surrounded by others equally bright which diminishes their hitherto confident self-assuredness. It is a brave student who is able to make such a discovery and a braver one who discloses it to a counsellor. Finding oneself in the crowd can sometimes mean discarding, in part, unwanted old versions of who we are. Repudiating the old self and discarding views and values that no longer fit our new surroundings can be painful and confusing. Feeling that they have betrayed their background and all that it offered them is part of their emotional conundrum, the other being that their upbringing had misled them about the world that they now have to enter as a freestanding individual.

Extending the context

Our networks and friends support the way we see ourselves; without them we can feel lost. Even the student who remains at home to attend college has the challenge of meeting different people and learning about other cultures. Perhaps it is the first time they will meet and become friends with a fellow student who is black, white, lesbian, gay or has a disability. It is a time of challenging one's own stereotypes, those long-held views passed on by family and social networks, and this can at times set off feelings of unbearable anxiety.

Rob had been a most successful and rewarding pupil at his independent home counties school. He was popular with staff and students, had good looks, a certain maturity and charm. Rob's family were committed to their religion and their local non-conformist Christian church. He had a precocious talent as a lay preacher and after completing a first degree in sociology and social policy his parents wanted him to study theology at Oxford and to join the ministry. In his first term Rob became a learning mentor at a local service for refugee children organised by the local branch of his church. He witnessed first hand the cruelty that had been meted out to children as a result of war and ethnic conflict. Moved by this, he struggled with his faith. He found it hard to believe in a loving and compassionate God, and was ashamed of breaking the family's and church's injunction against drinking alcohol. Rob held back from being fully involved in university life and hovered on the fringes feeling ill equipped to socialise with the worldly sophisticated cosmopolitan students. Rob felt that his background had not prepared him for many things and was most surprised that his mentees were still believers, after all that had happened to them. He came to counselling at the suggestion of his tutor having sunk into depression and neglect of his academic work. He was angry about the conditions in which the children he mentored had to live, guilty about enjoying drinking alcohol and unhappy about his isolation from others on campus. Like a refugee, he felt that he was on the outside looking in.

Rob had experienced a huge change in his social environment and cultural context on going to university. As a non-conformist Christian he had lived a fairly prescribed life and was having difficulty making the adjustment to what seemed like too many possibilities.

Identity and struggle

For many overseas students the difficulties may be subtle differences embedded in British culture. For others it could be the fear of freedom, without control to make choices and to be responsible for having done so. Feeling thrown into the deep end and perhaps having to rethink who they might be in relation to the new culture are all part of the preoccupations of newly arrived students. Apart from the encounter with racism, white western culture can seem to offer so much to a young person from an ethnic minority. With this comes the promise of escape from a third world identity, the possibility of a reassessment of family values and relationships and what appears to be the freedom for young women from the traditional patriarchy of their own culture. While the exposure to student life can have a strong influence, this change might not be appreciated by their family. Generally the student from another culture, even the British-based minorities, has the opportunity to take part in the activity of social progress. It is possible for some overseas or BME (black and minority ethnic) students to have an interesting experience of another culture but others might have difficulty ever feeling included and keep their nose to the grindstone longing to return home.

BME young people raised in this society often live in a dual culture. Statistics on health show an over representation of African-Caribbean people and some South Asians as having mental health problems. A psychological adjustment to being away from home or a political alignment with the aspirations of their own minority group on campus is often made in order to cope with being away from the familiar and having to deal with feelings of isolation. From an early age some BME children learn not to talk too much about the details of their cultural life, customs and religion for fear of being ridiculed. The young person's sense of pride can be so easily eroded that avoiding the subject of their difference is the safest bet. Feeling relegated to a lesser position, their way of thinking, eating and worshipping – which hitherto has supported their lives – disappears once away from home. Having other students from a similar minority background is sometimes supportive but even this is complex and cannot be relied on. Students from BME communities can find themselves 'double thinking' people and situations. This is a process that might have begun in childhood, saying and thinking what they think might be expected of them to fit in and appear to be like everybody else. Living in a dual world from early childhood can contribute to the young person developing a precarious sense of self. 'This false self might be made up of characteristics that white adults find easy to identify with – perhaps being like the white children in the breakfast cereal adverts or the soap commercials. Being a pretend white child is part of a psychological contortion that a black child might have to experience in a white society.'[1]

While having some short-term benefit this 'proxy self' can later become part of the tyranny of self-hatred that revisits the young person in their struggle for a sense of ethnic pride. Fitting in and not having learned to claim one's identity helps to create complex self-states[2]. Employed as a mask for self-protection, some young black or Asian people might try to blend in to the dominant culture by obscuring their own difference for fear of standing out, feeling one down

or inferior or being viewed by others as having an inferior culture. BME students experiencing difficulties are often problematic to identify and their struggles might only be known to tutors or others in close relationships with them.

Choosing to join a campus group based on ethnic identity can have its own hazards. It is a delicate balancing act between feeling a sense of belonging and that of toeing a particular line. Some groups can demand loyalty to beliefs and values which puts at risk the individual's forming identity. One might risk rejection for not being black enough to be a member of the Afro Caribbean society or too westernised to join the Asian society. This assumed group power can be corrosive to the young person who thought that they might have found support among their own. Having acceptance and having one's difference tolerated in ethnic focused groups is most helpful. Allowing members fluidity to move in and out and explore other groups serves the function of a safe base away from home. There will always be a tension between developing one's own identity and one that is group approved. Depending on the degree to which the BME student craves group approval, they might just be donning yet another mask and another proxy self. Given that shame is associated with presentation for psychological help, ways of engaging this group can present a challenge.

The transitional space
The student process, even for those who find it problematic, can be seen as an opportunity for play and self-discovery. Here the young person can choose to experiment with the space and through a gradual process learn who they might want to be. The space is transformational, offering college clubs or other off-campus activities. It is often while their sons and daughters are at college that parents discover their offspring have harboured anarchist politics that they hitherto knew nothing about or are animal liberationists or are celibate as part of their initiation to a religious sect.

Curiosity is a healthy position, allowing the student to think about themselves and adopt their own way of being,

choosing their own music and their own style. Most are able to use the experience to explore, socialise and make self-discoveries as part of the maturational process[3]. Leaving home and moving into adulthood can be well served by the decompression chamber that is the student process, providing an intermediate space for adjustment from adolescence into adulthood. For many, the student experience is a time to learn to be more independent, discover their views on life generally, and make lifelong friendships. The counsellor will meet both types, those who like Rob had difficulties allowing himself the playfulness that university affords, as well as the young hedonists who are not able to apply themselves to the academic work because life has become an endless opportunity for partying.

The counselling process
The counselling experience is also a useful medium for self-discovery and can be seen as a transitional object providing the student with a supportive experience to engage with what the institution has to offer. The variety of presenting problems are discussed by O'Carroll[4] as well as the different techniques used by counsellors to meet them. Alex Coren[5] considers the differences between longer-term psychoanalytic therapy and brief student counselling, and the different therapeutic ends that they hope to achieve.

Counsellors in education are usually confronted with a crisis of some sort, or perhaps the failure of the student's particular tried and tested method to achieve sufficient self-management. College life can expose students to

feelings of uncontainable anxiety with the pressure of work as well as social and relationship tensions. The flexibility of many different approaches and the counsellor's understanding of transferential phenomena to stay attuned to what is happening in the room is a good start. Coren mentions the ubiquity of transference, emphasising its presence in many relationships and the fact that institutional settings might be as important as the image the student has created of their counsellor. Transference is not seen as the fulcrum of brief therapy but an aspect that can be used in ways that can be different to longer-term psychoanalytic treatment. For the student counsellor, locating themselves as central to the student's material may not be useful from the point of view of time, or the student's issues.

The counsellor is working in an area that demands great skill, knowing where and when to explore and when to leave alone. Coren advocates issue selection so that natural development and maturity and problem solving can take place. He points out that the student process is part of the young person's route to growing up and that the counselling intervention, while brief, will be worked through by the student. Like a good apothecary, the counsellor in education using a brief model applies a fair amount of wisdom in the selection of technique as well as the other 'softer skills' of warmth and empathy in the encounter.

The process of finding oneself in the crowd can take many routes. In counselling, the student can explore gender, sexuality, political, ethnic and class identity in a safe place. Helping the student might involve getting them to think about their increasing dependence on drugs or alcohol, or their escape into an increasingly psychotic world. Some students come to counselling to deal with specific issues, relationships, depression etc; others come because they are generally not coping and are falling behind with work assignments. The panic and chaos that some students present can be overwhelming. The student who repeatedly fears that everything will fall apart if they are not able to meet deadlines, while speaking a language

that is common to campus life, might also be mouthing a long-held fear of breakdown and disintegration as Winnicott[6] has discussed. In the background are issues of attachment, containment, loss and separation exacerbated by the move away from home and not having access to family and other holding structures.

These psychoanalytic concepts are usually associated with the earlier stages of development but are so important for the role of counsellors supporting young people whose psychological difficulties have led to regressive states. A student counsellor is usually called on to perform the function of containment on behalf of the institution when the student has relinquished their ability to cope. From the infant's pre-verbal mode of functioning the counsellor receives and processes difficult or unwanted emotions, processing them and returning them in digestible form. Similarly the counsellor serves the purpose of helping the student to deal with difficult and persecutory issues.

Performing the function of holding or containing can tax the resources of the counsellor whose client is never too far away in the building and can at times seem to appear at every corner. Working with young people can provoke strong feelings in counsellors for a variety of reasons, sometimes concern about their difficult situation, or being reminded of their own experiences at that age.

Transformation

The student experience, whatever its nature, is transformational. Whether or not the student has made use of the counselling services, they have an experience that has played a part in their development. Along with meeting different people and being challenged by different political and religious beliefs, the student who has been able to make good use of the educational process has had the opportunity to find themselves in the crowd. The teetering steps of adolescence and the dilettante approach to the new and different would have given way to a more confident young person setting out in the world.

Intellectual growth can be a good companion to emotional growth, such

as discovering that completing the course is a vindication of being called stupid at school, and the years of insecurity that this might have created. The enjoyment of learning can also be new to those who had not hitherto seen education as anything other than hurdles to demonstrate their uselessness. By contrast the young person who left school as one of the brightest would have been in the company of some of the nation's brightest and might reappraise themselves in a less inflated way. Coming to terms with who we are, and not who we are seen through the prism of adoring parents and proud schoolteachers, is useful information. Discovering one's own worth, having had little afforded to you, can be transformational and invaluable to healthy maturation.

Who we think we are depends on many social, demographic, class, gender and ethnic factors as well as on the particular family in which we are raised, their attitudes and views. We are a mixture of the different selves we owe to others, and with increasing confidence, what we owe to ourselves. ■

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References

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