

PERSON-CENTRED EDUCATION

Carl Rogers developed what is known as the person-centred approach in psychiatry. Here the relevance of this approach to education is illustrated by extracts from Dave Mearns' and Brian Thorne's book, "Person-Centred Counselling in Action," in which the word "counsellor" has been replaced by "teacher," "client" by "child" or "pupil", etcetera. The page numbers refer to the first edition, published by Sage Publications, London, in 1988, not the third edition published in 2007, details of which are given below. Lib Ed is grateful to Dave Mearns, Brian Thorne and Sage Publications for permission to use these adapted extracts.

In some academic quarters the person-centred approach to education currently receives scant attention. There are at least two powerful reasons for this. In the first place the approach lays primary stress on the quality of the relationship between teacher and pupil, and secondly it travels light as far as theoretical concepts are concerned. There are some intellectuals, however, who delight in theoretical complexity and also tend to be somewhat apprehensive about relationships which seem to demand too deep an involvement. It is therefore not surprising that both in academic and professional circles the person-centred approach can sometimes be dismissed as facile or superficial, or even castigated as naive or misguidedly optimistic. (p7)

Unfortunately all too many of those who seek the help of progressive education have spent much of their lives surrounded by people who, with devastating inappropriateness, have appointed themselves experts in the conduct of children's lives. As a result such children are in despair at their inability to fulfil the expectations of others, whether parents, teachers, colleagues or so-called friends, and have no sense of self-respect or personal worth. (p 8)

It will be evident that the person-centred teacher has a belief in the basic rightness, appropriateness, even goodness of human nature. This is not the same as suggesting that we are by definition born pure and without defect, a kind of virtuous *tabula rasa*, but it is undoubtedly a point of view which runs counter to many of the pessimistic beliefs enshrined in certain religious and educational systems. The person-centred teacher believes that each individual has the potential to become a unique and beautiful creation, but that none of us can do this alone and unaided. (p 13)

It is possible to describe the nature of the growth-producing climate briefly and clearly. Rogers believed that it is characterised by three conditions. The first element focuses on the *realness*, or *genuineness*, or *congruence* of the teacher. The more the teacher is able to be herself in the relationship without putting up a professional front or a personal façade the greater will be the chance of the child developing in a positive and constructive manner. The teacher who is congruent conveys the message that it is not only permissible but desirable to be oneself. She also presents herself as transparent to the child, and thus refuses to encourage an image of herself as superior, expert, omniscient. In such a relationship the child is more likely to find resources within himself and will not cling to the expectations that the teacher will provide the answers for him. The second requirement in creating a climate for change and growth is the teacher's ability to offer the child a total acceptance, a cherishing, *an unconditional positive regard*. When the teacher is able to embrace this attitude of acceptance and non-judgmentalism then the development is much more likely. The child is more able to explore negative feelings and to move into the core of his anxiety or depression. He is also more likely to face himself honestly without the ever-present fear of rejection or condemnation. What is more the intensive experience of the teacher's acceptance is the context in which he is most likely to sense the first momentary feelings of self-acceptance. The third element which is necessary in an educational relationship is *empathic understanding*. When this is present

the teacher demonstrates a capacity to track and sense accurately the feelings and personal meanings of the child; she is able to learn what it feels like to be in the child's skin and to perceive the world as the child perceives it. What is more, she develops the ability to communicate to the child this sensitive and acceptant understanding. To be understood in this way is for many children a rare or even a unique experience. It indicates to them a preparedness on the part of the teacher to offer attention and a level of caring which undeniably endows them with value. *Furthermore, when a person is deeply understood in this way it is difficult to maintain for long a stance of alienation and separation.* (pp 14 and 15, Lib Ed italics in the last sentence.)

Human nature is essentially constructive

Human nature is basically social

Self-regard is a basic human need

Human beings are basically motivated to pursue the truth.

(Quoted from a paper by Bozarth and Temaner Brodley, entitled "The Core Values and Theory of the Person-Centred Approach.")

(p 16)

It is important to reject the pursuit of authority or control over others and to seek to share power. (In the box at the bottom of page 18)

"Really, when you get down to basics, our kind of teaching is very simple. It's all about loving. It's about being free to treat other people in a loving way. It's trying to put the loving into teaching." This assessment, which appeared in a student's essay, would make many academics cringe. But essentially the student is right. (p. 19)

Often professional teachers are conditioned not to become 'involved' with their pupils and advised to remain objective or even gently aloof. Such guidance is firmly rejected by the person-centred teacher, who believes that it is precisely her ability to become involved and to share the child's world which will determine her effectiveness. (p.22)

The person-centred teacher, it will be recalled, has a basic trust in human nature and believes that there is in each one of us a desire for the truth and for constructive social intercourse. Such a belief does not mean that the teacher is gullible and blind to human perversity, but it does imply that *she is prepared to trust those who are manifestly untrustworthy so that they may gradually discover their own trustworthiness*. In a strange way therefore the teacher's willingness to allow herself to be deceived is again a mark of the relationship's health. The teacher does not attempt to catch the child out, nor does she continually question the child's motives. She accepts that the child is doing his best, given his particular circumstances, to grow and to protect himself, and if this means that for the time being he has to manipulate and deceive her then she is prepared to stay with him through such deception rather than enjoy the dubious pleasure of unmasking him and preserving her own pride. By showing that she is not interested in playing power games or in scoring points the teacher hopes that the child will gradually no longer have need to resort to deceit and manipulation in order to preserve his frail identity. Such behaviour will fall away once the child feels the safety of a relationship where he is respected despite his initial inability to reciprocate such respect. (p.31)

What am I learning from my pupils?

Dave Mearns: Two things spring immediately to mind. The first is that I am less clever than I think I am. My construction of what is happening in teaching for the child often sounds clever and complicated, and then I ask the child, at the very end, what was really important for him, and he says, 'because you loved me and I believed you'. I get a frog in my throat and feel pretty stupid.

The second thing that I think of is that no matter how much experience I get, each new child really is a new beginning. The new child doesn't know me. He may well be scared of me. He may be angry with me in case he has to defend himself. He may want to love me. He may be too

scared. He may hate. He may hate himself. He may need to hate me. No matter how much experience I have had with other children, I have had none with him.

Brian Thorne: The children are teaching me that I am wiser than I know, and that they are too. . . . It has also put me back in touch with my sense of humour and it is good to know (if I am to believe the children) that when I am funny or even absurd I may be doing some of my most serious work.

(p 148)

Person-Centred Counselling in Action, by Dave Mearns and Brian Thorne was first published by Sage Publications, London, in 1988. The third and much revised edition appeared in 2007 (ISBN 978-1-4129-2855-7).