

About counselling in teacher training

By Nina Carson, Norway

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

This article is based on three qualitative studies carried out amongst lecturers and student teachers at Bergen University College, Norway. The first study (2000) explores how lecturers at a University college, faculty of education, express their thoughts about teaching, learning and counselling in their professional work. The lecturers were responsible for teaching both student teachers for primary school as well as student teachers who were trained to teach in kindergarten.

The lecturers in the study participants were selected at random and 14 of the 16 lecturers taught in both teacher education programmes.

The second and third studies (2002 and 2006) investigated how teachers participating in an in-service course for pre-school teacher experienced counselling as part of the educational provision. The data was collected through semi-structured interviews in all three studies. In this paper examples from the studies will illustrate the presentation.

Counselling has recently received a great deal of attention in the educational debate in Norway. This is largely due to the focus of some governmental documents in Norway put on the issue. These documents ascertain the view that counselling is both a teaching and learning strategy in the teacher training context. Norwegian Parliament states that

A range of teacher training strategies should be used in combination to strengthen the learning processes of teachers. Examples could be lectures, written assignments, computer-based teaching, group discussions, seminars, counselling, practicum, laboratory work and problem-based learning (Ministry of Education and Research 2000-2001).

Our understanding of counselling is:

Counselling is an action oriented process, which implies ethical, social cognitive and emotional aspects, that involves both the counsellor and the consultee. In the process

the counsultee is in focus, and the aim of the counseling process is to increase his/her reflection on, and knowledge of, how to act in an educational context.

The present focus on counselling in the governmental documents, and my own experiences from counselling student teachers in higher education motivated me to engage in the three studies in order to explore, and understand how counselling contributes to teacher education in a particular university college. 'In this paper I make use of the following terms to describe the professional status of the participants in the studies. Lecturers: lecturers at the faculty of education, responsible for teaching at teacher training courses. Student teachers: Student teachers engaging in courses of main stream and preschool education, as part of their professional teacher education. Counselors: When it referees to professionals in general terms, will be used for the members of staff participating as counselors in the studies referred to in this paper.

The results of the first study undertaken amongst lecturers revealed that most of them were unsure about what the term counselling meant in their professional understanding of education. They understood it to involve offering advice or imparting personal knowledge. The lecturers expressed a view that all counselling needs to support and challenge the student's personal development, In the lecturer's expressed understanding counselling differs from teaching in that it takes place in small groups rather than in a main class situation. A comparison of this study and the two student surveys (study 2 and 3) reveals that the student teachers seem to have a more reflected notion of what counselling should involve. In their experience, lecturers' counselling appears mainly as advices.

The student teachers argue that in their understanding of the practice of counselling should focus on them personally and their experiences in teaching. The student teachers maintain that the best counselling challenges them to reflect on their own teaching and /developmental processes, and that simply offering advice or explanations regarding what to do does not help them in their learning progress

The majority of student teachers stated that they in general do not receive enough proper counselling. They only receive advises which means that they are told what to do. There is no reflection on action.

In counselling the student perspective is paramount. It is the student teachers that "own" the counselling. The lecturer's control and direction should be limited. Thus, we can honour, the

student perspective, and provide them with help in their development as future teachers by giving counselling a chance.

The counselling process is influenced by the way the lecturers and student teachers understand their own roles. The lecturers may consider that counselling requires for them to give up their academic authority, giving opportunities for questions, without expecting to give the correct answer.

The student, however, is seeking confirmation of her/his position in the safety provided by this academic authority. While the context created by the lecturers creates – is important, I am of the opinion that culture and understanding of roles should also be considered in developing a context-sensitive counselling context.

The counsellor needs to be sensitive to the individual student's situation. The student needs to be in focus, but the counsellor must also be aware of hers/his own position. What are the student's needs? Does s/he need confirmation of her/his line of thought and action? Does s/he need a challenge? Does s/he need support in form of guidance and advice? When does s/he need a meta perspective on her own learning? Good counselling means that the counsellor is sensitive to the student's needs and has tools to meet these needs. Kierkegaard (1962) describes this as follows:

If one is truly to succeed in leading a person to a specific place, one must first and foremost take care to find him where he is and begin there. This is the secret in the entire art of helping. Anyone who cannot do this is himself under a delusion if he thinks he is able to help someone else. In order truly to help someone else, I must understand more than he - but certainly first and foremost understand what he understands. If I do not do that, then my greater understanding does not help him at all. If I nevertheless want to assert my greater understanding, then it is because I am vain or proud, then basically instead of benefiting him I really want to be admired by him. ". (Søren Kierkegaard, 1859 - my translation)

Kierkegaard's message is important but also thought provoking. Is it possible to find out where the student is, or what questions the student really wishes raise in the counselling session? Or, in other words: can counselling help the lecturer and the student to become more

aware of their position, as a base for further development? I have chosen two replies from the student survey to explore these questions.

In the counselling session the teacher only told me what I could have done differently. Why didn't she see what I actually did.

Counselling has helped me to better understand how I contribute in interaction with children and other people. At the same time, I feel that I'm better prepared to provide counselling myself as a practicing teacher.

Counselling must be given a chance in teacher education. The demands made in relation to quality improvement reforms in the form of more counselling in teacher education will naturally be met with a range of reactions. Lack of resources and the issues of time, organisation and practical arrangements are likely to be raised. It will be argued that it isn't useful to start something we can't sustain. On the other hand, teacher educators say they would like to provide more counselling. The question is: what do we understand by counselling and whose premises should/will guide the interaction?

Counselling is a basic necessity in the students' learning. Teacher educators can develop their own practice and become better teachers by learning more about counselling and trying out a range of counselling methods. (Handal og Lauvås 1999, 2006, Ulleberg 2004, Tveiten 2008 and Carkhuff 2008)

I hope this article can stimulate the readers' curiosity. I am not claiming that counselling is easy; knowledge, skills and a humble attitude vis-a-vis the students are necessary. In counselling it is essential to identify where the responsibility lies: it is the student who is responsible for her/his choices. It is important that the teacher educator doesn't deprive the student of this freedom of choice. Freedom, choice and responsibility are basic concepts in existentialism (Webber 2009) the philosophy upon which my beliefs about counselling are grounded.

FREEDOM, CHOICE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Existentialism is concerned with basic life expressions such as lack of meaning, anxiety, freedom, choice, responsibility and death. The very fact that a human being is born into the

world is central in existentialism. It exists, it is. We need to exist before we can become the distinct self (op. cit.).

Sartre (op.cit.) claimed that death is a condition of life, since the only certain thing in life is death. He also maintained that life in itself has no meaning; it is our responsibility to create meaning. Moreover, we also have a responsibility for each other. Human beings have the freedom to make choices that can create meaning. Together with the knowledge of our freedom of choice, comes the knowledge of the fact that we have to make choices; to avoid making choices is also a choice.

According to Sartre, when we acknowledge these three basic conditions – the existence of death, the lack of meaning and the freedom of choice – it may lead to anxiety. He calls this existential anxiety. This is not fear and shouldn't be treated as an illness. Existential anxiety is a part of life.

Students express existential anxiety in counselling when they discover that the teacher doesn't have all the answers and they themselves will need to find them. One student in the survey stated: *I felt anxious when I discovered that counselling is different from teaching.* The teacher educator may also experience existential anxiety. In counselling s/he loses control of the situation.

Counselling, like, is initiated by the counsellor signalling the freedom of choice to student teachers. This causes a dilemma. Counselling in teacher education is not voluntary. The existential freedom of choice lies in the fact that the student has choices regarding which changes s/he wants to make. This freedom can be recognised in the lecturer's attitude to counselling. How does s/he present counselling to student teachers? The following student response addresses this issue:

The counselling session starts by sharing expectations. We discuss our desire to change ourselves. Can anyone change me if I resist? The teacher refers to Sartre: "We have the freedom of choice" It is a bit scary – but actually true.

Key strategies basic to all counselling that are employed in educational situations are support and challenge. These strategies are intended to improve the student teachers' adaptability to

change. Support can be compared to what Schibbye (2009) has called recognising behaviour; this is behaviour that recognises the other person and hers/his perception of reality. It includes giving the other person the right to make their own choices and have their own opinions. The following example from pre-school teacher course demonstrates how this can be done. The counsellor had invited 6 student teachers for counselling:

This group counselling session was held with student teachers during their practicum period. One student tells the group about her initial meeting with teacher in the pre-school where she is doing her practicum. She is clearly upset. The counsellor responds that she understands that this is a difficult situation for the student. The body tension diminishes and the student seems more relaxed. The counsellor goes on to say that she would like to challenge the student teachers and asks a clarifying question.

In this example the counsellor provides support and then challenges the student. The support offered takes the form of recognition of the perceived emotions (Carkhuff 2008). The counsellor could have challenged the student more. For example, the counsellor could say “you feel upset”, giving the student the opportunity to explore her emotions and talk about what she is feeling.

Freedom, choice and responsibility are values that engage the human being as an ethical subject. If counselling is considered a technique, then the counsellor is only required to have practical counselling skills and be able to use them appropriately. The counsellor doesn't need to become personally involved and can sit on the sidelines taking the view that her own behaviour, attitudes and values are irrelevant to the quality of the counselling. There is no room for ethical reflection in this framework.

If, however, the counselling framework takes into account the principle of ethical closeness (Løgstrup 1997), the situation is quite different. Ethical closeness emphasises the you – me relationship. Løgstrup reminds us that in meetings with other people we hold a part of their life in our hands. This ethical demand is silent and needs to be discovered; it requires that we take action and that we take a stand. Implicit in a meeting with another person is an expectation of consideration and trust, and in this we expose ourselves. This is particularly visible in a counselling. Too much exposure can leave the student vulnerable to exploitation and abuse of power. As a lecturer, the counsellor has academic authority and power to define

the rules interaction with the student. In meetings with other people, it is easy to reduce the other person to something we can understand and comprehend; it is difficult to take in the other person's difference and acknowledge that we can never fully understand this person (Levinas 2003). This power will always exist in teacher-student relations, and has to be acknowledged. The counsellor has to ask herself how she uses this power. Løgstrup maintains that we need to take responsibility for the other person and not from the other person. The other person has the freedom to make choices and to take responsibility for them, while the counsellor's responsibility is to support and challenge the person in making the best possible choices.

The student's trust in the counsellor may increase or decrease depending on how the counselling sessions are experienced. This isn't necessarily a matter of the counsellor asking the right questions, giving the correct confirmations or using the most appropriate counselling method. It is more likely to depend on the counsellor's attitude, voice and eyes. It can be the tone of voice that determines whether the student feels accepted or rejected.

Counselling actualises questions about the counsellors' responsibility and challenges her to take the student's perspective. The silent demand she is facing forces her to reflect on what is best for the student. The counsellor will simultaneously need to critically questioning her own practice as a counsellor. Relevant questions could be: How did the student experience this counselling session? How did she experience my questions? How did I experience the situation? How do I relate to uncomfortable experiences? How do I deal with emotions that may be difficult?

The issue of ethical closeness challenges the counsellor's sensitivity to the emotions and needs that the student communicates in the counselling session. It challenges the counsellor to meet the student as a thinking and acting individual who has the freedom of choice, independent emotional attitudes and a desire to explore herself and her surroundings. It is a matter of listening and understanding the student, of recognition the individual and showing respect and consideration. This will enable the student to expose herself without fear of being rejected.

Thus, we need to give counselling a chance. In the following section three counselling models will be presented: *Reflection on practice*, *Systemic counselling* and *Gestalt counselling*. In its

own way, each of these has personal and professional development in an educational context as its aim. Moreover, key elements in the thinking behind these models are mentioned in the teacher education, although lecturers don't relate this to counselling.

COUNSELLING AS REFLECTION ON PRACTICE

Reflection on practice is the most common counselling model employed in Norwegian teacher education. This counselling strategy, which was developed by Handal and Lauvås (1999, 2000) has dominated teacher education for many years. The aims of this strategy are to develop and support the student teachers' reflections on their experiences and underlying values related to planning and carrying out practice teaching. The student teachers' level of awareness regarding the theory of practice teaching should be raised and exploredⁱ.

Alternative ways of acting and solutions to problems are explored, to enable the student teachers to expand their range of options and choices. This can lead to higher levels of awareness and more insightful practice. Counselling in this perspective is described as a conversation that explores and expands practice, in which the principlesⁱⁱ are more important than the counselling skills.

The following example is from a counselling session with a student in the primary teacher education programme. The student has submitted a note explaining what she wants to discuss during this session:

I would like some counselling about my professional philosophy. I'm going to a job interview and would like to present my professional philosophy.

The lecturer tells:

I ask the student to clarify her statement and to explain what she means by professional philosophy. She lists several theories, then I summarise what she has said. The student frowns: "No that's not what I mean; that's only theories". I ask her to give me an example from practice. I then challenge her: "Why do you think that you acted as you did? Have you read anything about this?" The student links her explanation to a theory about interaction. I continue to challenge her: "What perspective on pupils do you think this theory represents? Does this coincide with your own values and beliefs about pupils?" The student says no that it doesn't. She is now being challenged regarding her own values and beliefs. She reflects on this and moves between the different levels in the praxis triangleⁱⁱⁱ. She then asks: "Why did I act like that when it is against my own values and beliefs about children?" I

reply: "You are able to choose how to act. You can also choose whether to take responsibility for your values and beliefs." The student says that she has moved one step further in discovering her professional philosophy. I reply: "I want to challenge you with regards to curriculum. Which values and beliefs do you think the curriculum is promoting?" She goes on to talk about equality and human worth, and various ways these values can be recognised in teaching practices.

As she is on her way out she asks: What if they don't ask about my professional philosophy in the interview?" I reply: "You are free to choose whether you want to talk about it or not. You can take responsibility for that choice."

In this example the student has been supported in her effort to articulate aspects of her practice theory, to challenge and analyse it and to draw some new conclusions. However, this support did not help her to extend her practice theory. The lecturer could have challenged her to explore problematic issues arising from the idealistic philosophy of the curriculum and to identify some of the contradictions that appear when different statements are compared and put into practice. The lecturer, quite correctly, stresses the student's responsibility and freedom of choice, but this does not diminish the counsellor's responsibility to introduce new dimensions of these choices, based on personal understanding and knowledge.

COUNSELLING AS SYSTEMIC THINKING

Systemic counselling is based on Bateson's communication theory (1972, 1979) and some features are shared with family therapy. It is possible to draw a developmental line from Bateson via family therapy to systemic counselling. There are a range of different directions within family therapy, for example, structured, strategic and systemic family therapy. Systemic family therapy has the greatest influence on systemic counselling. The development of the counselling tool called *Circular questions* (Tomm 2000) is one example. Systemic thinking is holistic thinking based on the belief that everything in nature is connected and that human beings create the conditions that influence each others' behaviour.

Circular thinking is one of the central concepts. According to Bateson, we have a tendency to think in cause – effect relations. Because of this, we often see only one solution to a problem. Circular thinking helps us to see that reasons are complex and that there is a mutual

relationship between people and actions. As a counselling tool, circular questioning can support the student in her effort to develop a better understanding of the relationship and interactions she has with other people. By using these questions, the teacher can help the student to extend her perception of what she wants to discuss in the counselling sessions. The questions are organised in four main groups (op. cit.): 1) Questions that explore differences, 2) Effect questions, 3) Triadic questions and 4) Hypothetical questions. The following example was taken from a group session in pre-school teacher education. The group, which was working on a project, had 6 members. Only five were present on this occasion.

The counsellor arrives first and sits down at the table. The student teachers arrive. Some say hello and others just look at the floor. One student is missing. The counsellor senses a tension in the group and asks: "How is the cooperation in this group?" It appears that the group is frustrated and tired of the fact that one student is not following up on the agreements that are made. She is often absent and makes a variety of excuses. The counsellor says that they will place an empty chair at the table and pretend that the absent student, Hannah, is sitting there. "This is to remind us that Hannah is a part of the group and that we need to take care of her." The counsellor asks circular questions: "How do you relate to Hannah when she doesn't show up?" "How does she react to your responses?" "How do you think she perceives about this situation?" "What would you say to her now if she were here?" These questions explore the group's relationship with Hannah. Maria is a particularly articulate student. The counsellor wants to explore the relationship between Maria and the rest of the group. "What do you think about what Maria is saying?" "What do you think Maria is thinking when she says what she says?" During the counselling session the counsellor keeps referring to Hannah: "How do you think Hannah is feeling now?" "What do you think Hannah would think or say now?"

The counsellor uses circular questions in this session. It always constitutes an ethical dilemma to talk to student teachers about an absent student. The group is asked to visualise Hannah, in order to protect her. In my experience, student teachers are more considerate towards the absent student when there is an empty chair representing him/her. One student in this group put this experience into words: *"The counsellor forced us to consider Hannah's situation. That gave us new thoughts. It was effective to have Hannah "present".*

COUNSELLING AS GESTALT THINKING

Gestalt counselling is based on gestalt theory which was developed by Fritz Perls (1992). This counselling model stressing a holistic view of the human being, means that emotions, thoughts and body reactions, relationships and system understandings are all themes in counselling. According to Gestalt theory, the human being develops in interaction with the environment, each influencing and depending on the other. This means that the focus in a counselling session is not exclusively on the isolated issue or situation that is on the agenda. By implication, it is therefore essential to examine how the student experiences the issue in her own context. Gestalt counselling is here-and-now focused and process orientated. By becoming aware of how resources are bottled up, it is possible for student teachers to learn how to release them and use them more constructively. Moreover, since one of the pillars of Gestalt counselling is existentialism, freedom, choice and responsibility are central elements.

The skills a Gestalt counsellor must include the gestalt questions^{iv} and a range of methods. Some of these methods are illustrated in the following examples. The first example is an extract from an individual counselling session with a student in the pre-school teacher education programme. She is being given feedback on a written note about her wishes for the counselling setting.

The counsellor starts by saying: "This is an interesting note where you build on your own experiences." The student takes a deep breath and seems to relax. The counsellor then asks the student to comment the note. She doesn't have anything to say, so the counsellor goes on to add that she will make some suggestions that could improve the assignment. She stresses that "It's up to you whether you want to act upon my advice. We have talked about this in class. You have the freedom of choice." The counsellor notices that the student is getting teary and her body seems tense and asks "I can see tears in your eyes. How do you feel now?" The student says that it is difficult; that she has put a lot of work into the note and it is still not good enough. The student continues crying and the counsellor says: "It's ok to cry." She waits calmly until the student teachers wipe away the tears, and then asks: "How are you just now?" The student says she is feeling better. The student and the counsellor then have a conversation about freedom of choice and about being counselled.

The lecturer in this example discussed this experience with a colleague and her reflections upon it were as follows:

I believe that it is important to tell student teachers that they have the freedom of choice. This may have been too much for this student. I could see the anxiety in her eyes. Were my actions ethically appropriate? On the other hand, is it good practice to protect student teachers all the time? I believe the student was stronger after this session. But there is another perspective: What happened to the feedback on the assignment? That aspect lost focus. Would it be ethically appropriate to ignore the teary eyes and continue the feedback session? I think I will offer her a new counselling session.

The next example is selected from a group counselling session involving six student teachers in the pre-school teacher education programme. This is the first counselling session in connection with a project. The student teachers have set the following agenda:

We wish to get help to find out what we want to achieve with this project.

Each student was given a large piece of paper and a packet of crayons, and asked to draw a picture of what they would like to do in this project. Once they have completed their individual drawing, they go on to counsel each other in pairs. The counsellor asks: "What do you see in your own and your partner's pictures? Are there any common threads?" Finally, the whole group looks at all of the pictures, and they realise that they have six different topics they would like to focus on. One of them remarked: "We have become aware that initially we have nothing in common. This is a good thing." The counsellor replies: "You are now going to put forward arguments for why the group should choose your topic for this project." The group is left with two topics after this round and the counselling session is over. In a meta discussion afterwards, the student teachers discussed the advantages of drawing as a method and suggested other areas where this could be used; for example, to develop cooperation between pre-school and families, and also internally with colleagues.

Drawing as a method can be used in individual and group counselling sessions. The strength of this method is that it invites the student teachers to express themselves without words, and

that it increases awareness by making the implicit become explicit. Moreover, the use of colour can make student teachers more aware of tensions and values implicit in their own experiences, thoughts, emotions and attitudes. (Tveiten 2008). Finally, drawing can also make the student teachers more aware of options and possibilities.

COUNSELLING – THERAPY

It is important to be aware of the boundary between therapy and counselling. Since the same methods in therapy and counselling, when does the counselling become therapy? This can be seen as an ethical dilemma. In teacher education, counselling is related to the teaching profession. Emotions that emerge during a counselling session may need to be addressed in therapy. An example might be a session in which a student's problematic relationship with her mother is raised. Issues related to how this relationship has influenced her work with children and adults could be discussed in counselling, while issues related to the relationship itself should be dealt with in therapeutic counselling. It is a challenge for the lecturer to be aware of and maintain these boundaries, and to explain this to the student teachers.

CONCLUSION

On the basis of three surveys, it has been argued that lecturers in the educational setting in higher education need to give counselling a chance, by employing some of the range of counselling methods described. An important question to ask at this point is: "Are student teachers able to request counselling at any time?" The answer to this question needs to be seen in the light of the educational process. Student teachers at the start of their studies normally need more lectures and advice than those in the final stages, as do student teachers at the start of a group project. Thus, the first thing to bear in mind is the timing of advice. Secondly, if we are going to give advice, it is important to make it clear that the advice is based on our own experiences, which have been acquired in a different context from that of the student. Thus, lecturers need to stress the student teachers' freedom of choice when it comes to acting upon such advice. At the same time, however, they need to be aware that student teachers often become frustrated if their questions do not receive clear answers:

We had a teacher who redirected the questions to us all the time, and it was very frustrating... "That's counselling" she told us. "But what about giving some advice?" I asked.... But no, we were supposed to find the answers ourselves.

Quality reforms in teacher education have increased expectations with regard to counselling. In order to meet these expectations, we need to explore the content, organisation, aims and methods of counselling. Professionals in higher education for teacher training will need training if they are to use the three counselling models described in this article. Most teachers are familiar with the reflection on practice approach, while they are less well-informed regarding systemic and gestalt counselling. This shortcoming can be rectified by professional development and training courses. Teachers in pre-schools and schools are offered courses in all three counselling models at many university colleges. Isn't the quality of counselling within the college as important?

Give counselling a chance!

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ⁱ Praxis theory is a person's private, complex and continually changing system of knowledge, experience and values, and as such, it influences teaching practice. (Handal & Lauvås 1999:19-20).

ⁱⁱ To qualify the counselling dialogue, the counsellor needs to relate to the praxis triangle, to shift between support and challenge, to employ various perspectives and to utilise meta-communication. (Handal & Lauvås 1999:123-130).

ⁱⁱⁱ The praxis triangle is divided into three levels: the P-1 level illustrates the action level, the P-2 level illustrates the theoretical and experiential explanations and the P-3 level represents the action's ethical foundation

^{iv} Gestalt questions: How do you feel right now? What are you thinking right now? How is your body feeling right now? What do you want right now? What are you expecting right now? What are you avoiding right now? What is preventing you from...?