

Inclusion as a Natural Extension of the Person-Centered Approach: Welcoming All Learners

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Abstract. *During my attendance at ADPCA, I could not help but reflect on the benefits that the person-centered approach offers special education. In my professional experience as a teacher and therapeutic staff support, I have often found myself wondering the best way to reach children, and how to help them truly learn. Turning to a collection of essays, papers, and talks given by Carl Rogers gave me a great deal of philosophical direction, and creative inspiration. Looking at research on inclusion, especially by those who advocate and assess the effectiveness of a learner-centered approach to education, the efficacy of the approach became clear to me. Coming away from the conference I felt excited to incorporate the person-centered approach into my future work as a therapist. I now feel prepared to incorporate this approach in my current education profession, and into my own personal life. This paper presents reactions to the 24th Annual Association for the Development of the Person Centered Approach (ADPCA) Conference held at Kutztown University in June, 2009. This paper shares my experiences and reflections on how education and inclusion have been influenced by the Person-Centered Approach, as well as how the Person-Centered Approach can continue to enrich and infill special education practices with life and energy. Case Illustrations.*

Inclusion is a natural extension of the Person Centered Approach. The basic premise of inclusion is that non-traditional learners do better when they are welcomed into the same community and classroom as any other learner. The debate in special education today rages on about movements in behavior modification, life skills classrooms, and the inclusion of special needs students (Wisconsin Education Association Council, 2009), Abosi summarizes that:

Education has three main roles: it is developmental because it develops the unique qualities of a child; it differentiates between learners because it treats every child as an individual, appreciating individual differences; and it is integrative because it accommodates people of varying backgrounds (culture, beliefs and values) thereby

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allowing for a cooperative approach in problem solving (Abosi, 2008).

Rogers on Education

Inclusion, or the practice of bringing non-traditional learners into the community of the typical classroom, is a most natural and meaningful application of the core conditions to special education (cf. Rogers, 1989, p.221). Rogers' perspective on the broken nature of the educational system in America appears in three papers published over the span of 30 years, including: *Personal Thoughts on Teaching and Learning* (1957), *The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning* (1967), and *The Politics of Education* (Rogers, 1977/1989). It was Rogers' opinion that the core conditions exist in the typical realm of human relationships, but are much more essential in the therapeutic relationship in order to bring about any sort of change. He writes:

...the therapeutic relationship is seen as a heightening of the constructive qualities which often exist in part in other relationships, and an extension through time of qualities which often exist in part in other relationships, and an extension through time of the qualities which in other relationships tend at best to be momentary (Rogers, 1989, p.231).

Rogers' three essential qualities of person-centered educational relationships directly correspond to counselor qualities of genuineness, acceptance, and empathy in client-centered relationships. These include: 1) Realness in the Facilitator of Learning, 2) Prizing, Acceptance and Trust, and 3) Empathic Understanding (Rogers, 1989, p.306-311, from *The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning* written in 1967). He states:

There are three conditions that constitute this growth-promoting climate, whether we are speaking of the relationship between the therapist and client, parent and

child, leader and group, teacher and student, or administrator and staff. The conditions apply, in fact, in any situation in which the development of the person is the goal (Rogers, 1989, p.135, from A Client-centered/Person-centered Approach to Therapy).

Psychological Contact and Inclusive Education

The person-centered relationship between a student and teacher must begin with “two persons in psychological contact.” In *The Politics of Education*, Rogers is critical of the teacher as leader and source of knowledge and power from which educational systems traditionally stem. He emphasized that a learning relationship is one of facilitation, not domination, and called for an egalitarian approach to heal the educational system, in contrast to the norm where “The teacher is the possessor of power, the student the one who obeys.”

Rogers draws a comparison between the medical model of therapy and the educational system as a hierarchy, “where power rules and democracy and its values are ignored and scorned in practice” (Rogers, 1989). In the hierarchy of education, the student is at the bottom of the totem pole, and the special needs student is lower still. I myself have heard reference to working with special needs students as “glorified babysitting” and see the results of this hierarchal system to be giving the typical student little power or respect, and the special needs student none at all.

During the ADPCA conference, I attended Jeffrey Cornelius-White’s presentation *Learner-Centered Instruction: The Evolving Model of Humanistic Education*, presented by. Cornelius-White emphasized how much more readily students learn when they are engaged and interested in the subject. A great deal of the engagement is due to a healthy sharing relationship between students and instructor. Cornelius-White’s own session was learner-centered; he went around the room and asked us each what we would be interested in learning about, and then spoke our areas of interest. I asked him his views on using learner-center/person-centered principles in a special needs setting. Cornelius-White felt it would be an enriching and

applicable area, yet felt he could not speak to it in specifically, since he himself has mostly worked with college students (ADPCA, 2009).

The second core condition that Rogers writes is, “The first, whom we shall term client, is in a state of incongruence, being vulnerable or anxious” (Roger, 1989). The presence of this condition is somewhat different in education than counseling, because a student comes for learning, or with the expectation to learn something from the teacher. Possibly anxious or vulnerable, in either case, a student is looking for the teacher to provide something.

Special needs students may be especially vulnerable or anxious, and feel out of place, undervalued, incompetent or misunderstood from in the past. Incongruence may exist in any student, but more so in students with different needs. Take for example, a young male student with a diagnosis of attention deficit disorder. The student has been repeatedly told, either through actions or directly, that he is different and not a good learner; even told he is a drain on the classroom. He may come to the educational experience with resentment, mistrust toward the teacher, and with feelings of inadequacy and frustration at his abilities, yet he still comes with expectations of what a teacher might provide him.

The authors of the article, *Supporting Students with Dyslexia at the Secondary Level: An Emotional Model of Literacy* seem to have a clear understanding of the impact that a student’s own perceived educational inabilities have on his or her emotional health. In the article, the authors encourage the reader to address the emotional consequences of dyslexia:

Consequently, providing appropriate learning opportunities should go far beyond teaching the mechanics of reading. It is the responsibility of teachers to support in a holistic way the personal development of students who need to overcome their dyslexia. [Many]...studies demonstrate the emotional “scars” of frustration, shame, and depression that can result from lack of identification and appropriate support for young people (Long, MacBlain & MacBlain, 2007).

Considering the emotional health of students, Long, McBlain and McBlain (2001) assert the paramount importance of student gains in emotional literacy and ability to express emotions about literacy, to the eventual achievement of reading competency. If a student becomes fearful of a subject, the fear itself can hold the student back from improvement in that subject. It is therefore essential to the student's growth, to acknowledge and ameliorate that fear while at the same time working to improve their academic skills.

Congruence and Inclusive Education

That "the second person, whom we shall term the therapist, is congruent or integrated in the relationship" (Rogers, 1989) also applies to being a good teacher. Teachers bring all their past experiences into the classroom. Very early on in my experience working in special education, I realized how much my own congruence impacted my ability to teach. If I was tired, angry, upset, happy, or distracted, it had a major impact on reaching my students. Not only that, but I also brought my own relationship with school, authority, and individual subject matter into the school with me.

Take a simple example from my experiences of math. I struggled with math throughout my educational experience to the extent that I still have little personal enjoyment or even interest in the subject. One day a young girl was conquering extra math sheets with gusto, she delightfully whipped through sheets that contained my least favorite of functions: multiplication. I was surprised and gladdened by her delight congratulating her, "Wow, Joy, you are so brave to be doing all that hard multiplication." In an instant I took the wind out of her sails. She picked up from my statement that math was something to fear and is hard, not something to enjoy. She quickly incorporated my language and demeanor towards the sheet she had been previously relishing in. Luckily, I realized what I had done, and managed to do a quick patch job; yet I was amazed how my own incongruence could directly affect a student. It is fully evident from my own experience working with children how essential it is to possess this integration and congruence.

Rogers often uses the word “realness” to describe a congruent person. A congruent person is never playing a part. They are their real selves, and to be real they must fully know themselves. Rogers describes the realness a therapist must radiate in order to be effective:

...the therapist should be... a congruent, genuine, integrated, person. It means that within the relationship he is freely and deeply himself, with his actual experience accurately represented by his awareness of himself. It is the opposite of presenting a facade, either knowingly or unknowingly.

Rogers writes in detail about the realness a teacher should display. He beautifully describes how a teacher should approach students:

Perhaps the most basic of these essential studies attitudes is realness and genuineness. When the facilitator is a real person, being what she is, entering into a relationship with the learner without presenting a front or a facade, she is much more likely to be effective. This means that she comes into a direct personal encounter with the learner, meeting her on a person-to-person basis. It means that she is being herself, not denying herself (1989, p. 306).

Meeting a student or child on a person-to person basis is powerful. A great deal of my success working with children is based on this idea. Although I have long been aware of Rogers, I would not necessarily have known to cite him as the reason I operate this way in my teaching. I have noticed for a long time, that I treat children of all ages differently than do most adults. I talk to them just as I would to anyone else. I listen to them just the same and respect their time and opinions. Many people seem to treat children like they are something else, like they are not people, or half people. I think it's strange that most people do this, and I have yet to meet a child who will not talk or interact with me. For the special needs child this half-person treatment

is exacerbated, not only are they half people, but they are sometimes viewed as broken or sick. Add in a fear of unpredictability, and not knowing how to “handle them,” and it becomes clear how person-less special needs children are perceived to be. It is difficult for me to not become vehement about this subject. Children are people. Those with special needs are people. Children with special needs are 100% people and deserve to be treated as such.

Research Support for Empowered Students

There is a great deal of research to support the idea that giving special needs students the power to control their education and life is a more useful philosophy than that held by traditional special education. It truly comes down to empowerment. Empowered learners learn better. Keyes and Owen-Johnson (2003) give a practical description of how IEPs have revolutionized special education by taking it from an institutionalized and pathologized practice, to a more person-centered approach. Keyes and Owen-Johnson (2003) assert that while special education has made great strides, there are many ways IEPs can be generated and followed using a stronger person-centered focus, with even greater and more positive results.

Learner-centered education reasons that if students set their own goals, they are more likely to meet them. This simple difference can change IEPs from dreaded tally-marking sessions, to a self-determined plan of goals and rewards towards which the student works. In a study of direct student involvement with IEPs, especially during planning meetings, Arndt, Konrad, and Test, *Effect of the Self-Directed IEP on Student Participation in Planning Meetings*, (2006) observed that such meetings can help special needs children gain self-determination, leadership, and problem solving skills.

Special needs students often have had much in their lives determined for them, educationally and otherwise (Algozzine et. al, 2001). Many special needs adults find healthy decision-making and life planning difficult since well meaning but misdirected special education practices have been inimical to these individuals acquiring these crucial life skills (Algozzine et. al, 2001). Recent legislation has heightened

attention to issues of self-determination, and has made teaching such skills required by law:

The self-determination movement is among the most important current issues in the fields of special education and rehabilitation today. The right to make one's own decisions about life and future is viewed as an inalienable right by American adults without disabilities, but has only recently been recognized for adults with disabilities (Algozzine et. al, 2001).

If a student has never had to make their own decisions or determine their own path, how are they to face the challenges of a life filled with decision making? In a person-centered or learning-centered environment, the learner leads. Self-determination is the rule, rather than the exception. Many educators strongly endorse a person centered approach in order to counteract this common shortcoming (Keyes & Owen-Johnson, 2003; Algozzine et. al, 2001; Thousand et. al, 1999).

Unconditional Positive Regard and Inclusive Education

The fourth condition of client-centered therapy, that “the therapist experiences unconditional positive regard for the person,” is a transformative and powerful idea. As Rogers (1989, p.225) explains, “It means there are no conditions of acceptance, no feeling of ‘I like you only if you are thus and so.’ It means a prizing of the person...” The therapeutic relationship is like no other relationship. The therapist’s job is to see and to love a full person, in order that they may fully see and love themselves. This means feeling a warmth and acceptance for both flaws and strengths; more than in the typical relationship.

Person-centered education, especially for special needs learners, expresses “... a caring for the learner, but a non-possessive caring. It is an acceptance of his other individual as a separate person, having worth in her own right. It is a basic trust -- a belief that this other person is somehow fundamentally trustworthy” (Rogers, 1989, pp.308-309). Prizing is emotionally essential in a learning-oriented relationship. It is easy for students to feel admired for academic skill,

or distanced due to lack of skill. Academic skill should not be equated with likability and goodness, especially for the special needs student. Although an incredibly complex area to navigate, it is essential for all students to feel valued by their teacher, no matter their innate or learned abilities.

In a thesis on different perspectives on empowering learners, Adams, Cooper, Johnson, and Wojtysiak (1996) found that parents, teacher, administration and students have very differing senses of a student's academic and behavioral abilities. Students typically have higher expectations of their academic abilities than their teachers, and lower expectations of their behavior than their parents. Furthermore, "...other school personnel who have frequent contact with special needs students also have low expectations for these children. They treat them as though they are less capable than they are, thus discouraging them from developing to their full potential." "Students need to buy into the importance of education and the benefits of learning. Often they may have to overcome their home situations, parental expectations and their limited abilities" (Adams et. al., 1996).

The determination of the learner can truly make all the difference; yet parents and teachers may be inadvertently holding back students by not believing in and honoring their power to be self-determining. A person-centered approach in special education could drastically change this mindset and empower students and transform the environment in which our children now learn.

Empathy and Inclusion

The fifth condition is that "The therapist experiences an empathic understanding of the client's internal frame of reference and endeavors to communicate this experience to the client" (Rogers, 1989). Speaking directly to educators on the importance of empathy Rogers states:

This attitude of standing in the other's shoes, of viewing the world through the student's eyes, is almost unheard of in the classroom. One could listen to thousands of ordinary classroom interactions without

coming across one instance of clearly communicated, sensitively accurate, empathetic understanding. But it has a tremendous releasing effect when it occurs (1989, p.311 from *The Interpersonal Relationship in the Facilitation of Learning*).

Such deep empathy is vital to the special needs student. What is it like to move through your day when you have autism? Perhaps faces are overwhelming. Their eyes contain too much information, and they expect you to answer verbally when you do not understand what words represent. Even thinking for a moment what it might be like to be autistic can serve a student. Is verbal, face-to-face communication too difficult? Perhaps we can communicate with play dough, or by patting each other on the back, or making patterns with blocks. I often feel that even just simple connection is an achievement when working with nontraditional learners. Being observant enough to break through barriers and communicate is a triumph. Having empathy for a student's perspective and world is essential. In order to be able to teach anything, one must find out how they learn.

In the history of special education, there has been focus on teaching interpersonal skills in order to improve relationships with peers and family members. Empathy is being able to interact and be understanding of others. Unfortunately, there has been little taught about having healthy relationships with oneself.

Communication of UPR and Empathy Achieved and Inclusion

The sixth and final condition is "The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved" (Rogers, 1989). A client must really feel that the therapist understands and prizes them. If a therapist does not communicate understanding and warmth to the client, how then is the client to be aware of the nature of the relationship?

I think we have all come across people who seem to be good listeners, who look like they are listening intently, but when they react to what you have said it is obvious they did not truly hear you.

Conversely, most people have also had the pleasure of interacting with someone really understanding, even understanding what you cannot quite put into words. Not only is this about listening and truly understanding, but also being able to express the essence of what you heard so that the client knows you understand.

Applying the sixth condition in the teacher-student relationship involves the teacher conveying acceptance and warmth toward each learner and toward classroom contributions students make. Also it means accurately representing where a learner is, for example saying to a student, “you understand how money works, but all those silver coins look the same to you, it is really tricky.” I remember as a child being endlessly frustrated when a teacher would think they understood what I was confused about, but really they did not. Other times, students would ask a question and receive an answer that made fellow students wonder if the teacher even listened to the question.

Condition six is difficult in the educational climate because the teacher must to an extent understand how the student understands and problem solves, what modalities they favor (i.e. oral, visual, kinesthetic), and then convey this all in explaining course material and answering questions. To accomplish this takes observation, time and creativity on the part of the instructor. This individualized focus on each student in the classroom is at the heart of a learner-centered approach in the educational environment.

A thoughtful article on the ADPCA website by Barry Grant about the non-directive nature of the person-centered approach entitled *Principled and Instrumental Nondirectiveness in Person-Centered and Client-Centered Therapy* speaks to the type of being with a student described above. Grant expresses how learning should flow as a natural extension of a student’s interests and passions:

Client-centered therapy fully respects clients’ right to determine their path in life. It makes no assumptions about what people need or how they should be free. It respects clients as authors of their own lives and provides them with a space to rewrite their story, if they want to. Ibsen describes liberty as giving each individual

the right to liberate himself, each according to his personal needs (1989).

I am inclined to rephrase this last idea of “liberty as giving each individual the right to educate himself, each according to his personal needs.” Imagine how this would revolutionize the educational system: giving children the right to determine their path in education and life, as well as making no assumptions about what children need or how they should learn. This is a bit philosophical in nature, and in practical application moving our current educational system to this place would be a mighty battle.

Conclusion

Though the following quote may seem overly long, for me, it shines light on the heart of this matter: the transformative power of knowledge and learning when it is a truly person-centered approach. Grant quoted Edwards in his paper on the nondirective nature of the person-centered approach, expressing this inspiring idea:

Wittgenstein’s [notion of sound human understanding] is the expression of a religious commitment; it is the expression that is, of a fundamental and pervasive stance to all that is, a stance which treats the world as a *miracle*, as an object of love, not of will. The sound human understanding is the mark of such love, for it is a feature of love that it never literalizes any perception; love is always ready to go deeper, to see through whatever has already been seen. From the perspective of loving attention, no story is ever over; no depths are ever fully plumbed. The world and its beings are a miracle, never to be comprehended, with depths never to be exhausted. Thus the sound human understanding is essentially a religious response.... It is a response that makes sheer acknowledgement, not control, central (1989).

Although some may balk at the metaphysical tone of this passage, I found it beautiful. Learning should be miraculous and love based, students should be encouraged to chase their interests. Knowledge is endless, any subject can be explored deeper and deeper, and teachers should acknowledge and respect victories in learning, not look to control them.

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