

# Adjusting to Multiple Roles

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When you reminisce about your own educational experiences and reflect on those teachers who were most inspirational, who made the greatest difference in your life? Who stands out as the teacher you admired most? It's likely that in addition to any expertise or wisdom they demonstrated, there was something about their personal qualities, the ways they carried themselves, their integrity and honesty, that earned your respect and trust. It was not just the knowledge they held that made them such wonderful teachers—it was the personal and passionate way in which they communicated their caring for you. You sensed that they had your best interests in mind. They listened and responded as if you really mattered to them.

Assuming this phenomenon is fairly universal—in other words, that students are influenced not only by instruction but also by a teacher's caring and compassion—then teachers really must have specialized training in all of their various responsibilities; this includes not only your job as a source of knowledge but also your roles as a mentor, caregiver, authority figure, role model, coach, surrogate parent, and limit setter.

## **A SKILLED HELPER**

You have had systematic education in the materials and methods of pedagogy, the construction of lesson plans and completion of individual progress reports, and the use of audiovisual and computer technology. But what about training in the other roles you will play in students' lives—as a model of personal effectiveness, as a compassionate listener, as a skilled helper?

You will be called on daily, if not hourly, to wear a number of different hats and function in a variety of diverse roles for which you may not be adequately prepared. What will you do when a child confides to you that she is pregnant? How will you handle the student who is falling apart emotionally before your eyes? What will you do when you suspect that a child is abusing drugs or is suffering from an eating disorder? What will you say to the child who approaches you for understanding because he

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feels lonely? What will you do when a student solicits your promise to keep a secret, but then tells you that she is breaking the law and intends to continue doing so?

Teachers are not just receptacles of knowledge who impart pearls of wisdom every time a bell rings. By choosing this profession, you have dedicated yourself to influencing children's lives in a number of different ways. To accomplish this mission, you will do so much more than stand before a classroom of attentive eyes and ears. You will develop relationships with children that are built on trust, mutual respect, and true affection. And from those alliances, children will come to you with their problems. But more often, they will cry out for help in more subtle ways via signs that you will not be able to read without additional training.

Your job is to develop yourself as a skilled helper—a task that will involve mastering a number of counseling and consulting skills. This training will permit you to observe and make sense of what children are thinking, feeling, and doing. It will allow you to gain access to their inner worlds, earn their trust, and truly understand what they are experiencing. From such an empathic position, you will help them feel understood. You will help them reach greater clarity. You will help them make difficult decisions. You will help them take constructive action. When indicated, you will urge them to seek professional help. And they will listen to you because you have the helping skills and an authentic interest in their welfare.

### **COUNSELING SKILLS FOR TEACHERS**

Teachers in other countries function quite differently from the way we do in North America. In parts of Asia, for example, there are no school counselors—not because of lack of funds but rather because of recognition that teachers are the ones who are best positioned to serve in counseling roles. They are the ones, after all, who interact with children on a daily basis. If a child is going to approach an adult for assistance or advice, it will probably not be the person who arranges her schedule once per semester; it will be the teacher whom she has come to trust over many hours of work and play together.

Whether you like it or not, whether you prepare for the role or not, you will be sought out as a confidante by children who have nowhere else to turn. They will expect a number of things from you, some that you cannot deliver (finding the “right” answer), some that you won't have time to do (continue an ongoing counseling type of dialogue), and some that you should not do (take over their lives and tell them what to do). Nevertheless, if you are equipped with some counseling skills, just some basic helping strategies like listening and responding, you will be amazed at the services you can render in helping children gain better clarity of their feelings, better understanding of their motives, and greater resolve

in following through on a plan to change their behavior. Adding counseling skills to your repertoire of educational methodologies will help you in a number of ways.

1. You will notice an improvement in your personal relationships. Because learning counseling skills will increase your sensitivity and responsiveness, this training will affect the ways you relate to other people. You will notice yourself becoming more attuned to others' feelings. You will become clearer in your communications and more expressive of your own needs. Finally, you will experience a renewed commitment to working toward greater intimacy in your relationships with friends and family.

*I've been amazed at how attentive I am to my family when I get home. At first, I was pretty resistant to learning this stuff. Gee, the last thing in the world I need is more work to do; I'm already so overwhelmed with stuff. But I've been delighted at how learning to be more responsive to my students at school has also made me a better listener to other people in my life.*

2. You will become more respected as a colleague in your school. Just as high-level interpersonal skills allow you to create better relationships in your personal life, they give you the confidence and ability to forge constructive alliances with administrators, other teachers in your school, and support staff. Everyone wants a friend who listens well, is empathic, is a clear thinker, and responds to his or her needs. One other benefit: When you learn to speak the language of counselors, you will be able to make more appropriate referrals of children in need of help.

*I have one friend who's a counselor in the district, and he was telling me how he gets about 90 percent of his referrals from about 10 percent of the teachers. I'm one of them, I guess, who refers lots of kids. I don't think this means that my students are more screwed up than others, just that I pay attention to their emotional stuff. I know I can't help them myself, but I try to get them started and then have the counselor close the deal.*

3. You will become more influential in your work in the classroom. Children respond best to teachers who model what they themselves would like to become someday. They respect you and respond to you not only for your expertise but also for your caring and compassion. Quite simply, counseling skills will allow you to create better relationships with children in a shorter period of time. Students will be more inclined to trust you and to work hard to gain your respect if they sense the same from you. These skills thus form the glue bonding together everything else you have learned about being a superlative teacher.

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*Kids see me at their plays, softball and soccer games, and recitals. They know that I care about them not because I tell them I do but because I show them by my behavior. I'm someone, maybe the only person in their lives, whom they can truly count on.*

4. You will be able to address children's most important concerns at the same time you counteract your own fears of ineptitude and failure. Beginning teachers, in particular, have myriad apprehensions regarding their own abilities and potential as professionals. Several teacher education students, on the verge of beginning their student teaching, talk about some of their greatest fears.

Karyn feels quite confident about her ability to relate to children; however, she feels most unprepared conducting parent conferences: *"I dread having to explain to parents why I do things the way I do. I don't know how on earth I will ever get them to try different things at home that will make my job easier."*

Randi, as well, worries most about how she will react to certain parents—especially the ones who don't seem to care about their children: *"I'm afraid I will lose my temper, become completely out of control, when I talk to some of these parents who do such damage to their kids. I know if I do that I will just end up hurting the kids as well as my own situation."*

Travis mentions that his greatest fear is encountering the child who is being neglected or abused at home: *"I know what I am supposed to do: report the situation to protective services. But sometimes things aren't so clear. What happens to the child after I do that? Maybe I'll just make things worse. I just hope I have the courage to do what is right."*

Tanya is quite nervous about her responsibility of being a model for kids: *"It's so scary to think that everything I do and say will be watched so closely. Children are so impressionable, and I certainly would like to be the kind of person whom they admire. That is going to be hard for me because I'm not used to that kind of responsibility. I was the youngest in my family, and I'm used to looking up to everyone else."*

Nick wonders if he will ever learn to disconnect from the intense emotional problems that he will encounter as a special education teacher: *"Will I be able to save enough of myself for my family when I get home? Some of these kids are just so messed up and so needy—they just need so much attention. If I am going to last very long, I know I will have to back off, to separate their problems from my own."*

Cassie is reluctantly honest in admitting she has a problem with patience: *"It boggles my mind to think that I will be in a room with 20 kindergarteners for six hours every day. Will I have the restraint to be gentle when some of the little ones try to push me over the edge?"* She also wonders if she will be able to keep her biases under wraps: *"I know we are all prejudiced to some extent. I just hope that I can withhold my judgments when I'm dealing with a troubled student. Such a volatile situation could have disastrous results if I'm not able to keep my own opinions to myself."*

Nila considers herself oversensitive to criticism and overly cautious about everything she says. She wonders how that will affect her ability to be helpful: *"I become obsessed with saying the 'right' thing the 'right' way. I don't want to hurt or embarrass anyone. I'm concerned that I won't do anything at all because I don't want to make any mistakes."*

Each of these examples illustrates another way that counseling skills will help you neutralize your own fears of failure in trying to be helpful to children. That is the wonder and power of this training: As you become more skilled and accomplished as a helper of others, you become more proficient at applying what you know to your own life.

Counseling skills will help you not only adjust more flexibly to the variety of roles you will take on in your classroom and school, but also help yourself in a number of ways to which we already alluded:

- Enhancing the intimacy of all your relationships
- Making you more sensitive to your own inner feelings, as well as more fluent in expressing them
- Working through interpersonal conflicts more easily
- Handling discipline problems with less disruption and drama
- Talking yourself through upsetting situations in order to reduce negative feelings
- Processing unforeseen problems in constructive, systematic ways
- Confronting your own unresolved issues that get in the way of your being more effective personally and professionally

What all this means is that the more proficient you become in the counseling skills presented in this book, the more attractive you become as a person as well as a teacher.

## **LIFE INSIDE THE CLASSROOM**

Teaching is, first and foremost, a helping profession. While structuring a learning environment, the educator has to be aware of students' physical,

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emotional, and social needs, as well as their intellectual needs. Teachers must create a pleasant atmosphere in their classrooms where students will be safe physically and secure psychologically to explore the world of ideas. From the moment the students enter the room, the teacher begins to develop rapport with them and build trust—whether they stay for 45 minutes or the whole day. The educator must be kind and helpful, inviting and stimulating, as students are guided through learning activities. The teacher must work toward building the self-respect and self-esteem of each student. Furthermore, he or she must work toward fostering tolerance and cooperation in the classroom by adapting methods and styles according to the cultural backgrounds and individual needs of students. The teacher must prepare the children to interact with one another in a positive, constructive manner. Students must learn to be good citizens, to interpret the events taking place around them, and to make decisions. It is the teacher's responsibility to provide these experiences.

In addition to these roles, the educator must get to know each student, his or her ups and downs, and the momentary and long-term stresses of each individual. The teacher must offer support and encouragement to each child—from Fernando, who lost a portion of his finger in an accident; to Amy, whose new baby brother came home the night before; to Vanessa, who has such a low frustration tolerance; to Brian, whose father moved out of the house last week. Changing friendships, fear of failure, and other issues occupy the minds of students. And the teacher must decide how best to approach the events that take place in the lives of children—one-to-one, through reading a story, or through group discussion.

At the same time, the teacher must pay attention to external events that disrupt the daily schedule. Change interrupts the learning process, whether it is an impromptu pep assembly, a fire drill, or academic testing. A crisis in the community will take precedence over any planned topic. In several cities, for example, acts of violence have distracted kids from concentrating on relatively less important priorities, such as homework. Children needed to be reassured that they were safe and that nothing would harm them. They talked about the impact of violence; for example, in one city, they talked about how far they had to go to get food stamps after the welfare office had been burned. Immediate needs had to be addressed. Similarly, students in another town talked about depression, loneliness, and the responsibilities of friendship after one student tried to commit suicide.

Much of the learning that takes place in class has little to do with the scheduled lesson plans. Kids have their own agendas and their own interests, many of which have little to do with whatever you think is important. After all, how important can history, handwriting, or math be if your major priority in life is finding enough food to eat, making up with your best friend, getting a part in a play, or stopping others from teasing you?

Life inside the classroom involves not only the scheduled activities and subjects you have planned, but also many other issues that will arise spontaneously from current events or students' lives. You must be ready

to address these important issues rather than ignore them. Even more challenging, you must find ways to integrate what you teach into the cultural and personal context of each student. Counseling skills can help you draw out students better to find out what they know and desire, as well as to respond to these needs more powerfully.

## **A DAY IN THE LIFE**

A teacher will interact with counselors, social workers, school psychologists, deans, principals, parents, and other teachers—not to mention hundreds of children—on a regular basis. Whether evaluating the present or planning for the future, discussing a new policy or the behavior of an individual student, the teacher will be called on to give his or her views and recommendations. To work cooperatively with other professionals and parents, the teacher must also be able to establish rapport with these adults.

Relationships with students and other professionals are always evolving. Our goal is to provide you with the inspiration and motivation to develop the interpersonal skills so vital for the effective teacher. You will develop a clearer idea of what most teachers face if you watch over the shoulder of one professional who goes about fulfilling her daily multiple roles as a teacher.

As Mrs. Neubrith opens the door to her car and prepares to gather her things to start her day, she sees a group of kids congregating by the side of the building. Her heart skips a beat: Will she have to break up a fight? Perhaps they are transacting some illicit business or improper behavior that she will have to stop. No, this time she discovers an innocent gathering of friends who are huddled together for protection against the cold. She breathes a sigh of relief.

It is 7:10 in the morning, and already Mrs. Neubrith, high school teacher extraordinaire, is beginning the first of several hundred interactions she will have throughout the day with different children and colleagues. As she approaches the door and mentally reviews what lies ahead, besides her usual teaching responsibilities, she knows that she will talk to one of the assistant principals about a new student in her class. She needs to get in to see the principal about a workshop she would like to attend that will require supplemental funding. One of her lunch partners is going through a divorce, so she knows that will be a focus of discussion during the day. Also, she was alerted that someone from the district office would be monitoring some of her classes for a research study he is conducting.

During her preparation period, Mrs. Neubrith will talk to the school counselor about one of her students who is tracked in college prep but has much more interest in going into the military. As the day continues, a student who flunked her driver's test will literally cry on her shoulder. She will catch a student cheating in her fourth-hour class, a situation that will involve speaking to the other assistant principal; the student twice;

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and the student's parents, who will adamantly refuse to acknowledge that their darling son could have committed such an immoral act. Another student will approach her with excitement at having recently become engaged; this student feels a special affinity for Mrs. Neubrith because she and her fiancé first met in Mrs. Neubrith's class.

An assortment of other interactions will take place with the school secretary, several colleagues who are organizing support groups for children of divorce, and literally hundreds of children who pass her in the halls. She can see their pleading eyes, their distraught expressions, the disappointment in their faces, their raging hormones, their volatile emotions, their passion and excitement, and she feels overwhelmed by all the pain and neediness she can sense. Mrs. Neubrith tries to acknowledge each person and realizes that they all want so much more from her than she can possibly deliver.

As you follow Mrs. Neubrith through an all-too-typical day, you notice the great number of people with whom she comes into contact and the variety of situations in which she uses her interpersonal skills. One moment she is talking to a student who is apprehensive about a family relocation; she moves on to talk to a boy who feels like a failure because he was cut from the basketball team; then, she speaks to a student who is returning from drug rehabilitation; next, she is advising a student about college plans. A great portion of her day is spent interacting with others as people turn to her for guidance and as she lets others know she cares about what is happening to them.

Then, there are all the things that come up during her class discussions. In one class, there is a heated argument between two students about affirmative action that quickly takes on racist overtones. In another class, one minute they are following the scheduled lesson, and the next moment someone asks a question about the upcoming exam that somehow deteriorates into a gripe session about how unfair the world is. In another class, a foolproof activity that normally is quite exciting turns out to be incredibly boring, and she can't figure out why or what she can do to change directions.

Although this day in the life of a teacher involves the experience of a high school teacher, the same pattern unfolds for those in elementary education. Every hour presents a different challenge, another test of your concentration, sensitivity, and interpersonal skills. In each case, you are required to remain calm and in control, to sort out what is going on, and then to select the appropriate response from the hundreds of possibilities you can think of at the time.

Whether you like it or not, whether you are prepared or not, students will seek you out for help in making decisions about everything from accepting a party invitation to what classes they should take. They ask for help in sorting out values and evaluating the ethics of the situations they face. They come to share the events that take place in their lives: a new

dog, frustration over a poor grade, rejected friendship, a death in the family. They turn to you with questions of manners and etiquette.

The ways you respond to these situations, the fluency and ease with which you adjust to multiple roles, will influence greatly the quality of the educational experiences you provide. Your knowledge of counseling skills will affect your relationships with the children with whom you work, your friendships and affiliations with colleagues, and even the quality of your relationships with the people you love the most.

### SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

1. About which aspects of teaching are you most apprehensive? For which roles do you feel most unprepared? After reflecting on these questions, (a) write down your responses and put the pages in a safe place where you can reread what you wrote several years from now, and (b) share your reactions in a group of peers meeting to discuss their fears.
2. Interview a cross-section of children representing different grade levels to find out the roles they would like to see teachers play in their lives. Encourage them to be as specific as possible in describing what teachers could do to be helpful to them.
3. Shadow a teacher for a day and note the variety of roles he or she plays with an assortment of different people. Organize your observations of the teacher's behavior into some broad categories of roles that were played—as lecturer, problem solver, secretary, or whatever.

### SUGGESTED READING

- Corey, M. S., & Corey, G. (2007). *Becoming a helper* (5th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
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