

# Conversations that matter

Child and adolescent counsellor **Nikki Simpson** believes that the school system is failing to recognise and validate young people beyond their intellectual capacity.

**W**orking as a counsellor with young people, I am concerned by just how much the school system appears to be impacting on their wellbeing. It seems to me that the ever-increasing focus on academic outcomes is directly linked to young people's deteriorating mental health. I write this now because I am seeing increasing numbers of young people referred to counselling with symptoms of stress, anxiety and depression, which the young people themselves say is due to the pressure of school targets and academic performance. For many young people, the deeply entrenched belief of not measuring up is leading to self-destructive and harmful behaviours.

Through one-to-one counselling, I have met countless insightful, emotionally articulate and creative young people who feel invalidated by their school experience, and who doubt themselves and their capabilities because they are not always able to meet the targets set for them by their school. The resulting impact on young people's self-esteem can become corrosive over time, leading to a core belief of 'I'm not good enough'. My work frequently involves supporting teenagers to affirm and validate their sense of self-worth, despite the perceived messages they are getting from 'the system'.

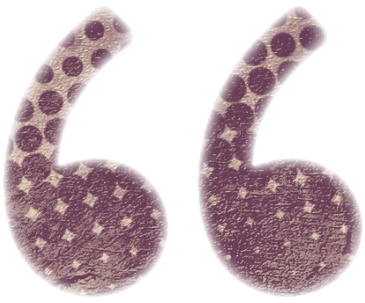
Young people often come into counselling feeling alone in their experiences. Some of them are savvy to the fact that it is not so much *their* failing but a failing of the school system itself that is impacting their sense of self-worth, but they feel at a loss to know how to counter this. I really feel and share in their despair. Most young people don't have the opportunity to opt out of school. I want them to know that it is possible to have a successful, happy and meaningful life even if they don't get grade 9s in all of their GCSE exams, but this message is contrary to the one they get from educators. I am maddened and saddened by the reality that many young people have such negative self-perceptions because they feel they are being judged predominantly on their test results. I want to do more to support them to flourish and to grow, and encourage others to support them too.

My sense is that something fundamental needs to change within the school system if we are to facilitate an improvement in young people's deteriorating mental health. I teach the teenagers I work with strategies to help them manage their anxiety, stress and depressive feelings. I provide a confidential place for them to feel heard, validated and understood. In the counselling room, we have conversations that matter. But if every day they have to get up and go to a place (physically and internally) that

doesn't affirm who they are, they and I feel as if we are fighting a losing battle.

I am witness to such maturity, wisdom and self-awareness in the young people I come into contact with through my work. Beyond the presenting symptoms of depression and anxiety, so many are thinking seriously about the real-world issues facing society; the impact of climate change and of Brexit are about to reshape life as we know it. Many young people are beginning to engage politically at grassroots levels, acutely aware that it is *their* future that is most at stake, as much, if not more so, than the adults making the decisions. The concern that many young people express is that the curriculum does not adequately reflect the shifts that are taking place and that the skills they are learning are falling short of 'future-proofing' them. Young people are aware that their career paths may not be as clearly mapped out as they were for their parents and grandparents, and that, for them, a skill set that enables them to be adaptable, resilient and creative is going to be key. My sense is that we need to be engaging more with young people, to listen to their concerns and support them to bring their voices to the fore. In short, to facilitate more of the conversations that matter to them.

According to psychologist Erik Erikson, adolescence is all about forming one's sense of self.<sup>1</sup> For teens, this means having opportunities to explore their independence and experiment with different roles, activities and behaviours. This can be a time of impulsiveness and unpredictability, but it is also a key time in the shaping of a young person's identity. For young



We need to take every opportunity to facilitate conversations that matter so that young people can make better sense of and be better equipped to navigate this crucial period of development

people to make successful transitions into adulthood, they need to have enough experiences in which they feel seen, validated and affirmed, enabling them to form a sense of self and determine who they are and what they have to offer the world. Adolescence is such an instrumental stage in development and it pains me that for so many young people there are insufficient opportunities for reflective dialogue. We need to take every opportunity to facilitate conversations that matter, so that young people can make better sense of and be better equipped to navigate this crucial period of development.

As a counsellor with a duty of care to foster the mental wellbeing of young people, I feel a sense of responsibility to advocate on their behalf. Their collective pain and anger at feeling failed by the school system is catalysing me to want to lobby for change, in order to create learning environments that seen the young person as a whole, allowing them to feel recognised and validated beyond their intellectual capacity. For young people's mental health to flourish, I feel there needs to be increased focus on the development of resilience, self-esteem and creativity alongside the teaching of core subjects and less emphasis on meeting targets and exam grades.

The feedback I get from young people is that the conversations we have in the counselling room really matter to them. They support young people to formulate a clearer sense of who they are beyond the constraints of academic achievement, to be clearer about their values and foster a greater belief in themselves and their potential. What a shame

that these conversations are mostly limited to the counseling room. It would be wonderful if we could foster a culture of active listening in schools, one that draws on Rogers' core conditions<sup>2</sup> of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard. This would help to facilitate opportunities for young people to get in touch with their innate wisdom and to express this.

I am beginning to notice some positive changes. Schools are being encouraged to offer better pastoral and mental health support. The Scottish Government has pledged to have a counsellor in every school. The Healthy Schools<sup>3</sup> toolkit includes ideas about how schools can help children and young people grow healthily, safely and responsibly. After a period of cutbacks and austerity, some schools are reinvesting in the arts, apprenticeships and vocational learning as an alternative to traditionally academic pursuits. Young Minds are campaigning to #TellOfsted that the mental health of students must be a priority in their school inspections. These changes please me. But I would also welcome the opportunity to join together with other counsellors and therapists to have more conversations that matter and to think strategically about how we, as mental health champions, can inform and effect change on a broader scale in the interests of young people.

#### References

- 1 Erikson EH. Identity and the life cycle. London: WW Norton & Company; 1994.
- 2 Rogers CR. Client-centred therapy: it's current practice, implications and theory. London: Constable & Robinson; 1951.
- 3 School wellbeing. Leeds City Council; 2019. (Online) <https://www.schoolwellbeing.co.uk/pages/healthy-schools> (accessed 18 February 2019).

.....

**Nikki Simpson** is an accredited child and adolescent counsellor in private practice. She is the founding member of Umbrella: Creative and Talking Therapies, based in Gloucestershire  
[nikki@space2b.org.uk](mailto:nikki@space2b.org.uk)