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ADOLESCENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHERS AS A THERAPEUTIC SUPPORT IN COPING WITH THEIR PROBLEMS

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to determine the importance with which students regard teachers as sources of support in coping with their problems, and whether there is any link between this and the type of problem seen as being of major importance to them. A structured interview was conducted and a questionnaire administered individually to 623 pupils aged 15-19 years, from 12 different schools and colleges. The results show teachers rank rather low in the list of those to whom the pupils will turn for help to cope with their problems. Boys and girls experience very different problems. Girls communicate as a means of dealing with their problems more than boys, who tend to look to themselves for support. The implications for those boys whose main problems concern school are discussed. It is stressed it is important not to neglect the needs of girls, who tend to adopt a lower profile in class.

The aim of this study is to determine the importance with which students regard teachers as sources of support in coping with their problems. Pastoral care, Marland (2002) argues, has been an important development in schools since the 1950s. According to Cleave et al (1997), in schools there is an emphasis on pastoral care, although there is very limited training for teachers in schools in specialist skills such as counselling. Many other researchers, such as Nelson and While (2002), provide supporting evidence of the importance schools give to pastoral care. Changes to the social environment in schools, however, over recent years, it can be argued, may have made the 'tutor' or pastoral role of the teacher more difficult. The reduction in extra-curricular societies and sports groups could make it more difficult for students to establish special relationships with teachers, to whom they can turn, if they experience problems. In addition the current emphasis on testing, many teachers believe, can make the relationship between student and teacher a more adversarial, rather than supportive one.

Teachers are not the only source of support, however, for there are many others available to adolescents. A study by Pulakos (1989), for instance, which looked generally at sources of support, found adolescents more likely to turn to friends, rather than siblings. Doyle (2001), in a study, which examined children's coping behaviour in the face of emotional abuse, found other non abusing family members such as siblings, grandparents, and particularly aunts, were important. Yet another source of support which has received recognition is the family pet, for as Melson (2003) notes, over seventy per cent. of homes with children have pets as members of their family. According to Entin (2001) animals become part of the emotional life of the family. McNicholas and Collis (2001) however, in a study of primary school children, found that although pets were important in the hierarchy of their preferred relationships, the children were well able to discriminate between relationships in terms of the support functions they could serve. Pets were high on the list as providers of self-esteem and as confidants, functions they were well able to provide, however, children's expectations of them were realistic, and did not include support services they could not provide. Flynn (2000) found, in a study of battered women, that pets often provided important sources of emotional support during their relationship, and Parsons (2002) noted the therapeutic use of pets in a hospice. Brodie and Biley (1999), in their review of the research, conclude the potential benefits of pet therapy to be considerable.

An appreciation of the ranking of teachers as sources of support will provide useful information, both for the teachers themselves, and also for therapists who are concerned with programmes to help individual students with their problems. With constantly changing social mores it would be useful to have an idea whom adolescents feel most willing to approach for support, when they are experiencing difficulties. This could well help all those involved with students to use the available resources to the best advantage.

The source of support should not be totally separated from the type of problem experienced by adolescents. The range of adolescent problems has been well documented, for example, moodiness (Steinberg 1999), engaging in age inappropriate activities such as drinking and sex (Ge, Conger and Elder 1996), eating disorders (Stice 2001), low self esteem (Twenge and Campbell (2001), career choice (Holland 1996) and delinquency (Moffitt 1993). Seifert, Hoffnug and Hoffnug (2000 p. 300) summarised the literature concerning adolescent problems by categorising them into four major groupings. These were **The family** - e.g. parents, job loss; **Relationships** - e.g. peer pressure, **School** – e.g. behaviour and **Self** – e.g. eating disorders. According to David (1993) the teacher is probably the first to notice students with problems, for this is frequently linked with under-achievement or bad behaviour. It would seem likely students are also more likely to mention to the teacher problems which occur within school, rather than those which occur outside. Many non-school problems may have an impact on behaviour in school and if teachers are unaware of them they may not be able to react appropriately.

Boys and girls often experience very different problems in life. For example, girls are four times as likely to be abused as boys (Vogeltanz et al 1999). They may also react very differently to events in life which they experience, which according to Fagot and Hagan (1991) is frequently based on traditional gender stereotyping. This may mean that boys will see different problems as being important to them, and find different ways of coping, than do girls. The communication patterns between boys and girls have been well researched, and Lytton and Romney (1991) for example, refer to the “boys don’t cry” syndrome. Rawlins (1992) found that when men and women talk to their friends about the same thing, women talk in deeper and more self-revealing ways. When considering student problems, gender needs to be taken into account. In the present study gender differences, as they reflect feelings towards others, are examined. It is difficult to compare male and female relationships because of the number of variables involved, for example, male/female, or female/female, parent/child etc. A questionnaire is used in the present study which controls many of these variables by using a technique of making reference to relationships with pets rather than other humans.

The aim of this study is to determine where teachers rank in the list of sources of support to which students turn, and to see whether there is any link between this source of support and the type of problem experienced. This may well provide teachers and therapists with an insight into where adolescents currently see the most ready source for support.

The study

Participants:

The sample included in the analysis consisted of 314 male and 311 female students with a mean age of 16.04 years and a range from 15 to 19 years. Students were only included if they met the following criteria. They were living at home with at least one parent. They had at least one sibling, and, to cater for the questionnaire concerning pets, only pupils who had had a pet in the home at some time during the previous three years were included in the sample. The students were drawn from twelve different schools and colleges, all of which were co-educational. The institutions included urban and rural locations, with six being in the top half of the OFSTED ratings and six in the bottom, according to league tables. No schools were at either extreme on the ratings scale and none were known to have specific ‘problems’.

The Interview/Questionnaire:

Each student was interviewed by a researcher who was of the same sex as the student. All students who satisfied the criterion outlined in the previous section were included in the study. The first question concerned the most important problem they had experienced. If they were unhappy to specify a problem, but acknowledged there was one, they were given an explanation of the four categories of problem, following Seifert, Hoffnug and Hoffnug (2000) and were then asked to indicate which category of problem it came from. This procedure was adopted in a pilot of the interview where it was found that some students were more willing to indicate a category of problem than they were to

specifically mention a particular problem. Eighty three per cent of those interviewed were happy to report the occurrence of a problem. Those who did not, either because they did not have a problem, or did not wish to discuss it, were debriefed and excluded from the sample. In the instructions given to the students, no period of time was set for the problem to have occurred. It could have occurred days or years previously. After identifying the problem, or the category, they were asked to indicate how serious they thought it was to them on a four point scale. This was in response to the question: 'Did you think the problem you mentioned was at the time' very serious/fairly serious/minor/trivial?

Categorising of problems:

The problems were allocated to one of the four categories outlined by Seifert, Hoffnung and Hoffnung (2000). This was carried out by four assistants, working individually, randomly allocated to 'nominal pairs'. No individual problem was placed in a different category by more than one of the four assistants. In cases of disagreement the decision of a third assistant acted as a majority decider. Disagreement only occurred with 12 problems out of the 108 problems categorised.

Students were then asked to indicate, in order of importance, the support they had received from various sources in dealing with the problem. These were presented in random order by means of identifying cards simply placed on the table in front of each pupil. They consisted of the ten potential sources of support drawn from those which had been outlined in the literature.

The questionnaire related to gender difference looked at the relationships with pets as a measure of attachment and their emotional relations. This followed Franklin and White (2002) who point out children are increasingly adopting a sentimentalised relationship with animals and often give them human characteristics. The questionnaire consisted of attachment questions, and questions concerning the extent to which they considered pets as having human characteristics (anthropomorphism). The fourteen attachment questions were derived from Sable (1995) and the seven anthropomorphism questions from Albert and Bulcroft (1988). Examples of the questions included are:

Attachment: 'Did you feel you received affection from that pet?'

Anthropomorphism: 'Pets should have the same rights as people'.

Results:

The ranking of the sources of support sought by the pupils can be seen in table I. For both males and females, friends are the main source of support, which replicates previous findings by Pulakos (1989), and for both, teachers are ranked eighth on the list, slightly below pets. Parents are ranked second, as a source of support, by the girls, but for the males, parental support drops to third place.

Table I

Showing to whom the students turn to for help with their problems

Question Who do you turn to? High mean score indicating high priority	Mean score, standard deviations in brackets Total sample N=625	Mean score, standard deviations in brackets Male N=314	Mean score, standard deviations in brackets Female N=311	T score. Sig Df=623
Friends	.36 (.48)	.34 (.47)	.38 (.49)	1.25 .210
Parents	.22 (.42)	.19 (.40)	.25 (.44)	1.79 .073
Self	.19 (.40)	.24 (.44)	.13 (.36)	3.51 .000*
Object, teddy etc	.09 (.09)	.010 (.10)	.10 (.10)	1.31 .191
Club leader etc	.08 (.08)	.013 (.11)	.032 (.06)	1.33 .182
Pet	.07 (.25)	.054 (.23)	.080 (.27)	1.31 .191
Sibling	.06 (.23)	.066 (.24)	.048 (.21)	.840 .401
Teacher	.04 (.20)	.051 (.22)	.035 (.18)	.957 .339
Relation	.03 (.11)	.013 (.11)	.013 (.11)	.014 .989
Other	.02 (.13)	.013 (.11)	.023 (.15)	.928 .354

In table 1 the rank scores for males and females are compared statistically for each of the sources of support. The only significant difference, marked by an *, shows that boys look to themselves for

support more than do girls to an extent which occurs more frequently than by chance. This gender difference, in the extent to which males and females seek external support in coping with their problems, follows the pattern of previous researchers (e.g. Rawlins 1992). The responses about pets on the questionnaire provides a possible explanation. Certainly from the results shown in table II it is clear girls display more attachment, and feel their pets have more human characteristics, than do the boys. This difference when tested statistically, as can be seen in table II, occurs more frequently than you would expect by chance. If this difference generalises to other people in their social environment, then it provides some explanation for the tendency of boys to look to themselves rather than relate to others. Boys simply do not think in terms of such a close attachment to others as do girls. This probably partly explains why they are less willing to turn to them for support.

Table II
Showing comparisons on pet questionnaire between male (n=314),
and female students (n=311).

Statement category High score indicates positive response		Mean scores Standard deviation in brackets	t-score df. =623	Probability
Attachment Scale	Male	32.38 (7.45)	3.97	.000*
	Female	34.74 (7.43)		
Anthrop scale	Male	15.96 (4.38)	4.56	.000*
	Female	17.60 (4.60)		

The rank order of problems is interesting when the sample is taken as a whole. As can be seen in table III, the main problem concerns relationships with others. When, however, the sample is divided into male and female groups, this ceases to be the main problem. For the boy, as can be seen in table IV, the main problem is school, and for the girl, the main problem is the family. The differences between the boys and girls, for these two problems, occurs more frequently than by chance as the differences are statistically significant. For both sexes, relationships become the second most important problem. It is noticeable, and statistically significant, that the females consider their problems as more serious than do the males

Table III
Showing the students' problems in order of importance

Type of problem High score indicates most important problem N = 625	Mean score, standard deviations in brackets
Relationships	.288 (.453)s
Family	.284 (.452)
School	.250 (.433)
Self	.176 (.381)

The problems mentioned by the students covered a wide range including poverty, parent's job loss, death, physical/emotional abuse, change of residence or school, conflicts with parents, experiences of conflict between parents, conflicts with their peers at school, and at home, and other family members. Problems with school work include things like lack of motivation to work, the stress of having to work for deadlines and to meet the behavioural requirements of the school, learning styles, problems with teachers, peer pressure, getting along with others and lack of communication skills. Personal looks and image were often raised as a problem, as was stress, and depression. Illegal activities tended to be expressed more in terms of what was considered to be the cause or the justification. In one instance, for example, drug taking was not seen as a problem, it was merely a result of, in this particular instance, parental conflict. Many other things were mentioned, which were not in themselves regarded as problems by the students, including behaviours such as eating disorders, alcoholic binge drinking and so on.

Table IV
Showing gender comparisons with problems

Type of problem High score indicates most important problem Male N =314 Female N= 311		Mean score, standard deviations in brackets	T score df 623	Probability
Relationships	Male Female	.28 (.45) .29 (.46)	2.53	.801
Family	Male Female	.23 (.42) .34 (.48)	3.29	.001*
School	Male Female	.32 (.47) .18 (.38)	4.04	.000*
Self	Male Female	.17 (.38) .18 (.39)	0.48	.635
Serious	Male Female	2.52 (.93) 2.82 (.81)	4.23	.000*

An analysis of the data, seeking a link between the source of support, and the problems reported, shows no consistent relationship between the two measures. The highest correlation between the various sources of support and any of the four problem categories was .127. This means that when the records of each individual student within the whole group is examined statistically there is no meaningful connection between the type of problem and the source of support.

Discussion:

The results of this study show that, generally, teachers are not high on the list of persons to whom students refer when they want assistance dealing with their problems. If the sample were a small group, or were from a single class, one could have interpreted this in the context of the characteristics of a particular teacher, or school. This is not the case, and therefore the results are more likely to reflect both the traditional adolescent reluctance to turn to authority figures and possibly the role played by teachers, with its emphasis on testing, and an absence of extra mural activities where personal contact can be established. The concern raised at the beginning of this paper, concerning the apparent incompatibility of the pastoral role of the teacher with that of 'tester' does appear to have some substance.

Although teachers are below pets in the ranking, pets themselves are also quite low, which does suggest their importance as a therapeutic source should not be overemphasised. There is a danger of that happening if specialist reports which stress the role of pets in isolation are taken at face value (e.g. Parsons 2002). The limited role of the teacher does need to be appreciated by external counsellors and therapists who are responsible for dealing with individual students on a professional basis. They must not expect too much of teachers in their planning of treatment programmes. The low ranking of teachers is particularly important with regard to boys, whose major problems stem from the classroom. With girls, their problems are to do with their family and relationships, and to deal with these the girls turn to their friends and parents. They effectively use the source of their problems to help deal with them. With boys, a very different picture emerges. Their problems are mainly to do with school, and then relationships. To cope with these they refer to their friends, but then turn to themselves to try to deal with them. The school problem is not addressed by trying to cope with it directly, as the teachers are extremely low in the ranking of sources of support. The girls would seem to seek more appropriate sources of support when dealing with their problems than the boys. Whilst it is necessary for teachers to try to relate to boys, to help them deal with the problems they experience in relation to school, it is important the lower profile needs of the girls are not neglected.

It would seem, from the results of this study, that the problems experienced by males and females in this sample are very different. It should be emphasised the problems referred to are ones which actually occurred to the pupils, and are not hypothetical ones. With boys, they are primarily concerned with school related problems. This rather reflects recent figures showing boys under achieving, as compared to girls, in GCSEs and 'A Levels'. For example, according to Tooley (2003), girls now outperform boys at every age from seven to eighteen years. The continued underachievement of boys has led to a number of possible explanations being put forward. Lightfoot (1998), for example, reported Stephen Byers, when he was the School Standards Minister, arguing that boys have adopted an anti-learning

culture, where taking part in school work is regarded negatively. Jackson (2002) takes this further, by suggesting that “laddishness” is actually a means of self-protection, covering up for lack of ability, or from appearing feminine. These sorts of problems may well encourage the teacher to respond to the far higher profile of the problems of boys, to the neglect of girls. The results of this study make it clear that girls are as likely to experience problems, it is just that they are not so closely related to school. It should also be noted that girls perceive their problems as being more important than do boys. The other way of looking at this is, of course, that boys are less concerned about their problems. From the researcher’s own contacts with teachers, they are fully aware of these problems, and are as concerned with boys’ under-achievement as anyone.

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