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Counselling and Deafness

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Abstract

Deaf people who identify with the Deaf community perceive the world differently to hearing people. This article is about the complex developmental, communication and cultural differences that are part of the Deaf world. Reference is made to the role of school counsellor at Kelston Deaf Education Centre (KDEC) and one counsellor's work with Deaf students and their families and caregivers. It outlines the many Deaf cultural, identity and community issues encountered and the skills and strategies found to be effective when working with Deaf people.

Introduction

I am the school counsellor at Kelston Deaf Education Centre (KDEC) and my key task is to counsel Deaf students and their families and caregivers. My work takes me to schools and homes in Northland, Auckland and South Auckland.

Sometimes Deafness is described as an impairment or a disability. However, my experience tells me that Deaf people have ability rather than disability, and share a rich culture and visual language that makes them unique and different to hearing people. Concepts of Deaf Culture, Deaf Community and Deaf Identity are integral to the lives of many Deaf people and it would not be possible for me to write this article without making reference to them. I use a capital "D" when referring to Deafness to acknowledge Deaf cultural identity. This distinction was first made by Woodward (1972) and has become standard in much of the literature pertaining to Deaf Culture and Deaf Community issues. "Deaf" in this article encompasses hard of hearing and mild to profound Deafness.

The young Deaf child

As a hearing child grows and learns, he or she is surrounded by sound. This sound provides a myriad of useful information and knowledge for current and future use. It facilitates communication and enables speech and language to develop. The situation for a Deaf child is different. When access to spoken language or other sounds is

limited information is gathered visually. As a result the Deaf child does not develop language and speech at the same rate as hearing peers. Experience tells me that when a young Deaf child is not able to access sound and make sense of it, behaviour, communication, relationships and education are affected.

The Deaf adolescent

Adolescence is a challenging time for young people and Deaf students are no exception. The main issues that bring young Deaf clients to counselling focus on understanding and accepting their Deafness and the necessity of wearing their hearing aids, coping with being different, understanding abstract concepts, living within hearing families, dealing with maturation, miscommunication and peer pressure, managing anger, understanding and dealing with emotions, personal safety and sexuality issues, drug education, understanding consequences, relationships and abuse, and coping with gaps in general knowledge.

Deaf students often feel left out of the hearing and/or Deaf peer group and struggle to understand the rules and norms regarding friendships and relationships. As a form of interaction Deaf students often tease each other and gossip, and then have trouble dealing with the misunderstandings and anger that follow. This can lead to bullying, harassment and text bullying. Similar issues and complexities arise for Deaf-plus (Deaf with an added difference such as autism) students also.

Deaf students miss the myriad of information gleaned from oral conversations, jokes and gossip that help to shape ideas about important issues and develop understanding of behavioural norms. At home, Deaf children with hearing families miss many conversations also. All of these factors contribute to gaps in the knowledge base of Deaf students, miscommunication and misunderstandings about the world. Many of these issues continue to challenge young Deaf people as they grow to adulthood.

Families

Families where both parents and children are Deaf tend to develop close relationships. Families that consist of Deaf parents and hearing children are often challenged by Deaf/hearing cultural differences. For the purposes of this article I will focus on my largest client group, the families of Deaf children with hearing parents and siblings.

The stress on hearing families is enormous, both before and after diagnosis. Approximately 90 percent of Deaf children are born to two hearing parents who have little or no prior experience of Deafness. How the family copes with the young Deaf child, and his or her education and development, depends on timely and appropriate input from professionals. Luterman and Ross (1991, p. 70) explain, "When your child

is first diagnosed, you live, sleep, and breathe deafness; it consumes and dominates your family and life.” Family members try to understand Deafness and the Deaf child in their midst, while the Deaf child struggles because they are different and often isolated within their family. Hearing siblings can be affected too – several have told me that when they were young they wanted to be Deaf too, so they would receive the same attention as their Deaf brother or sister.

After diagnosis families react in different ways, but generally they follow one of two paths. Families either learn to accommodate and understand their Deaf child, or they deny their child’s Deafness and continue this denial as their child grows. The first scenario offers possibilities for all family members not only to cope, but to become informed, empowered, well-adjusted and to participate so the Deaf child is understood, accepted and included.

Families locked into denial of their child’s Deafness can be difficult to engage and work with. Parents need time to adjust the dreams and expectations they had for their child’s future before Deafness was diagnosed. When I maintain a presence and continue to provide support and information for these families, over time many do change their attitudes and views about Deafness. I am working with many families as they accommodate Deafness and communication difference within their family, and this process takes courage, time and commitment.

Parents often request ongoing counselling to manage their feelings around grief and guilt. Key factors are the positive attitude, strength and self-esteem of the Deaf child’s primary caregiver(s). Luterman and Ross (1991, p. 70) say, “Your child can and will do many things well, as well as any hearing child. Parents must learn to see the normality that is present both in their lives and in their child’s.”

A family’s denial of their child’s Deafness can cause the Deaf child to become isolated, feel rejected, to suffer from low self-esteem and to develop identity issues. Sometimes parents decide to mainstream their Deaf child, and this can be successful when appropriate support is provided. However, within a mainstream environment young Deaf people do not always have opportunities to learn about their Deafness or to understand why they are different from their hearing peers. In my experience many mainstreamed Deaf children become interested in Deafness and Deaf cultural issues when they reach intermediate or high school age and often seek counselling to explore Deaf/hearing identity issues at this point.

Deaf Culture

Fundamental to my credibility, and the effectiveness of my counselling work with Deaf students, their families and caregivers, are two important factors. The first is my

ability to communicate and engage with all my clients, and the second is my understanding and acceptance of Deafness and Deaf Culture.

Deaf people perceive the world differently to me. This difference, and the bond that Deaf people share regardless of their gender, education, age or ethnicity, has become known as “Deaf Culture”. There are cultural differences between Deaf and hearing people in terms of language and communication, behaviour, attitudes, values, traditions, ideas, understanding about power and status, and life experience. Locker McKee (2001, p. 12) portrays Deaf and hearing as two distinct groups – “Much in the way that the world is divided into male/female, Maori/Pakeha, gay/straight or child/adult.”

Deaf people who embrace Deaf Culture and identify with the Deaf Community are usually those who do not access full audition from hearing aids and who communicate using New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL). Deaf people decide for themselves whether hearing aids are of use to them and if they will communicate orally or use NZSL. Sometimes Deaf people who can access speech sounds and communicate orally “code switch” and participate in both the Deaf and hearing worlds.

Since 1990, when I began working at KDEC, I have noticed significant change within the Deaf Community. I think that Deaf people have developed more assertion, and awareness of the importance of their language, culture and community. Hindley and Kitson (2000, p. 8) comment, “During the past two decades, Deaf people have become more aware of their own heritage and have developed pride in their lives and achievements. They have begun to recognise the importance of studying and preserving their history, language and culture.”

I think too that advances in communication technology have had a positive impact on the lives of Deaf people. Fax machines, emailing, teletext, subtitling and texting on mobile phones have provided opportunities for Deaf people to access information, improve their education, and connect with each other and the rest of the world. In their homes Deaf people can utilise flashing light door bells, vibrating alarm clocks, pagers and baby cry monitors. The use of this technology has resulted in increased skills, autonomy, confidence and independence for Deaf people.

Deaf Identity

The notion of Deaf cultural identity is not innate. It develops over time as Deaf children (both signers and oral) become Deaf adults and then often gravitate towards people the same as them, with whom they can communicate and identify. Education, information and counselling for Deaf students during this transition are crucial. For many young Deaf people this is the beginning of separation from their hearing family,

and movement towards understanding and accepting their Deafness. This can encourage confidence, maturity and growth towards independence and provide a safe environment in which to examine personal issues.

Compared to a few years ago Deaf students now present as more assertive and independent, and self-manage more effectively. I think that the development and recognition of Deaf Culture as a strong and supportive presence, advances in communication technology, improved access to education, and timely and effective counselling have been key ingredients for this change.

Communication

When I counsel a Deaf client my first task is to ascertain their communication mode of preference and their understanding of vocabulary. Some choose oral language, but for most the choice is NZSL. This language is the natural and accepted language of the New Zealand Deaf Community. NZSL is a visual and gestural language with its own syntax and conventions. It is not English, does not equate to any spoken language, and has no written form (Powell, 1992).

Steps are being taken towards the recognition of NZSL as an official language. On 7 April 2004 the Hon. Ruth Dyson, Minister for Disability Issues, released a media statement declaring: “Deaf people make up a distinct and dynamic cultural group of New Zealanders. NZ Sign Language is central to Deaf culture and is essential for effective daily communication and participation in society” (Dyson, 2004). Being a proficient NZSL user is of key importance to my work at KDEC as this language is my link with many Deaf clients.

Abuse

My counselling experience tells me that communication and cultural differences make young Deaf people vulnerable to sexual and other abuse. Hindley and Kitson (2000, p. 149) state, “Children who are deaf or hard of hearing, as well as children with other types of disabilities, are at increased risk of maltreatment, including neglect, physical, sexual or emotional abuse, or any combination thereof.” Much of my time is spent working with young Deaf people about abuse, and about their rights, safety, assertion, sexuality, their bodies, healing and relationships. This work is ongoing as Deaf students progress through school. Disclosures still occur, but there have been a significant reduction since 1990 when I started my work at KDEC.

Counselling strategies

When I work with a Deaf client I bring my “hearingness” to the counselling relation-

ship. Listening and hearing are traditional counselling tools, but Corker (1994, p. xvii) asks, “Why is ‘hearing’ seen to be so essential to the counselling process that it becomes the foundation of ‘good listening’? Does the spoken word always convey the client’s truth?” In order to “hear” my client’s truth I “listen” with my eyes and “talk” with my hands, face and body, and I do not rely on oral or aural communication. I must be expert at receiving and expressing information using the mode of communication preferred by my client. Some clients prefer NZSL, some prefer spoken language.

When I work with Deaf clients and their families I choose visual and action counselling strategies. Role plays, drama and movement, all forms of art, picture stories, dialogue journals, transactional analysis, sand tray, family sculpture and two-chair work are effective. In my experience art and action strategies can bridge cultural, language, age, gender and ethnic differences. I draw pictures to explain time and place, create visual time-lines and comic strips to sequence events, use a whiteboard, paint and make collage pictures. I always keep crayons, paper and other art equipment close by.

Margaret Kennedy writes about Art-in-Therapy in Corker (1994, p. 197), and states, “In the work that I do with deaf people using sign language, I have come to see quite clearly the relationship between sign language and art. In using sign language, therapy has to be art in language since the pictures entwined in the iconic aspects of sign language and the heavy emphasis on visual linguistic structure constitute an active art-communication.” Kennedy adds (p. 199) that art provides “a valuable insight for counsellors working with deaf clients, both children and adults, who are linguistically impoverished or who lack the range, depth and variety of vocabulary to describe their deepest thoughts and feelings, convey the full content of their world of meaning, or express and understand abstract concepts”. I believe too that the use of art mediums provides visual, concrete and practical opportunities to separate or externalise the person from the issue(s) they may want to examine.

Working with an interpreter

I believe that an NZSL interpreter is essential when a non-signing counsellor (or other mental health professional) works with a sign-reliant Deaf client. Many skilled NZSL interpreters work effectively with hearing counsellors and Deaf clients, but Corker (1994, p. 116) suggests that working with interpreters in the counselling situation has limitations. She thinks, “Just as deaf people have a wide variety of communication preferences and competences, counsellors and deaf people vary in the skill with which they can work with an interpreter and their ability to select an appropriate interpreter, and interpreters themselves are not uniform in their skills or their understanding of

the counsellor's task." However, I firmly believe that when a non-signing counsellor and a sign-reliant Deaf client work together the skills of an NZSL interpreter are necessary to bridge communication and language differences. An interpreter can be booked through the Deaf Association of New Zealand (DANZ). It is not advisable to use a client's family or friends to interpret during the counselling session. Incidentally, to my knowledge, in New Zealand there are only a few Deaf people trained, or currently training, to work as counsellors. I think Deaf clients and their families would benefit if there were more Deaf counsellors working within the wider community.

When a counsellor works with a Deaf client who does not sign both parties will rely on oral speech, facial expressions, and body language. Maintain eye contact, speak clearly with natural lip patterns, do not cover your mouth with your hand or turn away while speaking, rephrase to clarify information rather than repeating the original statement, do not sit with your back to a window (it is hard for a Deaf person to see your face clearly while looking into the light), stop talking while your client is reading (your Deaf client will have difficulty reading and watching you at the same time) and use visuals. A nod and a smile from your client are not always proof that you have been understood. Summarise often and check your use of vocabulary and language carefully.

Conclusion

Deafness is a constant factor in the lives of many people. Deaf people who identify with the Deaf Community share a unique, rich culture and perceive the world differently to hearing people. Deaf people vary in the way they communicate, and in their use and understanding of language. An NZSL interpreter is needed to address communication differences between non-signing counsellors and sign-reliant Deaf clients. Complex developmental and cultural differences are present within the Deaf Community. Counsellors who work with Deaf people and their families will counsel more effectively if they are aware of these differences and have some understanding of the Deaf World.

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