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Being with an other as a professional practitioner: uncovering the nature of working with individuals

David Collander-Brown

Youth workers have always predominately fixed their attention upon the group, whether in the club or on the street. The bulk of youth work texts reflect this pre-occupation. However, in all settings workers will at times be required to focus on the individual. In this chapter David Collander-Brown examines how this shift in emphasis can be effectively managed; how youth workers can create the space for the individual within the practice setting.

In the midst of all the new technical-sounding verbiage concerning targets and outcomes it is easy to lose sight of the truth that it is the relationship between the young person and youth worker that is central to the work. It is our relationship with a young person upon which most of our work, as a practitioner, hinges. And this is a relationship that can 'develop only when the persons involved pay attention to one another' (Barry and Connolly 1986: 47). What effective workers with individual young people do is highly skilled work, drawing on, through different stages in the process, a range of diverse roles and capacities. Done well the practitioner moves seamlessly through the stages, but the unifying core is the relationship between young person and the worker. Building face-to-face skills cannot be done impersonally. It requires personal exploration and reflection with a trainer or supervisor. The title *being with another* points to the quality of process within this work. It is not a *task-centred* way

of working. The *uncovering* is not a final description of method, but an examination and exploration of several interlocking processes.

Clearing the ground

Like a builder youth workers must first clear the ground before digging foundations. Youth workers at times do important one-to-one work with a young person in crisis. It is because of the relationship that the young person seeks out an opportunity to talk, hence the need to focus the worker's thinking, to respond appropriately with what are often called *listening skills* or the *arts of conversation*. Before proceeding we need to own up to the attraction of this 'counselling' role. The counsellor appears to have a kind of gentle power, a power to probe within the internal world. Such power holds temptations. As a detached worker it certainly appealed to me! However, after subsequently training and practising as a qualified counsellor I recognised that employing counselling skills was not the same as counselling. It is an important distinction. The worker hopefully recognises that someone meeting a counsellor consciously chooses to. A young person talking to a youth worker, who uses counselling skills, is likely to think they are 'having a chat'. Awareness of the wish to think of oneself as a counsellor is a vital recognition. To do so may seem diminishing, but there is an alternative way of viewing this process. For in clearing this ground we can discover clarity. It allows us gradually to recognise our reality (as distinct from one of the fantasies we hold about ourselves). I call this process self-awareness, the gradual discovery of our true selves. *Being with another* in this way is therefore a journey of self-discovery for the worker also.

When working with an individual we must think about time span. This does not refer to the longevity of a relationship. In this area of work, what I call *being with another as a professional practitioner* may last a long or brief time span. For example, I once undertook some quite intensive individual work with a member's cousin who visited the club once. After an activity with intermittent conversation, we talked on for perhaps half an hour. No contact was continued. We are talking quality here, not quantity. It is not possible to define this way of *being with* in terms of time scale, setting or even content. Rather the task of *being with* a young person is a way of working, one held in the mind of the practitioner.

'Being with'

To dig the foundations of understanding we will consider what *being with* a young person means. Practitioners constantly look for needs, patterns

and opportunities. For instance, we notice that Jason's body language is different today. He is quieter, isolated. The worker wonders if something has happened to Jason, expressed through his behaviour. The body language may be 'speaking' something he cannot put into words. The worker's awareness has been alerted. 'Keeping an eye out' is an essential part of the process of being with a young person. Growth and development are rarely on worker's minds as they seek to involve young people in activities. You are working with a group about to play a game. While choosing teams deeply held feelings emerge. A new member, Aaron, begins to express himself violently at the idea of being in a different team from his friend. The reflective practitioner looks for a way to deal with this question and the potential conflict. They note the strong feelings that have shown themselves to be a part of Aaron. An aware worker will reflect on this and collate it with other evidence about Aaron. They will keep their awareness focused on Aaron in other situations. They are beginning *to be with* Aaron in a different way. Initially such awareness frequently springs from a 'problem'. The young person says something or acts in ways that alert them. Their focus is intensified and they become differently conscious of *being with* this young person.

Awareness is the beginning for *being with* a young person, for attending to Jason or Aaron with different levels of consciousness. *Being with* is also about hunches and not knowing – a conundrum has surfaced. For in each example the worker didn't know what was happening for Jason or for Aaron. Both times they noticed something different, wondered what affected their mood and behaviour and allowed themselves to be, as Schön tells us we must, open to experiencing 'surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation' that is 'uncertain or unique' (1983: 68). Here is the starting point for being with another as a professional practitioner. Once awareness is aroused by something further questions and factors emerge. Regarding Jason or Aaron the practitioner will seek to comprehend the 'behaviour' by reference to past conduct. Is there a pattern, has something similar occurred before? Do you have any information about them? Has anything happened in the family, peer group or school? Is that whisper about exclusion reliable? What about that half conversation overheard about his Dad being arrested, or sister returning home? Didn't you think his friends were unusually boisterous last night? Clues do not amount to explanations, they are just *possible* connections. I think of this as putting nuggets away, perhaps worthless today, possibly helpful tomorrow. The kinds of questions posed above concern information and fact. Essential to fill in the knowledge void, but surprise, puzzlement, confusion and uncertainty are feelings. Feelings closely associated with a lack of knowledge. Feelings that may have various emotional links

and meanings associated with them for the practitioner. Making sense of, understanding, managing and using our feelings is something this chapter constantly returns to. First though it is important to revisit our examples. If it is unusual for Jason to come into the project looking as he does it is a fair bet something has happened – the natural tendency is to want to know what. However, here we encounter a fundamental principle of *being with* another person. Your focus of attention is primarily on *the experience* of the person, not on what happened. What has Aaron or Jason made of their experience? What is its meaning to them? Loosing sight of this principle is often the cause of failure in our work with an individual.

Choosing your role

Having your awareness of Jason raised does not mean you must intervene. Whether or not to act is a choice you must make. If you opt to intervene you must identify a feasible and appropriate way of doing so. For example, it may be inappropriate to publicly approach Jason. His body language may communicate 'stay away'. Therefore, you must carefully construct an opportunity for a conversation to occur. Alternatively we can approach this question of role in different way. Who are you – when you are behind the coffee bar and a young person loiters and wants to talk? Who are you – when someone turns up 'after hours' or 'bumps into you' in the street and you don't know why they have sought you out? Who are you – when you notice significant changes in behaviour or someone enters your office crying? What happens to you – when you find yourself focused on an individual? What part of you responds in these situations? You may find yourself excited by the possibility of working one-to-one with some young person, or not? Do your feelings depend on who it is and your feelings about them? You may be occupied doing the accounts or otherwise busy? You may wish to give information and move on. You may want to stop everything and focus attention on them or keep a distance? We are in the territory here of self-awareness. Judgements have to be made and responses given often in a very short time. It is therefore essential you know you have a choice. Choosing your role becomes, with practice, a conscious professional action, an element of *reflective practice*.

Choosing embraces many factors but broadly they fall within three headings: the young person, situation and yourself. Each is informed, though the questions are not all answered, through looking with care at your role. What is your role in relation to the young person? It may be the activity you are focused on can be put aside or passed on. If someone's case were an emergency, then a different choice would be made. Here we

need to pay attention to the question – what is my task here and now? Answering this question goes a long way to working out your role.

Making choices about your task is a constant theme for practitioners. Some situations are pressing. Tina appears in floods of tears as you prepare to go to the Juvenile Court to act as a character witness for Sam. She tells you her mother, once a part-time worker in the club, is about to leave her father. Tina is devastated and has tried to patch things up. Now her young brother has walked out of the house and 2 hours later is still missing. Clearly both Sam and Tina are important. As the worker you wish to respond to both. It may not seem questions about role are relevant here. But they are. The questions the worker asks here are – what is important, what is urgent and what is infused with the fog of strong feelings. Certainly the fog of strong feelings tends to confuse. All too easily they can energise and provoke an imperative to rush about and try to solve problems. Though Tina's brother's disappearance may be an emergency it is unlikely the state of her parent's relationship can be changed quickly. Tina, with recognition and feedback about how distressing this is, may best be employed finding her brother. They will need each other. There may also be some question about contacting her teachers depending on Tina's relationship with them. But that can wait. Tina's situation, though as important, is less urgent. Talking on Sam's behalf will not wait.

The demands on workers mean they must choose their role and *manage both the self and the situation*. So, the questions – what is my task? and what role am I in here? – help the practitioner be in the right place at the right time mentally, emotionally and physically. Had the Juvenile Court visit not been pressing and you were filing, Tina's arrival would still have prompted a question about your role, but the options and answers would be different. 'Being with' Tina would express itself through the role of a listener, a presence, a holder of strong emotions and, perhaps, the initiator of some action.

Finding the setting

Often questions arise regarding where individual work takes place. You may not have an appropriate quiet room. Counsellors meet clients in particular rooms, with door closed and interruptions excluded. This fosters a feeling that attention is focused on the client. Youth workers seldom have such rooms when required. It is a youth work skill to think about settings. Club workers are constantly shifting stuff about to enhance the setting. To encourage member interaction, to evoke a response or to have quieter games you move the furniture. Simple changes often affect behaviour, for example, to curtail the rush at opening time you open only one door or

you shut the coffee bar 15 minutes early to indicate closure is near. Should you create a setting where the focus is on the young person? The closed-door intensive setting may discourage some, so a more informal space may be appropriate. These are matters of judgement and opportunities for involving young people in decision-making.

Finding the setting is a task best achieved together. The suggestion 'lets go in here?' or 'shall we go for a walk?' if taken up is a beginning. Getting a coat, a few moment's wait, perhaps some agreement about where you are going and for how long are all connections, small markers of being with each other. For a counsellor their client decides to come to them so something is already happening. For the youth worker this is less likely to be the case. The individual work, their being with another, starts further back. Making a space may be walking or finding a café. The point is to find a setting where both of you can focus on each other.

Building a working alliance

With these foundations we can begin the process of construction. As in a building there are outer walls, inner rooms, the electrical and plumbing services and the like so in the process of working with an individual there are inter-connecting elements. In finding an appropriate setting and choosing our role we build the rapport essential for a *relationship of mutual trust and emotional affinity*. Rapport is fundamental. Given the young person has accepted the setting offered and is with you to talk about something important to them suggests the initial stages of rapport are present. Usually you will have a mutual 'history'. This was the case with Jason and Tina. With Aaron the working relationship was recent, but he knew the worker's role. Similarly with regard to the cousin, who dropped in, we could 'place' each other. What was different with the last one was that in a short time we established what counsellors call a *working alliance*. This is essential but the time this takes to establish can vary greatly. It is not the same as rapport, although related. For you can have rapport with someone at a party, but that does not mean you have a *working alliance*. It is likely that with Tina, who sought out the worker when she was distressed, the working alliance will be quickly established. With Aaron and Jason it will take longer. The *working alliance* means there is a relaxation of 'defences' and that you are going to work, in your different roles, towards something that will support the young person. This is rarely explicit; it just happens the relationship reaches that stage. But of course building a *working alliance* can take considerable effort and skill; however, it is important to acknowledge the significance of 'the moment'. This is difficult to get at because it is part of the inner world. Generally

people become ready to talk when they are ready. There is some inner process or order. The Greeks used the idea of logos time, the cosmic order or when things are ready (see Boardman *et al.* 1992). Logos, it must be noted, is distinguished from chronos or clock time. Without diverting into philosophy or religion there often seems a coming together of factors connecting inner and outer worlds. It is difficult to catch.

So you as a worker and the young person are together in an appropriate setting. What happens next? How do you begin? Well in a sense you have already begun. But the 'how do I begin?' question lingers. A straight question – 'Why are you in a mood, Jason?' – will probably be counter-productive. It is best young people tell their story. So the beginning is about finding ways for them to articulate their experience. Let's say you meet with Tina the next day and you may ask her 'why don't you just tell me about what has happened?' 'Open questions' requiring neither 'yes' or 'no' answers are frequently used. Regarding Jason and Aaron preparatory steps need to be taken to build a working alliance. The first is 'hearing' the unspoken communication. Both are making it clear something is not right for them. But they are unable to say so in words, they are 'saying' it in their actions. If you want to respond to this communication it is often best to use this language of action. This step, of understanding and using the same language, may rather than connect with the content of their story, make a bridge with the medium of the story. This is so often called the body language. The hunched shoulders, the head down and air of depression can be recognised ('heard') as a way of saying 'something is wrong'. How to respond? Asking the straight question – *why are you in a mood?* – closes him down because, though the question seems to be about Jason, it actually starts with where the questioner is. For it is the questioner who wants to know; therefore, this question is not really about Jason. Worse, it is likely he will experience such a question as accusatory – why are you moody? To develop a working alliance you need to start where the other is. However, Jason may not know why he feels like he does or be unable to put his feeling into words.

The starting is not to find why Jason looks as he does; that may emerge later. The initial steps must be to open channels of communication. A verbal communication that starts with where Jason is might say 'you're looking pretty fed-up, Jason'. This requires Jason to recognise, in words, how he feels. So an alternative is to communicate in the language of the body. For Jason hunched shoulders, bent head and sense of depression are his 'language'. An approach that bypasses verbal communication is, through using the same 'language', adopting Jason's posture or aspects of it – this is called *mirroring*. Here the worker's body mirrors Jason's. Body language takes a different quicker route to the brain than verbal

language. Often it bypasses the conscious mind. So it would be 'heard' by Jason instantly. Words could follow – 'feeling really fed-up is horrible'. It often makes a better bridge to make a comment than asking a question. What makes this communication is not only what the worker does but the young person's response which may often itself be via body language – a relaxation or opening up of the shoulders or raising of the head. Observation is essential to discern the language and meaning of the response. The practitioner's own response is modified accordingly. Communication is thereby established.

There is no right way to achieve connection between people. It is part of the relationship. There are many different possibilities and considerable subtlety. Perhaps each relationship has a unique quality. What is common is these steps lead towards building *the working alliance*. Without the sense of joining together to work at something subsequent wise words are of no avail. While writing this chapter I encountered an example of how difficult it can be to develop a working alliance. Penny (16), who had come for an interview, said that she was leaving school because she had five siblings to look after and her mother was always criticising her. Penny said they perpetually rowed and therefore needed her own place if she was to continue studying. Getting somewhere without financial support would be difficult and perhaps undesirable. The first step, it seemed, was to work with mother and daughter about their relationship. My aim was to help her to function, as a daughter, student, sibling and young woman, within the family. I made a home visit to meet the mother. She had to empty their main room of the children and her partner, not Penny's father, to speak to me without interruption. I had the early stages of a working alliance with Penny. But I began my relationship with her mother as a male stranger, who she believed her daughter had informed she was a bad mother. This was the setting and 'being with' situation I found myself in. The starting point for our relationship was the message her daughter believed she was unsupportive. It seemed difficult not to provoke her hostility, denial or collapse. How might I establish a *working alliance* with this woman whom I barely knew and who I threatened?

First I reflected on her experience as a mother whose eldest had become stubborn and wilful. I approached building rapport and a working alliance by expressing admiration of her achievements. But I couldn't avoid the purpose of my visit. So I began by admitting that what I would be saying might be unwelcome to her and then outlined the facts of my discussion with Penny. I tried to add meaning to this in terms of the thoughts and feelings she must be having. I stressed that conflict during adolescence was commonplace. This complex communication became

more difficult as English was her second language. I said I guessed she wouldn't view things as Penny did. I encouraged her to interrupt me, to express her thoughts. As we talked I watched for signs of tensing up or of softening in her face and body. What happened when I spoke of her daughter; how I perceived her position; of the impact of Penny's adolescence on her? I watched how she responded and reflected back, in *précis* form, what she said. Where I sensed tenseness or resistance I often gave voice to it – '*I imagine you feel hurt and perhaps angry that your daughter both feels these things and what is more speaks to me, a stranger, of you in this way?*' It was speaking to someone else of family matters that allowed her face and shoulders to relax the most. It emerged that it was the sense of shame, confusion and anger that was significant to her. Allowing this hostility towards me to emerge gave permission to give voice to these feelings. It helped us establish a rudimentary working alliance. Working with resistance this way has its root within psychoanalysis, but there is a useful way of relating it to a Gestalt perspective called supporting the resistance. The 'resistance' has its own reason for being there.

Aaron or Jason are unlikely to say how they felt, except perhaps via a verbal attack on the interrogator. So how might you match or mirror someone like them? One club worker describes how on entering the snooker room he encountered a young man cursing and hurling a snooker ball through a window. Without pausing, the worker picked up another ball, threw it through another window, shook his fist and yelled '*sometimes I get so angry I cannot find words.*' The young person immediately stopped what he was doing. What happened here can be described as mirroring in action and it worked. For communication between them was established, words were found that enabled the young man to express his anger and pain through tears (Wilson 1985).

We want deep connection with others. We like being listened to and understood. Generally building rapport begins when you begin to give your thoughtful attention to another. What we have explored above are exceptions to that experience. It is like the layer of bricks upon which everything else rests. Unlike brick foundations, however, rapport needs constant attention, and it can break down. Such things as loss of confidentiality or ignoring boundaries can overnight destroy a carefully built rapport.

Resources – using theory

To respond to the sudden aggressive demands of someone like Aaron, the silent powerful communications of Jason or the raw feelings of Penny, practitioners must draw on deep wells of resource. There are two I will

comment on. One is the well of theory, the other our own emotional life. Many useful areas of theory exist. An example of drawing from this well came in the conflict between Penny and her mother. They were originally from Ghana. Part of the mother's complaint was the effect of British culture on Penny; 'when she first came here she was so different from now', she protested. Here my understanding of adolescent development helped me explain some of those changes. I recalled a section of Rayner's book entitled 'The Denigration of Parents'; subsequently I found the quote which began: 'the manic mood is not only grandiose about the self it can very readily also be disparaging of his parents and other adults' (1986: 153). Understanding this normalisation and contextualisation of the developmental process helped me support Penny's mother in her puzzlement of what was happening to them.

The well of theory also helped me understand 'resistance', a term coined by Freud. The psychoanalytic method he developed was of an unconscious life expressed through behaviour and dreams (Freud 1900). The reasons for, or connection with, earlier childhood experience were not, he argued, known by his patients; hence the unconscious was the key to unlocking the meaning of their behaviour. He interpreted this unconscious behaviour to bring it into consciousness. Resistance described the process blocking conscious psychological awareness. He later recognised that this resistance provided clues realising it 'was itself a means of reaching the repressed and unveiling the secret of the neurosis' (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 395). Others extended this notion. The Gestalt ideas of Perls (1947) added to our understanding suggesting that 'you know you're getting somewhere when resistance comes up'. This is an essential element in psychosynthesis – 'resistance only erupts when something is about to happen' (Young Brown 1983: 87). Whether we like it or not, it is part of an essential self which is trying to find expression. It is essentially hopeful for

Somehow (our) resistance must be acknowledged as of value and included in our change. The old belief needs to be embraced within the new paradigm, for they hold truth (for us) as well. Paradigm shift means movement towards an expanded belief system, not the substitution of one belief for another.

(*ibid.*: 88)

Resistance must be acknowledged, its role given value and theory explored. It is often possible in some way to give the resistance its own voice, its own expression.

A colleague adapts this principle in work with groups. One example concerns a game of football that threatened to get completely out of hand because the rules were constantly being broken. He began to take it

much further pushing people over, picking up the ball. When the group complained he stopped, looked hurt and said 'Oh, I am sorry I thought, because of so and so and so and so, we were not obeying the rules I didn't have too. Are we going to play to rules or not?' They continued to play without rules, for a while, until it ceased to be fun. The group worked together to agree some rules. This is skilled work that draws upon the theory of supporting the resistance.

Resources – understanding and using feelings

The other deep well of resource in *being with another* is our feelings or emotions. First we must remind ourselves of two fundamentals about the inner life of feelings. One that feelings are different from thoughts; two that we have feelings about everything. In this work, however, though we will have all sorts of feelings these are put to use, almost entirely, in an indirect way. One principle is that we rarely speak of our own feelings. This is because much of the exchange is explicitly or implicitly about the feelings of the other. These are complex enough. Introducing yours would make the task of seeing where you both were impossible.

In building working alliances we begin to understand *the story* of the other. As a child, when told a story, I remember blank anticipation. My mind was free and waiting as if I found *space in my mind* for what was to come. This image of *making a space in the mind* illustrates what happens next in being with another as a professional. Here we must allow the story to unfold. We each have our own unique story comprising the events of our lives and the way we experience and try to make sense of them over time. *Being with* someone, in the sense that I mean, involves gradually gathering up aspects of this combination of events and understandings so a sense of their uniqueness unfolds. We make links here with the engagement process. We are engaging with another. An engineering metaphor may help explain what is happening. When a cogwheel engages with another cog precisely the right space has been engineered to accept the cog so it can 'fit', move it on and do its work. Something similar happens in being with another in one-to-one working. There is space in the worker's mind not 'filled up' with the anticipated issues, required knowledge and right answers. The worker doesn't know what the young person wants to talk about. Of course the worker may, from previous encounters, have an idea, but it is a guess. They don't know how they will tell their story or what part concerns them now. Their position is of 'not knowing' and it is very important the worker views this encounter as new territory. They need space in their mind for what is coming, for both the facts of the situation and *emotional space*. There is

a deep interest in the 'facts', whatever the component parts of the story are, and the feelings that accompany the telling. These two themes – the facts and the feelings – inter-relate and sometimes blend together but must be understood by the practitioner, as distinct. In following the story both facts and feelings need to make sense, to add up. Where it does not generally, it is because feelings have got caught up in it somewhere. The practitioner needs to receive the sometimes strong and often contradictory feelings the young person has about the situation they are describing.

Recently when I was observing a Connexions Personal Advisor hearing an asylum seeker talk about a course she was undertaking it became apparent to me that he was acquiring the facts but was ignoring the young woman's feelings about the course. As a result there was disconnection in their exchange. In discussing the session afterwards I drew two parallel lines, one headed emotions and the other practical or intellectual learning. I described these moving happily along beside each other until something happens to one of them. I then drew the emotion's line splaying out into the intellectual sphere. For if the emotional track of a person's life is disregarded then it will try to make sure its presence is felt in some other way. So in hearing a story both the facts and the feelings need to be listened to and given feedback. 'Space in the mind' allows the story and feelings about these events to be heard, taken in and recognition given. Then the young person has found their voice, begun saying what is going on for them and experienced being heard. Experiencing someone really listening to you and conveying what they understand is powerful. It alone can lead to change, but even if that were not so, the significance of it remains for the young person. Counsellors call this process 'summarising' or 'reflecting back' the outlines or a paraphrase of the main point. Repeating key phrases or words often does the trick. With skill offering a metaphor or an image of what is said can aid the process.

Pressure to act

Often alongside 'the story' we hear a demand for change. When Penny explained the conflict with her mother she demanded I find her somewhere to live. Regarding Aaron and his behaviour there was powerful pressure to stop things deteriorating and maintain discipline. In some settings it is desirable to 'jump on things quick'. Practitioners also, for example, have responsibilities to other users, colleagues and equipment. Recently I felt I had to do something to stop Simon breaking chairs. But I could also see his sadness. This sense of something being wrong applies to all my examples and so the seemingly natural response is to try to make

things better, and to take away painful or angry feelings. Here we are at that other well of resource – our own feelings.

We must recognise this 'pressure to act' gets inside us – I call it 'the DSN moment'. The *do something now* (DSN) state of mind compels us to change the situation. Recognising it is central to preventing it taking over. I had an overwhelming feeling I must stop Simon vandalising the room. Had I tried to stop him using equal force (if that was possible) who knows what further aggression and violence might have been unleashed. But I glimpsed in time something of the desperate pain and anger being expressed through his actions. Consequently my DSN moment was checked, replaced by a tentative desire to connect with where Simon was in his emotional state.

In conclusion

We have explored a part of professional practice that is about learning and support, developing awareness, growth and development, and relationships. We can usefully call this part of the process of 'gathering their story'. We have difficulty understanding others from inside our own skins. But we can, if we allow ourselves to have *space in our mind*, get a working understanding of someone else in relationship to particular issues. We must grasp it as an unfolding story, with always another chapter to follow. So we approach this process of being with another with awe and anticipation. Others have expressed this idea, but one that hits the spot for me is Taylor who expresses the place of the listener in this way – 'And so we enter dialogue with the humblest kind of curiosity in which expectancy and reverence and dread all have their place' (1971: 8). Humility, curiosity, expectancy, reverence and dread are pretty sound attitudes with which to approach 'being with another'. Interestingly Taylor, from a different background, comes up with a list similar to that of Schön (1983). Though 'dread' may seem a little extreme, except maybe in a case of bereavement, for example, if we see ourselves as gathering another's story in working with an individual young person with humble curiosity, expectancy and reverence we will not go far wrong.