

A Strategic Approach to Student Counselling in Schools

Maria Piera Malagola ¹

Abstract

Student counselling of adolescents in schools deals with non-pathological areas in which teenagers require help and clarification regarding their own particular difficulties. Very often their calls for help take on dramatic tones : this is mainly due to their own rigid ideas, a typical feature of this age range (from 11 to 15 years old). However, by using suitable communication techniques, it is possible to guide them towards a solution to their problems much faster than it would be with adults, by transforming their feeling of crisis into a new, more functional ability to take action.

The most common, recurrent problems that came up from interviews with about 300 adolescents concern: lack of motivation to study, anxiety about written and oral tests, conflict with parents and teachers, difficult relationships with peers and loss of family member or close friend.

By adapting therapy procedures for adults and creating simplified treatment methods, it is possible to deal with adolescent problems in non-pathological areas.

The prescriptions thus becomes a kind of bizarre experiment, which, by stimulating curiosity and surprise, leads to a situation whereby difficulties can be rapidly overcome.

A typical counselling session on “reluctance to study” is described below.

¹ *Affiliated Psychotherapist Centro di Terapia Strategica,
Luino – Varese, Italy*

The problem of reluctance to study

If a teenager does not have the least inclination to study, and the obligation to study appears as the only possible road towards not being kept down and moving up to the next class, then we have a problem on our hands. This is what brings teenagers, who are often intelligent but averse to hard work, to our counselling sessions. Too much like hard work - forget it! They know all too well that they should be studying but the reaction is reluctance to study.

“ It’s pointless to sit in my room, staring at my books – I just drift off , daydream and it’s a total waste of time, that’s all ...” is a typical comment.

This is usually what they say to themselves. The justification of not wanting to study is the perfect alibi. Unfortunately, when report cards are brought home , the real problems start.

Most students believe that it is not so vital to do well in the first half of the school year. If they really have to do something, they put it off for as long as possible and cram the day before the test. This kind of student instinctively follows the motto “ maximum results from minimum effort” after having adapted it to “minimum results and minimum effort”. What follows is a typical counselling session in which this kind of problem is dealt with.

Psychologist : Why did you ask to come to see me¹?

Definition of problem

Student: Things at school aren’t going so well, I can’t be bothered to study...

P. : That’s quite a problem !

S. : My marks are bad in lots of subjects and if I carry on like this I’ll fail for sure. That’ll be a real mess, I can just hear my mum and dad – it’s always the same old nag, nag, nag ! Anyway, I don’t want to be kept down and have to stay here another year... all my friends will be leaving.

P. : This fact of not wanting to study, is it only in one subject or in all of them ? (Most students are usually good in at least one subject)

Looking for exceptions by illusion of alternative

S : I’m not bad at some things, like playing the recorder and art.

¹ Students ask to see the Psychologist by putting the request slip in the relevant box in the school hall

P. : And do you actually study for these subjects or not ?

S. : Well yes, I suppose so, but it's more a question of doing a drawing or actually practising the recorder, and that's fun, I mean I don't get bored doing that. Then the Art teacher goes on and on at you if you don't bring the work you have to do.

P. : So, as I understand it, correct me if I'm wrong, your problem is that you can't be bothered to study certain subjects but strangely enough you are quite keen on some things , which on the one hand you have fun doing and on the other hand you do the required work because otherwise the teachers in question would tell you off and get on your nerves. Am I right ?

*Re-organizational
paraphrase*

S. : Yes, that's right.

P. : So, we've got something that's working, but that's the easiest bit; what I'm interested in now is trying to understand what we can do about you not wanting to study and the problems that entails, making things difficult for you...

*Anticipation
technique*

S. : I see...

P. : Let me just ask you something. When you try and look at a thing you've got to study for homework, and you really don't want to do it , do you actually feel physically sick and have a sense of rejection for what you should be doing ? I suppose some subjects are definitely more revolting than others .

*Evocation of
sensations*

S. : Yes, absolutely, like History, it's really awful ! It's just impossible to remember all those dates, I don't understand a word of it..

P. : I really feel that this sense of revulsion is a key to the problem. We need to get to the bottom of it and find out...

S. : How do you mean ?

P. : You know, I really need to understand properly how this mechanism works... We would then be able to find a solution... it's just that if I

*Establishing the
therapeutic
contract*

don't understand how it works, I wouldn't like to get things wrong and I know you need to sort things out pretty quickly...

S. : Well, yes...

P. : (moving nearer the student, with a more confidential tone of voice) Listen, it'd really be important for me to get a clearer picture of the situation; there's an experiment you could do which would leave me in no doubt as to the nature of your lack of interest in schoolwork. Then, once I've grasped the problem, it'll be easy to show you.....

S. : What's this experiment about ?

P. : Well, look, it's a bit strange. You need to get your alarm clock and set it to go off after half an hour.

S. : Is it OK if I use my mobile phone ?

P. : (looking thoughtful) Yes, I suppose so. Get everything ready as if you were going to study, with your books open in front of you – all organized for studying.

(as soon as the word “study” is pronounced the student looks suspiciously at the psychologist as if he were being tricked)

S. : It's not as if you're going to get me to study, are you ?

P. : (indignantly) ABSOLUTELY NOT . In that half an hour , you have to make yourself disgusted, repulsed by studying, completely sickened by it, really make sure that you exasperate these feelings, use all the boring things you find in your books to make you feel as sick as possible. Actually, the best idea would be to start with the subjects you hate most . I'm really looking forward to hearing about it , try to increase your revulsion for studying by doing this regularly every day for half an hour – only half an hour though, OK ?As soon as your mobile rings put everything away, that's the end of the experiment and you can only repeat it the next day at the same time. Remember, use whatever you

*Prescription: half
an hour of
reluctance to study*

can, to get the maximum effect... pictures, difficult words, passages where you haven't a clue what they're on about. You'll manage to do it , won't you?

S. : Well, yes, I suppose so. The main thing is not to study.... Actually tomorrow I've got a Geography test....

P. : Well, I think you probably find that fairly revolting, don't you ? You can start the experiment from today. Come back and let me know how it's going in two weeks' time .

S. : (looking at psychologist with a confused expression) OK . Bye.

Needless to say, the student goes away , feeling a little confused as to the task , but also quite satisfied as at last someone has not just given him the usual nagging “sermon”.

The prescription usually has a pleasant effect which goes something like this : “As I had to sit in front of my books, I started to read something, and I actually found it quite interesting, and later I managed to remember it without any problems”. A lot of students even carry on reading after the alarm clock has gone off, just because they are interested enough to want to.

From my experience, these students do not normally even open their books and very often the laziest are also the most intelligent; there is, therefore, immediately quite a noticeable jump between not even opening a book and spending half an hour a day reading one.

Usually, once they start to “ know “things, the students start to put up their hands in class to answer questions and , consequently, they start to be gratified.

In addition, having made a specific promise to the therapist, they feel obliged to spend that half an hour every day with their books, so that... one thing leads to another, and the time dedicated to homework gradually becomes part of their daily routine.

Outline of Approach

Definition of problem

Inability of student to achieve adequate results in schoolwork.

Solutions attempted by student

Avoids studying as he is easily distracted and cannot manage.

Uses the alibi of not wanting to study as irrefutable justification.

Manoeuvres and strategies

Demonstration of great interest in this phenomenon of reluctance to study.

Statement of lack of power with a complementary position.

Prescription which incorporates the logic of paradox and that of self-fulfilling prophecy

Re-definition of the problem

Maintain the half an hour rule as a moment for study, which is feasible as a daily activity

Reinforce success gained

Give student credit for having achieved this transformation, by feigning disbelief, “How did you manage to do it ...?”

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Address reprint requests to:

Maria Piera Malagola
Centro di Terapia Strategica (Luino – Varese – Italy)
pmalagola@libero.it