

**Working systemically with adolescents in schools**  
*Michelle Koay, school counsellor, Raffles Girls' School (Secondary)*

**Abstract**

The paper will explore how school counsellors can work with Secondary School students from a systemic perspective. The school counsellor is strategically positioned to work with the student and his family as the counsellor is familiar with the school culture and the teachers. Challenges faced by school counsellors to work systemically will be addressed, especially since few are equipped with the knowledge and skills to do so. This paper will also discuss how to expand the scope of systemic work beyond family therapy to include interventions such as skills training and working with peer groups. The author will share examples from her personal experience of integrating systemic ideas and practices to enhance the effectiveness of working with adolescents in the school.

**Introduction**

This paper explores how systemic ideas and approaches can be integrated in the local (Singapore) schools when working with adolescents. It takes a look at the unique developmental stage of adolescence and the types of issues presented by adolescents. In addition, it takes into consideration the impact and the implications of societal and technological changes on the magnitude of the problems faced by adolescents. The paper reviews the conceptual and theoretical framework of the school counsellor scheme and how this translates into the actual operational work of school counsellors. There are certainly numerous gaps and shortfalls in the way that school counsellors work today and this requires a paradigm shift to equip the school counsellors with the necessary skills and knowledge to think and work systemically. The scope of systemic work is not merely confined to family therapy but should include a range of interventions involving other aspects of the adolescents' system. The paper will highlight and address the numerous challenges faced in working systemically in order to integrate systemic ideas and practices effectively in the schools.

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**The world of adolescence**

Adolescence is probably the most turbulent stage in a person's life because it is the period of transition between childhood and adulthood. This developmental stage is characterised by puberty, which involves biological changes and physical growth spurts. As a result of these changes, adolescents experience changes and growth in the psychosocial and cognitive dimensions. They have to learn to adapt to their new body image and sexuality and learn to define themselves as individuals who are unique and independent from their parents. They seek to find a sense of belonging with their peers and their sense of identity in relation to their peers and the world around. Cognitively, their thinking evolves in the breadth and scope of more abstract and complex ideas.

During this period where numerous significant changes occur, adolescents go through fluctuating and intense emotions which they and their parents have to learn to cope with. Adolescents may become more withdrawn and less communicative, experience mood swings and unexplainable emotional outbursts. Consequently, parents become distressed, confused and are left feeling helpless and powerless. As they struggle with trying to understand what their adolescents may be going through, they anxiously do whatever they can to improve their relationship and attempt to restore the connection with their children.

Human beings are primarily relational beings, so most presenting problems – psychological, behavioural, emotional or interpersonal in nature – have a relational component to them and are often indicative of some issues within the system. Considering the family as a system, symptomatic behaviours may emerge if the family is unable to cope with the transition stage of adolescence.

Family functioning, whether adaptive or not, affects adolescents' behaviour in a positive or negative way respectively (Horigian, Robbins and Szapocznik, 2004). When parents and their adolescents have a healthy and secure attachment, good communication and bonding with each other, and an environment based on trust, love and understanding, the risk of these adolescents developing problematic behaviours will significantly reduce. On the other hand, in a family characterised by highly critical and conflictual interactions, lack of control and management of what adolescents do in their day-to-day activities, they are usually known to

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be at risk of problematic behaviours and have greater difficulties dealing with their interpersonal relationships and friendships.

Since issues faced by adolescents seldom exist in isolation, it is important to understand how the family system, its dynamics and patterns of interactions (Horigian et al., 2004) influence and impact the way adolescents think, feel and cope with life. Some of the issues seen in schools are: stresses due to interpersonal relationships and friendships, truancy, school refusal, gang association, conflictual relationships with their parents, distress about the strained relationship between their parents, unable to perform academically or drop in academic performance, psychosomatic symptoms, eating disorders and problematic eating behaviours, self-harm behaviours and suicidal ideation, psychological and emotional issues, violent behaviour, substance abuse (smoking, glue-sniffing, prescriptive drugs, illicit drugs and alcohol), risky sexual behaviours, gaming and internet addiction.

It is important to consider the context in the work with adolescents today because the world of adolescence has changed dramatically: proliferation of technology, exposure to the Internet, elaborate use of social media and extensive reliance on various digital devices. The adult generation can be described as “digital immigrants” while the generation of children are “digital natives”. This has significant implications on how their brains function, how they interact with others, how they live their lives and what they do with the time that they have. Adolescents today have to juggle and manage numerous things at the same time. This is especially so in a competitive and tech-savvy culture like Singapore, where children have to cope with copious amounts of homework, projects, tests, examinations, school activities, tuition and enrichment classes. In addition, with the availability of various digital devices like 3G mobile phones, digital tablets and laptops (big, cumbersome computer desktops are no longer in fashion), while adolescents are doing their research online or completing their homework on the computer, they are multi-tasking (Taffel, 2005) by text messaging their friends, chatting with their friends online, watching videos on YouTube, playing online games and listening to music.

In fact, the evolution of the world due to technological advancement has influenced and affected adults, and changed how they live and interact as well. Adults also spend a significant amount of time on their digital devices for both work and leisure. There is

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generally less supervision of children by their parents because parents spend more time at work, there are more dual-income families, and increasingly, children are raised by their grandparents, domestic helpers and after-school facilities (adolescents typically raise themselves because they are old enough to be on their own). With less communication between parents and their adolescents, the relationship and bond between them is threatened. Parents may also be experiencing their own life-stage changes, which are likely to influence and impact the family dynamics as these add stressors to the family system. They may experience mid-life crisis, changes in their work situation, challenges due to the maturation of their marital relationship and in some cases, they may have to attend to their aged parents' health issues.

From the news reports and online media resources, it can be seen that the values of adolescents have changed. What is considered right or wrong, acceptable or not, are no longer the same. In fact, there is a glaring disconnect between the world of adults and the world of adolescence. Counsellors who work with adolescents will experience a parallel disconnect (Taffel, 2005) which is present at home between the parents and their adolescents, if they are not cognizant of what is going on and are not attuned with the world of adolescence. Adolescents have re-defined the rules of engagement of sex, substance abuse, values about gender, marriage, relationships and so on. They do not feel understood by their parents, teachers and helping professionals who are all adults and seem to be on another plane of understanding.

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**Current situation**

During a talk given by the Mr Tharman Shanmugaratnam in 2005, Minister for Education at that time, he mentioned that by 2008, every school will be staffed with a full-time counsellor. The role of the school counsellor is to work directly with students with high-risk behaviours like delinquency and substance abuse or other problematic behaviours, which they may exhibit in school. Two teacher-counsellors will assist the counsellor in identifying students who need counselling. If the cases are more difficult and complicated, or may require additional work with the family, they may be referred to the Family Service Centres or other associated agencies (National Council of Social Service, 2007).

The counselling profession does not have a very long history in Singapore so there are limited number of people in this profession. Hence, in order to staff all the schools with full-time school counsellors, the entry criteria are not particularly stringent. From the Ministry of Education (MOE) website (<http://www.moe.gov.sg>), graduates from any discipline will be considered. For those who do not possess counselling qualifications, they are required to attend a six-months counselling training sponsored by MOE. The initial training equips the school counsellors with basic counselling knowledge and skills to work with students. Due to a lack of clinical supervisors within MOE, it is challenging to provide the necessary support and guidance school counsellors need in order to improve in their clinical skills and expertise. In recent years, it is noted that more and more experienced counsellors are joining the school counselling field so the experience level of full-time school counsellors is slowly improving.

For school counsellors who are new to counselling, they may not possess the knowledge and understanding of systemic ideas and approaches. This may limit their ability to assess whether they should work with the student in individual counselling or refer the student's family for family counselling. In addition, the school counsellor is mandated to only work individually with the student, which may consequently constraint the school counsellor's scope of work. Students are typically referred to see the school counsellor by their parents or teachers. However, in order to work systematically, there is a need to reach out to the students in other ways. The next two sections will elaborate further on the scope of systemic work, which can be implemented in schools.

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**Paradigm shift**

Research has shown the effectiveness of systemic interventions and systemic family therapies in treating adolescents with various problematic behaviours, relationship difficulties and psychological issues (Cottrell & Boston, 2002; Carra, 2009; Kaslow, Broth, Smith and Collins, 2012).

A family is made up several separate individuals and each of them possesses a unique personality, character and issues (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004). How the family interacts and functions has to be seen as a system, because their internal functioning and interpersonal functioning affects and impacts the way the family functions as a whole.

There are numerous advantages for school counsellors to work systemically with adolescents. It helps the counsellor understand the dynamics of what is going on in the family, appreciating the “big picture” and to be able to piece the “puzzle” together or to make sense of their story in a more coherent way. By working with the family, each member will be able to get a sense of why things happen the way they do and how they interact affects the others psychologically, emotionally and behaviourally. It would be ideal if each family member takes responsibility for change, is accountable and works on his or her own issues actively rather than passively allowing himself or herself to be the way he or she is. Since the family is likened to a system, everybody has a part to play in order to produce positive change. If the adolescent changes as a result of counselling, and the family system remains as it is, the work done in therapy may be undone or the changes may be difficult to sustain or the family system may be plagued by a range of new issues. On the other hand, the changes may force the system to react and respond to the shifts, which can sometimes result in a better outcome. Working systemically is a way to tap on the resources within the family and within each person. Positive changes seen within the family system will in turn influence the intra-psychic of each individual family member and impact their interpersonal relationships with others outside the family system. The adult is likely to become a better parent, spouse, co-worker and friend. Similarly, the child is likely to become a better daughter or son, sibling, friend, student, and engage in more fulfilling and satisfying relationships with other people in their lives in future.

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The school counsellor is well-placed in a school setting to reach out to the family and other stakeholders within the system especially since the counsellor knows the school culture, environment, teachers and other students. A document by the National Council of Social Service (2007) reflects the understanding of the importance of working systemically and how the school counsellor can work effectively with the students to produce change. Due to the limited resources within the school, the systemic work involves tapping on external resources to work with the students, if and when necessary. The external resources include various programmes which have been set up to attend to specific groups of students like enhanced STEP-UP (School social work To Empower Pupils to Utilise their Potential) and REACH (Response, Early-intervention and Assessment in Community mental Health) or referrals to Family Service Centres and other agencies for counselling.

The current system of working with external agencies certainly has its advantages since those programmes have dedicated resources to work with specific select groups of students. However, in certain circumstances, this may not necessarily be the best and most effective way to work with the students. Hence, this paper calls for a paradigm shift, to consider a change in the way school counsellors work with the students. For example, if rapport has already been established with a particular student, it may be preferable for the school counsellor to continue to work with the student and the associated members of the system, rather than to refer the student to an external agency.

Working systemically typically involves working with the entire family where possible. If it is not possible to include all the members of the family, it would be helpful to at least work with the parents. Engaging the parents goes beyond interviewing the parents to find out information about what they are doing or not doing, or what their adolescent is like outside the school setting. Since I work in an independent school, there is some flexibility in the work processes. As I have some training to work with families, I sometimes invite parents to join their daughter for a family session. I prefer to see the parents together with the student to ease the issues of client confidentiality. Depending on the issues, I will assess if working individually, with the family, or both, would be most effective and beneficial. Timing is also important when assessing when to use family sessions as a form of intervention. Even if the school counsellor cannot bring the entire system into a session, the counsellor must think systemically when working with the adolescent.

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More often than not, it may be easier to engage the mother than both parents. This is primarily because mothers are traditionally regarded as the primary caregivers and are often socialised to be the “more-involved parent”. As there are still a substantial number of mothers who are SAHM (stay-at-home mums), they are usually more available to attend the sessions without having to take leave from work. It is important to engage the father as well because he plays an equally significant role in the family system. With greater awareness of being a father in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the father needs to be aware of his role and influence on the emotional and psychological development of his adolescent.

Working systematically becomes more challenging if the school counsellor is not working with an intact family. The school counsellor has to be aware and open to the unique circumstances of single-parents families, co-parenting in divorced families, blended families as well as working with the extended family if significant and appropriate.

### **Beyond family work**

Systemic work is often considered synonymous to family therapy but this paper will explore other perspectives of systemic work beyond family therapy.

The first area is preventive work and skills training. Carra (2009) shared that systemic work can include a range of interventions including parenting skills training. Skills training (Horigian et al., 2004) can be employed to reach out to the parents of adolescents, to coach them on how to communicate and interact better with their adolescents. Although large-scale talks reach out to more parents, such one-off presentations may not be as effective. Small-group workshops and follow-up sessions are more useful to engage the parents and ensure sustained positive change. The use of support groups is another possible way to reach out to specific groups of parents for them to share experiences and learn from one another. As the school counsellor works directly with the students, he or she will have a sense of the pertinent issues faced by the students in the school. The school counsellor may be able to conduct talks and workshops on relevant topics and also be able to influence the programmes and policies within the school system.



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The second area is working with teachers especially since they spend a good amount of lesson time with the students. The teachers are valuable resources if they are trained and equipped with the basic skills and knowledge to pay attention to students who exhibit problematic behaviours and know how to approach them to address issues, which may arise. In some cases, the students may be more comfortable speaking to their teachers so the teacher may be trained to make a preliminary assessment and subsequently work together with the school counsellor to support the student.

The third area is working with the “second family” (Taffel, 2005), a term used to describe the adolescent peer group and pop culture. The family of origin, or the “first family”, significantly influences and affects the social-emotional well-being of a student. However, during the adolescence stage, the “second family” plays an important role in an adolescent’s life, sometimes even more important than the family of origin (Horigian et al., 2004). It is common for adolescents to turn to their friends for support and comfort. As the bonds of friendship are particularly strong during adolescence, peers are usually very loyal and try to do everything they can to help each other. In some cases, the friends may feel overwhelmed and helpless if the problems are beyond what they can deal with or they may recognise that professional help is required. This is when they may approach their teacher or the school counsellor for help.

In my school setting, it is not unusual for students to come in pairs or trios to talk to me about their friend. I will find out more information in order to assess how their friend is coping. Although the assessment is based on the girls’ knowledge, observations and experience of interacting with their friend, it usually provides a very good indicator of the amount of distress their friend is facing. Depending on the issues, I may coach the girls on how to communicate with their friend, what to listen out for during their conversations and how to show empathy towards their friend. We will discuss about the signs to look out for and how to deal with them accordingly. The teacher may mandate a student to be seen by me but the girls are usually much more effective in getting their friend to seek help. Most of the time, the girls will offer to accompany their friend to see me, as a form of emotional support and a reflection of how much they care about their friend. I also take the opportunity to assess how the girls are coping psychologically and emotionally, while trying to help their friend.

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Counsellors are familiar with using the genogram to represent the family of origin but another tool to use is the friends sociogram (Taffel, 2005) to represent the key friendships in the adolescent's life. Note that the relationships and interactions in a genogram remain relatively constant and the same, whereas the relationships in the sociogram are more volatile and may change from time to time. Fall-outs, misunderstandings and arguments can result in considerable amounts of distress to the adolescents. The type of friends they spend time with gives a glimpse of the types of issues they face and how their friends may influence them, in a positive or negative way. My clients often talk about their friends and when good enough rapport is built, they may share about their concerns for their friends who may be experiencing difficulties or have similar issues as them. When I become aware of such cases, I explore ways to reach out to them through my clients or their teachers.

In certain cases, the session can be more effective and productive when a client comes with her friends. Rather than to have the friends wait in the waiting room, I invite them into the sessions as well. The friends can be a great resource when they share what they know about the client. They also share about how they feel and think about the client and the client's actions and behaviour. These can be useful feedback for the client and their friends' opinions matter a lot to the client. If the friends have issues as well, they may feel comfortable sharing their issues during such sessions too.

As mentioned earlier, today's adolescents are digital natives and they may use social media to connect with one another and express their views and emotions to those who have access to their online profile (Turkle, 2011). Due to the professional boundaries, it may not be appropriate for the school counsellor to engage the students on social media but it is important to understand the implications and significance of the relationships and interactions online. Some students may talk to me about their concerns when they notice troubling content posted by their friends on various forms of social media.

**Challenges of working systemically**

Despite the advantages of working systemically with adolescents, there are many challenges to implementing these ideas.

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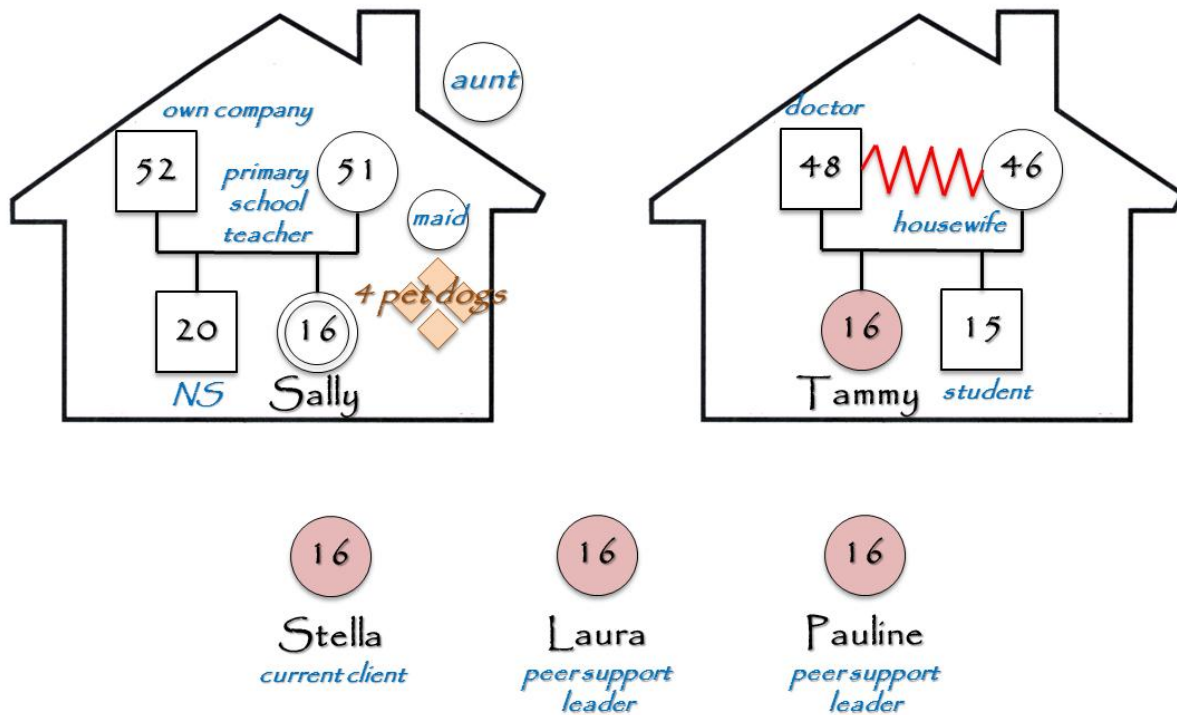
For most counsellors, it may be easier to work with a student individually. This may be due to their own anxiety because of the lack of training and opportunity to think and work systemically with the family.

It would be helpful for school counsellors in Singapore to receive some training in systemic theories so that they can have a better understanding and appreciation of working differently with the students. It may be useful to review if the school counsellors can explore various aspects of systemic work and receive appropriate supervision and training for continuous learning. In view of the large population of school counsellors in Singapore, it would be more crucial to consider implementing the changes in stages. Since this requires a change of mindset of the school counsellors as well as the policy makers, the school counsellors can initiate discussions with their school management to implement some of the systemic ideas and approaches.

The dropout rate may be high if certain aspects are overlooked when working systemically. One such area is the alliance between the school counsellor and the parents and the adolescents (Robbins, Turner, Alexander and Perez, 2003). This is usually dependent on the experience of the counsellor or the counsellor-client match. The other aspects are practical barriers (Nichols & Schwartz, 2004) such as lack of time for sessions due to work commitments or language barriers, especially if the counsellor is not effectively bilingual or is of a different ethnicity as the parents. The school counsellor may not have the resources to engage the families as it tends to be time-consuming to contact them and schedule sessions.

Lastly, confidentiality can be difficult to manage since the family and the teachers want to know the content of the session. It is challenging to balance how much to disclose and what to disclose because the adolescent may become hesitant about sharing certain aspects of their concerns and may either withhold information or resort to lying to the counsellor (Taffel, 2005). The school counsellor has to be sensitive and clear about the information that can be shared with various parties.

**The case of Sally**



The case of Sally provides an overview of how I worked systemically with Sally. The focus in this section is on how I engaged the various parts of the system to work with Sally.

Sally asked Stella to accompany her to see me because they were classmates in lower Secondary and she was aware that Stella is a client of mine. Both of them came and were in the session together while Sally shared that she had issues with self-harm behaviour and experienced depressive symptoms. She seemed disconnected from her family and was troubled by her mother's critical and harsh words. She sought comfort and solace in the company of her pet dogs.

A few weeks' later, Sally's classmates – Laura and Pauline – requested to speak me. They noticed that Sally and Tammy were spending a lot more time together and suspected that Tammy also self-harmed because they observed multiple lacerations on her arm. Tammy was often seen crying when talking to Sally. Laura and Pauline tried to reach out to Tammy but she refused to share anything while Sally seemed distressed and affected by Tammy's emotional state. We discussed ways of reaching out to Tammy such as getting a teacher to speak to her. Meanwhile, Laura updated me on her observations of Sally and Tammy in class. After a few conversations with the teacher, Tammy finally agreed to see me.

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Since Laura and Pauline approached me because of their concern for their classmates, I was able to assess how both of them were coping emotionally and psychologically. Laura was more affected as she was saddened to know that Sally and Tammy were in so much emotional pain and that made her feel very helpless. We processed how she felt and what she experienced as a friend who desires to help others.

Sally accompanied Tammy for her session but she failed to inform her mother so her mother waited anxiously for her in the school. When they went home, her mother was extremely angry and they had a huge argument. Her aunt spoke to Sally about what happened and Sally revealed that she has been seeing me about some issues. Her aunt talked to her parents and they decided to see me to discuss how they can help Sally as a family. During the sessions with her aunt and her parents, Sally was able to talk openly about how she felt. Her parents and aunt also shared about their feelings and concerns for Sally. Her father realised that he has not been involved in Sally's life in recent years. So he reached out to Sally and assured her that he would make an effort to be present for Sally and asked what he could do more for her. Her mother became less critical and harsh in the way she interacted with Sally. Her aunt offered to attend to Sally whenever her parents were at work. This was how Sally and her family started having conversations with one another again.

Tammy talked about her favourite song which she often listened to. When clients share about their interests, the counsellor has to be curious about them because they provide an insight to what the client may be feeling and experiencing. I did an online search of the lyrics of the song and found certain segments indicative of Tammy's experience. For example, "cutting yourself with the jagged edge" was a reflection of her self-harm behaviour. "You're not sure you can take this anymore... I'm scared as hell" was about the pain and fear she was going through. "Because you're not done, you're far too young and the best is yet to come... just give it one more try" showed that Tammy was still hopeful that she would be able to make it through her difficulties.

The work with Sally and Tammy continues with the involvement of their families in subsequent sessions.

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**Integrating systemic ideas in schools**

Integrating systemic ideas and approaches in the schools requires a paradigm shift for the school counsellors, school management and policy makers. It will take time for school counsellors to adopt a systemic frame of working.

The previous section covered the aspect of providing training and clinical supervision to equip school counsellors with the knowledge and skills required to work systemically. In view of the large numbers of school counsellors, the training can be conducted in stages. The key is to start small and not to be too ambitious because quality outweighs quantity. The school counsellor needs to have an open mind when working with adolescents and be flexible and creative in his or her approach. This means that the school counsellor cannot be oblivious to what adolescents are engaged in. Self-initiated research and exploration of what adolescents are interested and engaged in (type of music, movies, idols etc.) helps the school counsellor gain a better understanding of the world of adolescence.

Although the school counsellor has to familiarise and understand a broad scope of family and systemic approaches, it is preferable to adopt an eclectic approach and be flexible when working with adolescents. It is important to build rapport with each member of the family system and not be seen as an ally with either the parents or the adolescent. When the adolescent develops a strong relationship with the counsellor, the adolescent will be able to trust the counsellor to work through the issues. The school counsellor may explore the possibility of expanding the scope of systemic work to engage the teachers as well as the “second family”. Taffel (2005) emphasises the need for counsellors who work with adolescents to be three-dimensional. The adolescent has to experience the school counsellor as someone who is real, honest and fully engaged during the sessions. The counsellor may have to do away with the textbook-like responses which do not reflect the range and depth of emotions which the counsellor may experience when relating to an adolescent in sessions.

When working with adolescents, the interactions and relationships are much more fluid and dynamic. Taking the recommendation by Yalom (2002), “the therapist must be prepared to go wherever the patient goes, do all that is necessary to continue building trust and safety in the relationship.”

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