



Leoarna Mathias continues her series on education's original thinkers with a look at Carl Rogers...

Unconditional optimism

CARL ROGERS IS NOT AN OBVIOUS choice as an early childhood pioneer. We certainly don't mention his name as we list the likes of Froebel, Vygotsky, Piaget or Isaacs. Nevertheless, as a towering presence in the development of 20th century psychology and psychotherapy, Rogers was able to articulate some very salient ideas about human relationships, and how they can facilitate personal growth. For me, these ideas truly resonate when I think about the kinds of relationships carers and educators need to build with their young charges.

Rogers is widely considered to be one of the founding fathers of psychotherapy research; in defining his person-centred approach, which involves a unique understanding of personality and human relationships, his work found wide application in various domains such as psychotherapy, counselling and education.

Born in 1902 into a strictly Pentecostal family, Rogers was academically able and began his career in farming technology. However, during his late 20s, he began to question the role of his faith in his life, and spent some time at theological college, and then moved on to teaching college. As he undertook first an MA and then a PhD, he conducted some original research into the clinical treatment of problem children, and began lecturing in this area. By 1940 he was professor of clinical psychology at Ohio University.

While his work is closely associated with his colleague and predecessor Otto Rank, the clarity with which Rogers went on to describe the value of empathy, understanding and acceptance in any facilitative relationship, while seeming almost commonplace now, was quite radical in his own time. Early 20th century psychology, as established by the Freudian school, had been dominated by a view of the clinician as first diagnosing and then imposing authoritarian solutions onto the client. In breaking with this

world view, Rogers successfully reframed the discipline and can be held to have essentially invented psychotherapy, as distinct from psychiatry.

Rogers was critical of the formal, didactic instructional methods that were commonplace in schooling during his most active years. He rejected the 'teacher as expert, student as passive learner' model that was familiar to most school-age children. For him, self-actualisation is realised when emotion and cognition are both able to play a part in the developmental process. He hoped to abandon the use of the word 'teacher' altogether, and in this, one remembers how much more comfortable our European neighbours are with the word 'pedagogue' than we are here in the UK.

Incredible potential

Perhaps the phrase most closely associated with Rogers' work is that of 'unconditional positive regard'. For him, these words describe the essential nature of the relationship between therapist and client, but they also have application for the relationship between, for example, key worker and young child. In simple terms, Rogers asks the carer, facilitator or therapist to remove or suspend judgement from the room and the relationship, and to instead perceive the client, student, or child in the most optimistic 'light' possible. The *helper's* absolute faith in the *helpee's* capacity to bring about the change or learning in their life they desire is a fundamental building block of the relationship between the two. There are moments in Rogers' writing

where he wonders if he is 'hopelessly unrealistic and idealistic'; nevertheless, his belief in the 'incredible potential' of every child is thoroughly persuasive.

Our real priorities

If you were unfamiliar with Rogers' work prior to reading this article, you are beginning to see why I feel he has genuine relevance to those of us in the early years field. In arguing that the facilitator of learning should 'prize, accept and trust' the student, should embrace the emotional aspects of learning, should listen carefully to what the student is saying, and should be willing to let the student lead, Rogers' words resonate with much of the best practice in our field. He calls on everyone involved in helping individuals to realise their goals, to recognise that "the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities that exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner". A better description of the real priorities for early years practitioners – far beyond those set by top-down curricula, and the school readiness agenda – I have yet to encounter.

