ROLE PLAY # 3: Cultural Issues in Counseling With an Adolescent Client

**Counselor:** Well Jane, thanks for coming back this week. We talked a little last week and maybe we could just pick up with what's going for you.

**Jane**: Well I was asked to come in and see you again.

**Counselor**: Yeah. So what's going on for you this week?

**Jane:** Well just the same things that were doing on last week. Classwork and I got into a bit of a yelling match. Someone in class and the teacher asked me to come and talk to you.

**Counselor**: I hadn't heard about that. Would you mind talking a little bit about what happened?

**Jane**: Well, she was being rude and making some statements about my hair and I got angry and we started yelling at each other and then the teacher asked me to come see you again.

**Counselor**: So someone in class was making some statements about your hair and then you guys sort of got into it and the teacher told you to come down and see me?

**Jane:** Yeah, just before the end of the break.

**Counselor:** So it's sounding almost like it was a little bit of a punishment.

**Jane**: Certainly I think that's what it is because she's in class and I'm here.

**Counselor:** So I wonder what that's all about?

**Jane:** Well, this seems like I'm always in some kind of trouble here, you know, and this is no different.

**Counselor**: And when you say that, I hear you say trouble here, you mean here in this school since you moved here? And that's a little different for you then from where you lived before? **Jane**: Yes. I've lived in New York with my family for years and it was different there and since we came here it's just been really hard and I just seem to always be doing something wrong. **Counselor**: Yeah. Wow, you know, I'm not sure exactly what that means for you but one of the things that's pretty obvious is this is a pretty white school and you're a student of color. There are not a lot of people who are students of color here in this school and I'm wondering if that is some of what you are talking about that's different and that’s hard.

**Jane**: Well, that’s definitely a part of it. The school that I was in for the last three years was very mixed, all sorts of people, and that's very different here for me.

**Counselor:** Yeah. So one of the effects of that is that you get, you're feeling that you get blamed for stuff or treated unfairly, is that what I'm hearing?

**Jane**: I think I just, I feel misunderstood. People are always asking me all sorts of questions about myself and I get tired, I get tired of answering those questions. And then people treat me differently because I'm tired of answering all these questions and now things just, things are just not working out for me here.

**Counselor**: Yeah, I sort of have a couple of thoughts in my mind and one is just that whole, you know, it must be really exhausting, it must be really draining, and I imagine that you're missing in your other school and your friends and stuff.

**Jane:** Yeah, I miss my friends. I miss my teachers, my teachers there.

**Counselor:** My sense is maybe that situation with, that just happened with your hair or if that maybe might have been handled differently down there, are you thinking?

**Jane**: Well first of all, no one would ask me those kinds of silly questions. I just feel like anytime there’s a misunderstanding here I'm blamed for it. And I just don't feel like I have anyone on my side.

**Counselor**: Yeah, there’s no one here on your side. So, you know, if it felt like someone was on your side here, what would they be doing?

**Jane:** At least somebody would believe me, you know, when I say certain things. Just someone who would understand what it was like for me as opposed to people who just keep on asking me questions and it’s always like I'm always defending myself.

**Counselor**: Yeah. And I imagine just feel like you're on stage a lot. Everyone's always looking at you. You sort of stand out and so quick to blame, quick to ask.

**Jane:** I don't think I care about these people here very much but my parents were also just angry with me, so everybody is angry with me because my grades are not what they used to be and people think I'm not friendly and they just don't know me because they don't know, they don't know how I was.

**Counselor:** Yeah. So I imagine you're just doing the best you can given the circumstance, it's a really tough one.

**Jane:**  I don't know. Sometimes I just feel like maybe if I fail then we'll go back.

**Counselor**: Yeah, so you’re thinking that’s an option maybe if I do bad enough my parents will take me out of here.

**Jane:** I know that they want me to do well.

**Counselor**: You know, I'm thinking that, you know, you and I have talked about maybe working together for the next couple of weeks and I'm wondering how you and I could start to think about how to work together so it doesn't feel like that what's happening out there is happening here. I realize sometimes I ask you questions and I’m wondering if you know how, that I'm feeling empathy, that I'm, you know, that I'm understanding, that it must be very tough and how would I know if you're not getting that?

**Jane**: I don't know if it's okay for me to tell you that I'm uncomfortable with some questions. **Counselor**: Would that seem respectful, I mean, would that seem appropriate for you to say, you know, I don't want to answer that?

**Jane**: Yeah I'd like to do that. I think it seems like sometimes in the classrooms when I'm asked certain questions and I don't want to answer they think I am being rude but I'm tired of being asked those questions. Yeah. I just want to be like everyone else.

**Counselor**: Yeah, well I would hope that in our relationship you would say that because, you know, I would not want to disrespect you and if I was starting to do that without knowing, I would hope that you would tell me that. But even more than that I would hope that maybe we can find a way to work that in some of the relationships with some of your teachers how, you know, so maybe that is something we can talk about is how we can let teachers know what's happening for you. Obviously they're not getting it. So how can we help them know that and help you feel okay about the voice that sounds like you had when you came here from your other school, before you came here, how can we help you find that?

**Jane:** I don't want to get into any more trouble because I just, I don't want you to go and tell them that I’ve come here and I’ve said all those things because things will get worse, I just don't want to get into any more trouble.

**Counselor**: Yeah, I don't think that would be a very good idea for me to go and talk behind your back about this stuff I'm just thinking how we can help you sort of regain the voice that it sounds like you had before you came here so that you can sort of feel a little more engaged, feel like you’re able to say what you need to say, and feel okay about it cause that sounds like that is really important to you.

**Jane:** Yeah, I don't know. Does it ever work?

**Counselor:** Yeah and what I am hearing you say is that you are not very hopeful that it would make a difference.

**Jane**: I think part of me wants to believe that it would make a difference but I'm just seeing all the things that would just to be the same and I’m just, part of me just wonders if the best thing would just not be for me to go back to New York. But My parents are now here and it's just so confusing, I just don't know what I want anymore.

**Counselor:** Yeah and, you know, I'm hearing that and I don't want to talk to you into anything but I guess I want to say that, you know, something that we knew about you before you came here is that you were a good student, you were really involved, that you had a voice, that you were, you know, very participatory in your class and I’m not seeing that here and so it sounds like there is a part of you that's been silenced here that maybe would like to come forward.

**Jane**: And so I guess that's what I'm talking about. I hate being this way. I just feel like all that people are seeing here are my weaknesses and not my strengths.

**Counselor:** Yeah, so that’s I guess what I'm talking about is maybe we could work to find some ways to bring those strengths forward, they're there, but maybe they're not coming out because the environment’s making it real hard.

**Jane**: Yeah.

**Counselor**: So Jane, we just have a couple more minutes in here, I guess I'm not sure sort of how to leave. How is this going for you? What are you thinking?

**Jane:** I like it. I mean I’ve enjoyed coming in here and talking to because it's different. I just want us to talk before you go and talk to anyone. I just want us to talk first.

**Counselor**: Yeah, absolutely. That makes sense and, you know, we did talk, I didn’t go over it this session, but before about confidentiality and that, you know, I really do think that's important that what we say in here stays in here unless of course there was a danger to you or to someone else but I think most importantly I think it's not about me talking for you but supporting you to find the voice that you know you had.

**Jane:** I think that sounds better to me. Yeah.

**Counselor**: Well thanks for coming in and let’s go ahead and meet again next week if that’s okay with you. Okay.

**FEEDBACK/DEBRIEFING SESSION**

**David**: So Jane, Anne, that was lovely. You know, it seemed very real and I don't know what your reactions were Gary, but I liked the whole tone in the way in which the kind of support that you were offering would have left me feeling anyway. Like I had somebody in my camp, somebody in my corner. So the whole notion of support and the potential for finding some courses of action to make this a better situation for Jane were the things that struck me the most.

**Gary**: I was very interested as you kind of raise the cultural issue. When Jane was talking about differences and also the questioning that she was experiencing an emotionally how that felt and, you know, the cultural issues are multi-dimensional and so I’m wondering if you could, what it was, going for you in both noting and bringing up the cultural differences as well as the cultural similarities as two women being together and then ultimately supporting her in finding and using her own voice.

**Anne:** Yeah, you know, I didn’t, I didn’t want to, it was sort of a balance of wanting to validate the differences that she felt and how different she felt and so sometimes moving too quickly into a conversation about similarities really disrespects that experience of feeling different and so I was aware of trying to do that, not do that, not disrespecting that. The finding of voice was something that, you know, I had a lot of evidence that there was, there had been a voice that was lost that was really helpful and wanted to make the most of it.

**Jane**: Yeah, I certainly felt that way I felt that, validated, you know, that you did not question my concern for my experience or the validity of my experience so as a client in that role I felt heard and I felt like you were interested in knowing how this situation could work out for me. AnneI also sensed a caution from you though.

**Anne:** You know, it was almost as if you weren’t quite sure if you could trust or not.

**Jane**: I think I was really trying to mirror the mistrust that sometimes minority students will have that in those kinds of situations where they feel misunderstood or they feel like their voice will not be heard in the way that they wanted to be heard. So also being cautious with a counselor until there's enough trust in the relationship that I know that you are different and that you really hear me. Yeah. So just wanting to mirror that, you know, interaction.

**Anne**: Well and I was aware of that because sometimes I would paraphrase or reflect and you would correct what I said and I was thinking, oh, is it, did I miss it or is it that she’s really wanting to voice it in her own words, so I noticed that a few times.

**David:** There was something that even your body language and positioning here, which to me would have felt comforting. Jane was kind of down, you know, looking down and you kind of leaned in and kind of got down there with her and yet in a non-invasive way and the fact, even the way you are sitting, were sitting, kind of allows the in but out, kind of, opportunity where she can be either looking directly at you or looking away. That again seemed very respectful and so something about the whole respect, and desire to know that it came through.

**Gary**: With that David, you know, counselors and therapists have all sorts of ways of trying to indicate, you know, joining with a client, being with them, and empathizing, and I noticed a very wonderful way that you would numbers of times use the phrase I'm imagining, I imagine that you might be thinking or feeling something and one as an I statement but also not making an assumption and letting her know that this was coming from your inner perception, your imagination.

**Anne**: Yeah, and that she could validate or not do that.

**David**: So for the future my assumption is that you would be trying to strike a balance between wanting Jane to feel empowered to go out and stand up for herself with people and it's relationships but also to let her know that you will be intervening in ways that are appropriate to support and deal with some of those forces perhaps that are outside her control.

**Anne:** Yeah, that's where counseling meets advocacy and negotiating that I think the two of us would be really key as much as we could do that given our age differences, and power differences, and our roles.

**Gary**: You know, with that I thought also there was a moment that I think again comes up and in counseling in a particular way in which you were reflecting on what was happening between you around the issue of how Jane experienced questions and you wanting to kind of raise that in fact in counseling and as her counselor you might ask questions. So that particular moment and then inviting her to let you know if that felt intrusive. And I guess what I'm was wondering was again, either in terms of personality or family style or even maybe even culture style, is telling an adult how would we know if telling an adult, bringing it up, is okay or not too so that got interesting and complex.

**Jane:** So maybe a question like how is it like for you to discuss this with me?

**David**: But that you were really making the situation more immediate in terms of the relationship between the two of you by even posing these kinds of questions.

**Anne:** Yeah, and I think I probably should've done it in a little more of an open-ended way so that that would have invited her and if she couldn't respond to that then maybe structure it with a little more with how are my questions or am asking questions that maybe starting a little more open-ended probably would have been….

**David:** Great. Thank you all and let's roll on to the next one. Thanks.