

## PSYCHODRAMA AND CREATIVE COUNSELING IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL\*

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Detroit elementary schools have no specially designated counselors, that role being given to teachers, assistant principals and principals. Several years' experience with sociometric devices\*\* as sociograms, role playing, sociodrama and some psychodrama have given the writer a background and feeling for the uses and values of these techniques in her counseling, one of several administrative responsibilities. In using these techniques the author was ever mindful of her role of assistant principal, and not that of therapist. With such an orientation, psychodramatic techniques were used as often as possible. Administrative limitations made it necessary to vary to some degree the traditional procedures of role playing, sociodrama and psychodrama. For us there could be no stage and seldom even a classroom. A crowded office, the hallway, the clinic, and even the stairway have been the loci of our role playing counseling. Such limitations, far from proving a handicap, served to stimulate more creative effort on the part of the counselor.

The problems of normal children included: quarrels over possessions, rivalry for position in a game or line, tripping or hitting each other—especially on the playground, interference with each other's classroom activities, classroom behavior unacceptable for the learning situation, and academic inadequacies. There was considerable range in degree of severity among these children from the first through the eighth grade. There were occasions when role playing had to be postponed for another hour, or even days later, partly due to time and situation necessities, and sometimes because the writer was unaware of the psychodramatic possibilities until later.

Varying aspects of the psychodramatic process appeared, or were deliberately planned for use to tease out behavioral responses. The warm-up was included in the act which had caused the child to seek help, or to be

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brought to my attention. The warm-up continued in the re-playing of their own roles for clarification of the director and themselves. This preliminary action was also a readiness for the assumption of roles of others, or for new roles for themselves.

One noted how frequently the child mirrored the behavior of another. Occasionally the director was the "mirror," the scene sometimes ending in chuckles and giggles at the unprecedented behavior of the assistant principal exaggerating or even assuming the normal role of a child.

It was decidedly useful, and often fun, to be able to create an imaginary "Agg" or "Doe" for the occasion when it might have proved embarrassing or difficult to have the real child present. Not even the auxiliary chair is needed as such, although it was used when the situation might be improved by its use. Young children love to pretend and even twelve and thirteen year olds are not averse to use of the imaginary figure to address, or on which to vent anger.

Role reversal, double ego, soliloquy and conscience—all have been used, as well as a form of ego-building technique (although every form of role playing or sociodrama can contribute to ego-building).

The children and the writer have served in a variety of roles: directors, auxiliary egos, double egos, and protagonists interchangeably. The children are usually unaware of the designation and may be unaware that they are role playing.

The examples which follow represent only a single contact and in no respect indicate the follow-up which was in many instances a necessary part of the counseling at a later date.

#### PSYCHODRAMA IN SITU

For the child whose role has been constantly that of attention-getting in the classroom in undesirable ways, it may be ego-building to place him in a new role, one in which he is sent to the office for commendable reasons. Michael's story is of interest here. He is a seven year old boy in the second grade, whose frequent rule infractions had nearly depleted the stock of "better behavior tricks." One afternoon, in front of his class and teacher, the director asked that Michael be sent to the office every day—but for a new reason—that he was to bring one piece of acceptable quality work, or because he had been observed in one thoughtful act. He grinned at the assignment, his teacher cooperated beautifully, and Michael has brought at least fair work daily, except once; this he explained, was because his regular teacher being absent, there had been no written work to show. "But I did open the

door for you, didn't I?" Last week he brought a treasured photograph of himself to show. Yesterday, though, he was guilty of very rough playground behavior and consequently must stay off the playground for a while. Perhaps the noon hour can be used for a different form of role playing, to help him in this other area.

For the boy or girl whose too rough playground behavior causes physical hurt to another, the role of attendant and nurse's aide helps toward a realization of the consequences of the act, and substitutes a role of service for an act of harm.

The untidy child at the table may one day be placed in the role of a "Service" boy or girl, helping to prepare the tables for the next group of children to use. Once or twice in that role is usually sufficient, although I have occasionally discovered a child intentionally being untidy, so as to be given that special attention that a lonely child may seek from an adult. One must be careful that the fun of role playing problems does not become so attractive as to cause the children to remain indoors seeking the company of adults instead of the company of their peers.

The younger ones frequently seek the director in the hall at noon, complaining of one kind of mistreatment or another on the playground, and expecting me to "settle" the argument or quarrel, and punish the other child. "Show me what *you* did" often forces him into quick recognition of his own shortcomings, and with a slight grin of embarrassment, he may make a hasty exit.

"*Show me how*" are magic words, unlocking many a situation, and dispensing with the need for adult pronouncements and punitive measures because of the added dimension of insight resulting from psychodramatic devices.

#### *Psychodrama "On the Spot"*

As the director entered her office at noontime, she saw a mother and two six year old boys waiting on an office bench. Tommy and his mother had come because Ray had been involved *again* in a "fight" with her son. Mrs. M. disgustedly held up a pair of torn and very muddy trousers. "The third time this week," she explained. She added that she knew her son was no angel, "but. . . ." The boys were almost too ready to tell what happened, each talking so rapidly, and interrupting each other so constantly that the tale was incoherent. "Show me what happened, boys." They didn't understand, and began to talk again. "*Show me* just what each of you did." A few more efforts, and they began to act out the drama, without words.

But the action was incomplete, and still a mystery to the mother and director. They were asked to reverse roles, and the director noted a little more of the story. Then the counselor assumed the role of Ray. He was asked to assume the role of the assistant principal trying to decide what to do about this situation. The director's role as Ray was one of pretended aggressiveness, even to seeming to push Tommy down. Surprisingly enough, it was not Ray who protested, but Tommy, who called out, "But he didn't push me down, Mrs. W. We were playing mud boats and we both fell in the mud, and I tore my pants on a tree stump." Tommy's mother was a silent but intrigued witness to this drama. At the conclusion of her son's statement, she nodded understandingly and said, "I'm satisfied. I don't feel so badly now. The trousers can be repaired and washed." For the director there was no need for the usual assignment of blame or punishment. The children were still friends, and the mother pleased at her son's role of truth teller.

More obvious sessions of role playing have been utilized by the writer for other counseling purposes: seeing individuals in their relationships within the group; facilitating deeper understanding of the dynamics of individual and group behavior; freeing a group or individuals from tensions; assessing the spontaneity-creativity potential.

#### PSYCHODRAMATIC FUTURE ENACTMENT

A class of thirty-five sixth grade boys and girls—eleven year olds—recently was introduced to role playing as such for the first time, and with delightful results. The children were asked to imagine themselves acting in a career role they might be assuming some twenty years hence. They were instructed to show only bodily action, exclusive of speech, unless imagining a partner or auxiliary ego to whom they wished to talk. One by one they enthusiastically came forward.

Rex set a fine example, eagerly and unmistakably becoming an auto mechanic, entering so completely into the spirit of the occasion that he lay on his back on the floor, repairing the car suspended above him. His spontaneity made it easier for others to participate freely.

Sandra, without hesitation, let us know of her love for horses, and proceeded to use the mare as guide for training the young colt in its routine.

Carol had a similar interest, but wanted to raise horses, not train them. She gave the colts tender care, patting them freely as she fed them, and showing her pleasure at the act.

Serious Sammy, with more restricted, tense body, conducted an orchestra

at rehearsal, mimicing a "No" to an erring group of violinists. One wondered at his satisfactions.

In the role of artist, pale Lorraine came alive. She seemed happy and relaxed as she examined her oil painting and found it to her satisfaction.

We were a little less sure of Pat's role—perhaps because she was unsure. Was she a mother wheeling a baby carriage, as many thought? Urging her to enlarge on her action, we learned that she wanted to be a nurse, and watched her get mixed up in her handling of the instruments to the doctor. Pat then volunteered, "My mother always wanted to be a nurse, and I guess that's why I want to be." What a responsive note that struck with the director, who had become a teacher for a similar reason, and was able to empathize with the child.

Nancy also wanted to be a nurse, explaining her desire as an outgrowth of an experience caring for an older sister during an acute illness. We did not feel enthusiasm in her role.

What dreams Sue has of being a pianist! This tense little girl pretended to play, quite aloof from the group—her customary relationship. Her fingers stiffly manipulated the keys. Perhaps this revelation of herself could be of some importance in understanding and working with this tired-looking child.

As another Michael competently moved at his workbench with test tubes and chemicals, one felt sure of him—that he would be capable in whatever career he chose, whether developing new chemical formulae for a space age, or medicines for a hospital—as he indicated.

Perhaps the action of Dennis was most enjoyed and most revealing in this group. He almost literally threw himself into the role of baseball batter. Surely he had made a home run after that resounding whack at the ball. This was not pretend! Here was a boy who had difficulty selecting from among three sports to demonstrate, and hoped to be a baseball player and football team member so as to be employed all year round in sports. "Frankie does that," he indicated forcefully. Here was a boy constantly in trouble for shoving and pushing and knocking down other children at noon. What tremendous energy, and definiteness of purpose, needing to be channeled. He gave significant clues for his guidance.

#### PSYCHODRAMA IN THE "HERE AND NOW"

As the class was leaving, two boys began to pummel each other quite angrily. In raising their hands to answer a question, they had bumped

arms, and became angry over the supposed intent to hurt on the part of each. They remained in the room while a new class came in. The boys were asked to re-play the situation, for each blamed the other for striking first. How quickly this had happened! How ready they were to fight. Each was then asked to take the role of the other. This they did less well. On being asked how they felt, Marshall said, "Sad." "Worried," Bob answered. They really were worried, lest in the role of assistant principal the director punish them for fighting, by calling their parents. This was not the first time these two had clashed. Bob was asked to be the assistant principal—to the accompaniment of much giggling by the new pupils now in the room. The director took Bob's role, and soliloquized the worries over the form of punishment, hoping that the assistant would let them make up and be friends instead of calling in their parents to help. Marshall uneasily joined the director in conversation—and understandingly so. The boys, in their own roles again, were able to shake hands, weakly at first, then more vigorously. They seemed to have patched up their differences, the original incident and anger dispelled by the novelty of a new way of settling a fight.

For the director, there were special insights from this occurrence. The boys saw the assistant only as one who punishes, and who calls their parents. How often had the mother and father been placed in a threat role, unintentionally! In her future dealings with children there will be more careful evaluation of the role into which parents are cast.

The twisted face of Marshall in anger will not easily be forgotten. Much more counseling is going to be needed by that boy.

This had been a revealing and worthwhile forty minutes, to the director and to the pupils. The class was unified by their interest in performing, and in seeing the performances of their classmates. When could they finish, and do this again? The director was aware of their personalities, not only through their role playing, but through the observations some had made of the action, noting smiles and other facial expressions, as well as bodily postures of the performers. The director felt the contagious quality of both the sure, competent acting person, as well as the negative quality of the unsure child. The tone of this group seemed of a positive nature, judging from the spontaneity exhibited.

The eight-year-old children had watched the role playing of the two angry boys with fascination. Their music teacher had not arrived, so the activity could be continued with them. Here was a perfect opportunity to share with them a new kind of experience.

## PSYCHODRAMATIC ROLE PERCEPTION AND ENACTMENT

This time four children from a row were asked to show some actions of a policeman. The audience was to watch for the actions that told them the performers were really in role. Each of the four responded with different degrees of enthusiasm and accuracy. One gave a motorist a ticket and a stern lecture, another blew his whistle vigorously to stop traffic, and signalled with his arms for the traffic to cross in the other direction. One waited and watched, as a policeman might, while the fourth imitated another. Grant gave the most convincing performance, putting himself happily and energetically into role. The director noted with care the child who imitated.

A second group of four were clowns. Such spontaneity in this group! Russell's performance gave most evidence of pleasure as he tumbled, turned somersaults, pretended to trip, and gave himself completely to the act. Here was Russell in as happy a mood as the director had ever seen—a little boy whose home conditions were certainly conducive to strain and tension. The two little girls were true to themselves, as they tried at first to take part, and gradually stood by to watch. After all, this was not for girls—this tumbling about on the floor with pretty dresses.

Individuals were then called upon, to enact any role they chose. We learned that Jimmy would love to be a fireman, and his face was smiling as he slid down the pole at the engine house.

Ellen seriously tap danced for us, displaying the carefully measured actions of the professional dancing school. The director hoped for an opportunity to see her improving. She didn't seem at all happy in her chosen role.

Peter chose to be a rifleman, getting more and more vigorous as he managed his machine gun, and obvious pleasure in "mowing 'em down."

Debbie was the last to show herself in role. She too is from a "broken" family, a noisy, aggressive, very talkative child—frequently the despair of her teachers. The director was stunned by her portrayal. She quietly pretended to lift a baby from its bed, lovingly and tenderly rocked it, eyes closed, head bowed, and humming a soft tune. She wanted to be a mother! This was complete role reversal for Debbie. Could this be the expression of her own great need to be tenderly cuddled and mothered? At lunch time she explained that it was hard for her to do what she did, but as she spoke, her eyes were shining! Her action had seemed so relaxed and spontaneous, that it was difficult to believe the action had not been easy. Her teachers are going to learn about the Debbie the director saw and began at that moment to love.

What magic keys these children had given, today and previously—keys for unlocking doors to their own futures, if need be. One must guard against reading into the actions one sees, however. Keys were best used by the counselor to *open* doors, not close them.

For the children role playing creates a new means for dealing with some of their day-to-day and face-to-face situations. Insight seems to follow action and feeling. For the writer, the abovementioned psychodramatic techniques have facilitated the counseling process. They have caused her to invent new words, places and ways to meet unexpected situations. Her own role of an administrator has changed from one of decision-making for the children to one of guidance in formulating their own decisions, making their own choices and taking greater responsibility for their own actions than heretofore.

The writer is aware of her own growth in ability to understand and use these psychodramatic tools creatively. Earliest experiences were all of the more obvious nature, with emphasis on the dramatic, role acting, as a device to help one teach less routinely. As understanding develops through practice and interpretation the subtleties and nuances of the method become apparent, particularly in a sensing of the personal roles that we are constantly assuming. One learns to utilize knowledge of these roles for more effective personal relationships without a stage or even role casting as such. "Among the things in his own world which man creates is his self—his personality."<sup>1</sup>

The word creative as used by this writer is synonymous with spontaneity, as she understands the terms. Even though a child's responses to a situation may seem stilted, clichéd, and of the conforming variety, there is in every action something of the unique quality of that individual which can be noted and utilized; something new and unrehearsed which can lead to self-acceptance and self-fulfillment.

Listening is creative when there is reached a point of awareness of the time to interpose a question, to repeat a word or phrase, or to continue listening. No less artistry is required for role playing than is required in combining pigments for a special color on the palette, or the precise numbers and colors of strands for the beautifully woven fabric.

Continued use of psychodramatic techniques gives to this counselor a

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<sup>1</sup> Haas, Robert B. *Psychodrama and Sociodrama in American Education*. New York: Beacon House, 1949.

heightened awareness of human roles and their significance for education. She has learned to sense and utilize to greater degree the possibilities of these tools. She has learned to use clues arising from the spontaneous and creative behavior of the children to help them grow in power to give point and direction to their own lives, improving the quality of their inter-personal relationships, and enriching their moments with more creative experiences.