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Gearing Up in Psychodrama: Using Psychodrama to Support Education in  
Diverse Communities and Building Teams to Deliver Support

### **Abstract**

This paper describes a group work training offered in 2011 for 60 highly diverse staffers to a GEAR UP (Gaining Early Awareness of and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs) educational grant P334A990515 for the San Jose, CA area. Multiethnic, multi-aged trainees with varying educational levels and backgrounds were brought together as a cohort for the first time for training purposes. In 4 full days of hands-on, active engagement training, they were instructed in application of psychodrama and sociometry techniques to engage poor and minority students and their families in middle school, high school and college retention. Uses of psychodrama and sociodrama to support education in diverse communities are reviewed and explained. Advantages of using experiential learning and action methods to enhance learning, engage low performing students, and build social cohesion are discussed.

*Keywords:* Psychodrama, Sociodrama, Sociometry, Education, GEAR UP, Diversity, Retention, Minority, Community, Mentor, Group Work.

## Introduction

This paper describes a recent group work training program in psychodrama and related methods for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs (GEAR UP) staffers in the San Jose area, one of the most diverse cities in the US. GEAR UP is a federal grant program designed to assist disadvantaged students from middle school through high school to successfully graduate high school with preparation to enter college. GEAR UP in San Jose has been at the forefront, according to Jones (2001) and Koller (2012), in psychodrama and sociodrama to enrich education and engage families in school communities. [For a detailed description of GEAR UP see ([www2.ED.gov/programs/gearup/index.html](http://www2.ED.gov/programs/gearup/index.html))]. This grant is # **P334A990515**.

GEAR Up provides coaching, tutoring, counseling, after school programs and summer school to students from poor and minority homes. A crucial ingredient of the program is enrolling families in getting children through school successfully. Forming the teams who can deliver GEAR UP services from the diverse communities represented is in itself a complex task. A major part of the training described here was aimed to develop teams with cooperation, trust, and skills to do the job.

GEAR UP also recognizes and acknowledges that educational enterprises are not likely to succeed if parents, community workers, and teachers are not allied with and invested in the goals for students. Consequently GEAR UP incorporates and nurtures liaison and engagement for families with multiple aspects of the school community. Drawing in communities that have too often

been alienated from mainline educational establishments and keeping lines of positive communication open has been a wonderful way of working with ethnically and otherwise disparate segments of American society. For instance, GEAR UP coaches will call parents to let them know of achievements and efforts made by their students. The aim is to acknowledge accomplishment and assure that families are not intimidated by school staff or only expect to be contacted if schools have complaints about their children. Key administrators recognize staff must have a profound understanding of the social, cultural and economic complexities that the families face so that they can maintain a non-judgmental and respectful stance, leading to productive alliances.

GEAR UP staff contacted Moreno Institute West to train 60 highly diverse GEAR UP staffers in San Jose, CA in techniques of psychodrama and sociometry. Staffers were of all ages, races, levels of education, and were working for GEAR UP's after school and weekend support programs around San Jose. The sixty staffers were peer tutors, counselors, teachers, group leaders, community liaisons, working to retain and engage students, and give families of the students an active role in supporting their kids' progress.

Moreno Institute West has been teaching, training and implementing psychodrama, sociodrama, sociometry and related techniques to support and enhance education, especially in diverse poor and minority communities, in the San Jose metropolitan area since 2003. Goals include increasing interest, active learning, retention, personal choice, engagement, creativity and spontaneity in education for children and their families. School must be a successful and

constructive experience if students are to get a fair chance at living productive lives. Too often poor and minority families are disconnected from or even intimidated by local schools. The use of psychodrama in the programs at GEAR UP is designed to engage families as vibrant parts of the educational institutions in the communities where they live and also to help build diverse teams to provide services students and families need. (Koller, 2012).

### **Reasons for using psychodramatic and sociometric techniques**

Why use psychodramatic or sociodramatic approaches to train and build these teams? Why teach team members to use these practices within their jobs? These are experiential learning methods. Their use relates to Kenneth Burke's dramaturgical view that action is the basic communication of humankind, and the ability of the act to transcend cultural limits makes it perfect for cross cultural presentation. (Burke, 1954.) Also, communication researchers acknowledge that as much as 95% of all communication is nonverbal. (Argyle, Knapp, Mehrabian). Gesture and facial expression transcend cultural bounds. (Ekman et al.) In addition, the use of enactments provides vehicles for attaching personal meaning to offered subject matter. (Propper, 2003; Orkibi, 2011; Blatner, 1973.) Through these methods engagement is made concrete, personal and real. (Hollander; Haas).

The use of action methods in education increases student interest, presents content as relevant/personal, transcends cultural barriers, and helps build social cohesion. Students who engage in acting together get more comfortable in their groups and feel less isolated. Teachers using these methods

foster spontaneous student expressions of reaction to material presented.” Action methods encourage creativity and resourcefulness. (Blatner, “Expressive arts,” “Action Exploration” <http://www.blatner.com/adam/pdntbk/expressivearts.html>).

Training Goals for the four days included:

1. staff members getting to know one another, building group cohesion and encouraging support for each other in their work;
2. introduction to methods of psychodrama as effective and direct forms of intervention, specifically addressing barriers to learning, social discomfort, and lack of motivation;
3. exposure to use of sociometry and sociodrama to build community and peer support for students, increasing attendance and interest in learning;
4. experiencing and gaining skill in doubling, role reversal, mirroring and role playing, all techniques that in turn build community and common ground; and
5. adapting specific techniques to working with students and parents in service of educational retention. (Tomcho, 2002; Larson, 1999; Moradi, 1994; Moreno, 1964 )

GEAR UP staff who attended the training here described were highly diverse themselves: of varied racial and ethnic backgrounds, of differing ages, of varying education, and working in different roles at a number of locations in the San Jose metropolitan area, performing diverse tasks for GEAR UP. Some were teenagers, others in their sixties, immigrants from all over the world and of

multiple religions, traditions and beliefs. They are representative of the school district served which is comprised of 46% Hispanic, 32.1% Asian, 9.1% Filipino, 7.9% White, 3.5% African American and Native American and Pacific Islander students making up the rest (<http://www.esuhsd.org/BoardAdmin>).

GEAR UP staff often deal with students who arrive after school and in weekend learning programs carrying major stressors such as: family problems, money concerns, disagreements with friends, romantic break ups, bullying, substance use, gang activity, and cultural dissonance (Brown 2006). These students are often on the edge of leaving school even before such troubles emerge. They require flexible and culturally responsive (Brown 2006) management skills from their GEAR UP teachers, counselors, and staffers if they are to remain engaged in educational programs. Omnifarious staffers come to training with widely differing expectations, some with no idea what training might offer, many with limited experience with expressive arts. The four day training program aimed to help staff deal with a multiplicity of issues engaging students at risk for school drop-out and their families. Staff have to be prepared to cope with all kinds of problems that get imported into GEAR UP settings, which otherwise will cause attrition. Psychodrama techniques such as doubling and role reversal help staff increase self and other awareness, resolve or manage conflicts, discover the underlying issues to which students are responding, and identify motivation to change.

Adding psychodrama and sociometry techniques to their toolkits, enables staff to be more effective in their jobs preparing students to successfully graduate

high school and gain readiness for college. The purpose is educational, not what we ordinarily call therapeutic. Education is the main and central goal. The use of psychodramatic techniques to support education is important and does not call for in depth therapeutic analysis or training. (Jenkins & Guthrie, 1976; Tomcho & Foels, 2002.)

Most of the trainees did not know one another when we began working with them. They were employed at different school sites in San Jose and had differing roles in the GEAR UP program. For the most part they also knew nothing about psychodrama when we began, but by the end of the four days of training, had acquired a basic level of knowledge and enthusiasm to use psychodramatic and sociodramatic techniques in their work. We did not attempt to teach them to do full scale classical psychodramas such as might be taught to therapists. Instead we introduced some of the more discrete techniques of the method, keeping their particular GEAR UP tasks and special concerns in mind. Part of the week was spent in subgroups of about 30 each, and part with all 60 trainees working together with the two trainers. We developed a set of exercises that worked well, and you may find some of our ideas useful in your own differing settings. We will explain what we did and why.

### **Developing a safe environment – The warm up phase:**

Utilizing locograms, a technique that asks participants to place themselves on an imaginary map of the world, we had them move around on the floor to show, for example; where they were born, then the place they considered home, where they most wanted to visit, and where they would like to live.

Spectrograms, a similar technique, clarify issues, make abstract issues concrete, and seek participation and commitment of usually nonverbal members. These were used to display length of time participants had been in GEAR UP, their knowledge of psychodrama, and to gauge their confidence in their roles of coach, mentor, parent liaison and more (Blatner, 1988).

Sociometry explores relationships and intuitive connections among group members. Existing connections in the group were brought out using sociometric inquiries such as “Whom have you known longest in the group?” “With whom would you like to spend more time?” “Whom are you curious about?” and “From whom do you feel you have something to learn?” By so doing new connections were made.

Each of these sociometric activities caused group members to move around the room and talk about why they had chosen as they had. They began to get a sense of who they were as a group, as well as similarities and concerns shared. During this phase they were also invited to face each other in two rows and greet each other enacting specific emotional tones such as “friendly” or “hurried” or “cranky” called out by the trainer. This created a playful environment where spontaneity was put in practice, and the notions of role taking, role playing and role development were introduced. Opportunities for discussion and feedback were offered and participants challenged to consider how they might use any of the activities with their students or their students’ families . (Stietzel & Hughey, 1994). For instance, the trainees started to entertain and develop ideas of how they could adapt locograms. One was to



show different aspects of the school campus thereby getting a visual impression of the spaces that are important or most frequented by students, discovering patterns, and getting a more particular perspective on how school is seen.

### **Moving into action**

We moved participants into two groups, also referred to as an Inside-Outside Circle (Kagan, 1994): half the group sat in an inner circle facing outward, and, across from each member of the inner circle, a chair containing an outer circle member sat facing inward. We set out to use action to explore the notion of an important teacher they had encountered, someone we called a “mentor”: a role model or someone who set an example or had taught them something that mattered was called for. They were each asked to recall a character from history, literature or personal life that had served as a mentor for them, and, after they had each fleshed out the details and characteristics of the mentor in their minds, they were to role reverse with the mentor and speak from the Mentor’s role. The partner in the facing chair would question and interview the Mentor in an effort to develop and comprehend the character fully.

After each had had a turn they were able to reflect on the experience, what it meant to have this mentor and how having had a mentor might be significant in their roles as student advocates. A study conducted by Zimmerman, Bingenheimer and Notaro (2002) shows that adolescents with natural mentors had a more positive attitude towards school than those without. This study then informed the follow-up discussion: Would their students be able to find mentors? What would it take to create such a relationship? How does having a mentor

matter? After completing that exchange and discussing in the large group the kinds of mentors chosen, they said good bye to their current partners.

The outer circle was asked to move one person to the left, finding a new partner. With this partner they were asked to think of a time when they had had trouble understanding something in school or completing an assignment. Partners took turns telling their collaborators what those experiences were like and then took on the role of feeling rejected or misunderstood, associating feelings along with describing them to their partners.- Partners were then asked to reverse roles, so that the partner then took on the role of the person in distress, and the original owner of the difficulty made some recommendations or gave some advice on how to best deal with the challenge, thus mentoring themselves. The outcome was to have each participant recall what the frustration of struggling in conflict feels like and to counsel how to cope with such a sense of friction, as well as to recognize that disappointment plagues all of us from time to time. (Kranz et al., 2007)

In this section we had used role reversal –the changing of roles played from the person who had suffered the frustration to the one who knew how to cope with it—and so we were able to teach the GEAR UP staff then that they could use role reversals, too, to cope with conflicts that arose in their work. They saw that in using this same exercise with their students they would be empowering students to participate in problem solving, increasing chances of success toward productive change.

In another round of the Inside-Outside Circle exercise, with a new partner,

the group members were each asked to identify a conflict encountered in their work setting and the emotions attached to the conflict. They were to share this situation with their partners and then the partner instructed to take on the role of the one in conflict, while the 'protagonist' reversed roles with his/her antagonist. They talked through their conflicts, articulating the feelings of the adversaries. This role reversal served as a classic case of building empathy and seeing the situation from the perspective of another, calling for a shift in stance in the conflict. They were instructed to reverse roles again and the protagonist made a closing statement to the antagonist. They were then asked to share with one another how it felt to play those roles and to identify what felt like common threads of experience that partners shared. Compassion can be trained.

(<http://neurosciencenews.com/neuroscience-brain-activity-compassion-training-153>)

Each of these rounds took time, and each made a concrete demonstration of some of the most basic elements of psychodrama. Using very ordinary small tasks, psychodrama techniques can be experienced, deconstructed in discussion, and serve as an instructive base appropriate for use in educational settings, without becoming emotionally overwhelming. (Stietzel & Hughey, 1994.)

When working with a large group of people who do not know one another, beginning with exercises that call for one on one conversations instead of speaking at the start to group as a whole, which can be intimidating among strangers, and especially among minority group members or immigrant

populations, is a reasonable approach. So fishbowl, inside-outside circle, and exercises that involve dyads and triads are useful to establish connections, familiarity, comfort, and safety.

### **Role training**

The previous activity was the perfect entrance for demonstrating Role Training as the next step. Role training in this context means experimenting with different approaches to new or expanding roles by trying them out in action and receiving input from others. (Blatner, Role Playing in Education, 2002). Plainly, this is important to retention in families who have not had much success in educational settings. We asked for volunteers who would like to get the help of the group in gaining more ideas on how to approach a situation in stalemate or where they would like suggestions for resolving an on-going conflict. Each trainer conducted a role training session. The difference between coaching statements offering a wide spectrum of possible responses and the concept of doubling statements expressing internal perceptions and feeling was explained and demonstrated. The stated goal was to open up new avenues, various alternatives and approaches that the protagonist might choose to employ or integrate if one seemed suitable.

For example, Maria, an after school counselor, played the role of a student who attends GEAR UP sessions but is always disruptive, cannot engage in productive schoolwork, talks and distracts others and who does not respond to attempts to get him to work quietly. Maria demonstrated what she has tried to work with him that has not worked well, and a group member who thought

he understood her feelings, doubled her and spoke what he thought she must feel in the situation. Maria adopted the double's statements aloud when they were accurate and asserted herself when they were not. Then, in an effort to offer her some different approaches, others from the group who had alternative ideas for dealing with the disruptive student were invited to try those ideas out in what we call "role training." A number of such 'coaching' suggestions were made in action. After many statements had been offered, the protagonist was role reversed back and asked to distill or adopt what had been offered that fit and put that into his/her own words. The protagonist ended the role training with a soliloquy, which was then followed by sharing from the group and finally overall discussion. (Stietzel & Hughey, 1994; McVea & Reekie, 2007).

Before the section ended, Maria and the others discussed the possibilities for working with the student in the future. It was understood that she might use some or none of the suggestions, but it was hoped that her role repertoire would be expanded, that she would now have some new ideas to put to practice, and that she would feel supported and encouraged to conjure other options herself.

### **Sculpting**

Family sculpting is a dynamic way of discovering the quality of family relationships and getting a visual impression of perceived place in family. (Hernandez, 1998). Family sculpting shows family relationships by placing group members in the roles of family members in space, in proximity or distance, and facing or avoiding one another. In GEAR UP's view, the support of family for education is significant for retention or attrition. Staff comprehension of this

factor is directly relevant to their tasks.

The person showing his or her family to the group is demonstrating by placement and gesture the ways the family acts. So, if I show my own family of origin, I might place my father standing near my mother as if to protect her, while she, disabled, sat, with me on one side of the parents, with my brother on the other because he and I related most often through them rather than directly to one another. In another family sculpture, much greater distances might exist between members of a family.

The trainers modeled a few demonstrations with volunteers from the group. Each member of the training group then had an opportunity to present his or her family via a family sculpture, getting others to play the family roles, and giving each a line to say, or an instrument to play as in a family orchestra, and a sound to make to contribute to the family's overall sound. The protagonist, by assuming roles of family members and speaking in self-presentations, gave the lines, sounds, and poses and a brief description of each person in the family so that the auxiliaries selected were informed how to play the roles they took. The exercise explicitly invited inclusion of family members who had passed away but remained important, and the inclusion of distant but significant others, as well as allowing the insignificant to be omitted. The focus was emotional connection and relevance. The group members were thus introduced to the idea of the social atom, and the notion that understanding the kinds of relationships a person has tells something about the person's overall health and social/emotional well-being. (Moreno, 1964; Blatner, 1988; Stietzel & Hughey, 1994).

## **Vignettes**

We also had group members present, via vignettes, ways in which their families supported or did not support education, and their attitudes about it. Small enactments starting with scene setting and role presentations showed how family members acted toward school, homework, and schooling. (Goldman & Morrison, 1984). For example, one group member identified mother as demanding work around the house from the girls, father as wanting the children to get jobs as soon as possible, uncle as advising going to college, etc. Placing this in action, roles were assumed by group members. The protagonist could correct the way a role was played. Gender roles and how those figure into the family's particular view of education were included, as well as birth order issues. We asked the participants to be mindful of who helped, who got help, how much time was set aside for homework, etc. Were there special times or places to do school work? Did parents give time, advice, or what attitudes were manifest toward education and how to fit its tasks into life overall? What makes it easy or difficult to study in this family? Following the family vignettes on support for education or lack of it, we also asked the group members to show how ideally they would like the family to treat education if they wanted a change. This technique is one which GEAR UP staffers could take and use directly with their student clients. (Guldner, 1990.)

## **Doubling**

Trainees were instructed in the use of psychodramatic doubling and the different kinds of doubles, depending on the need of the protagonist.

Psychodrama uses many kinds of doubles: those who take a particular advocacy position, those opposed, those who give cognitive rationales, those who express inner feelings, those who recall earlier experiences. Doubling is supportive, affirming, empathic.

This exercise also offered a chance for the group members to serve as directors for one another's enactments, giving them directing practice and confidence.

We used the convention that, although the double speaks aloud and in the first person, the double's statements are only acted on if the protagonist repeats the double's statements. This permits the double to investigate the feelings of the protagonist while the protagonist repeats, negates, clarifies, explains or corrects the doubling. We demonstrated with examples from the trainers' lives, how an internal conflict can be made clear, or an ambivalence shown, by using two or more doubles pulling on the protagonist for attention and control. (Stietzel & Hughey, 1994; Blatner, 1988; Tomasulo, 2000).

Each group member then presented a small piece of action in which she or he was torn by different urges or desires where multiple doubles could be strategically used and practiced. We discussed how such internal tensions contribute toward a person getting stuck in what feels like an unproductive rut. Doubling brings issues to awareness and also challenges, questions or reflects the emotions, blocks, barriers, and cognitions. This helps the protagonist to name and reframe what is happening and then consider changes in patterns of behavior. (Moreno, 1951 and 1959).



## Future Projections

The trainees were invited to participate in guided imagery in which they saw themselves in the future. What was their future environment like? What sort of job would each have? Who would be around them? The future projections were enacted starting with a detailed scene setting and then introduction of auxiliaries leading into dialogue. Veronica, for example, envisioned her future running a neighborhood agency as a manager, becoming increasingly important in her community, and had the opportunity to try out the new role of manager. Future projections help individuals visualize goals clearly, and can be key in reaching those goals.

We also had them take the role of a student they work with in future projections of how college would be or how they had imagined college would be before they got there. For the students this might be the first time that they thought of college as being a reality and actually visualized what it would look and feel like. We thus taught the use of future projection and surplus reality in action. A student's imagined college experience might include fears about fitting in, about not being able to afford the right clothes or keeping up with the class work. Can I envision being in college? Where can I go to college? What if anything scares me about it? What do I want from a college experience? How might my family react to me going to college? (Goleman, 1995). We wanted to encourage the staff to empathize with their students' hesitations and fears so that they could work to diminish them, at the same time, building new constructs and setting up unforeseen achievement goals. 'Seeing things in the mind's eye'

is a crucial visualization skill. ( Department of Labor, Washington D.C. Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills , 1991.)

### **Sociodrama**

Sociodramas offer issues that are societal rather than simply personal. Participants generated a number of salient issues that affect education for their students. For example, family need for income and the obligation to work to earn money to contribute to the family can be major concerns in immigrant families, or the concept of outgrowing one's family education level can be threatening to a family and child with hopes for an education. They then agreed to explore one of these issues and identified a number of roles involved in that particular issue. Group members identified some of the elements they often see in families they work with, and are afraid they cannot afford to send their young to college: scarce resources for rent and food, fear that children will outpace their parents, not knowing if the children are good enough to make it, not having the money for books, having to choose between one child and another, not having help with younger siblings, not wanting a child to fail, language or cultural barriers, and more . The participants chose roles to play from the many generated and, after taking their roles, had a chance to develop those and introduce them to each other. (Moreno, 1969.) They interacted in these roles, had opportunities to role reverse and to gain in-depth understandings of some of the dynamics surrounding their chosen issue. The exercise concluded with discussions of how it felt to play a role such as lack of self esteem and what experiences the sociodrama brought up for each player. (Blatner, 2006;, 1988; Moreno, 1964;

Stietzel & Hughey, 1994; Moreno, 1960; Haas).

### **Bibliodramas- dramas on books and reading**

A separate section had the entire group identify books that they loved that they thought some of the other members of the large group might also love.

They named books they loved, such as the Dr. Seuss books, Alice in Wonderland, The Hobbit series, The Harry Potter books, The Wind in the Willows, etc. The idea was to create an engagement in action with highly valued books (Kim & Hall, 2002). We winnowed these down till we had about 6 or 8 books, each of which had a group of admiring followers.

Once a book was chosen by a group of supporters, it became the center of a piece of bibliodrama, in which the book's lovers went off together to plan to make two presentations to the larger group: first, an advertisement for their chosen favorite book—telling audience members why they should read this book, and second, an enactment of some aspect of the book for the larger group. This was great fun, and one group, which had chosen Dr. Seuss' Green Eggs and Ham, for example, went off to download some of its text, rewrite that text to fit the instant situation, keeping the rhyme scheme, and delivered its rewritten version in choral recitation to the entire large group!

### **Outcomes**

A year after this training ended, the Director of San Jose GEAR UP reported that many trainees had been using these and other psychodramatic approaches that they were taught, adapting to their particular settings and needs. One frequent application has been help with classroom management. A GEAR

UP coordinator took what she learned from our workshop to create a conflict resolution model. She uses the conflict resolution technique to diffuse aggression in her very tough school setting.

GEAR UP in San Jose has had very high retention and success rates, including extremely high attendance at after school and weekend programs, causing increasing demand. When budgetary concerns suggested cutbacks, diverse minority participants demanded the program not cut offerings because students wanted to be able to continue to attend. That is a fine outcome for at risk students. (Moradi, 2004; Moreno, 1993.)

### **Conclusion**

After four full days of training in psychodrama techniques designed to serve education, we had 60 GEAR UP staffers who were bonded and excited to have a set of new methods to use as counselors, tutors, coaches, managers, community liaisons, within their comfort zones and within their expertise. We encouraged their progress in further learning about the use of psychodrama in their work, and practicing in small steps some of their newly acquired skills. They left with the sense that they could go forward in small, contained, interactive bits without being overwhelmed or too worried about not doing it exactly in a certain manner as long as they worked within their training level and ethically. They understood that responding to the needs, obstacles and interests of people they worked with was the first order of business. The American Society of Group Psychotherapy and Psychodrama (ASGPP) website, in particular its library of online sources, was promoted for free additional resources they could consult.

Lastly, we encouraged them to support each other in their endeavors, and that the trainers were available online for further guidance or clarification.

Psychodrama is a wonderful way of working with people of diverse cultural backgrounds, and with language issues, because it permits significant emotional material to be conveyed in gesture, action, facial expression, placement, and display. Using it to advance educational engagement and to provide the sense that poor and immigrant families are important to schools serving their children was fruitful and creative, a worthwhile task, and one Moreno would have wholeheartedly endorsed.

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