Gearing Up in Psychodrama: Using Psychodrama to Support Education in Diverse Communities

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This paper describes a recent training program offered in psychodrama to GEAR UP staffers in the San Jose area, one of the most diverse cities in the US. Moreno Institute West ( formerly Associates for Community Interaction) has been teaching, training and implementing psychodrama, sociodrama, sociometry and related techniques to support and enhance education especially in poor and minority communities in the San Jose metropolitan area. The goals are to increase interest, retention, personal choice, engagement, creativity and spontaneity in education for children and the families they come from. School must be a successful and productive experience if students are to get a fair chance at living productive lives. Too often poor and minority families are not engaged in, or are intimidated by their local schools. The use of psychodrama in the programs at GEAR UP is designed to engage families as vibrant parts of the educational institution in the communities where they live.

GEAR UP is a federal grant program designed to assist disadvantaged students from middle school through high school on to graduate high school and prepare for college. GEAR UP stands for Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs. Thanks to the ceaseless efforts of Dr. Andrew R. Hughey, GEAR UP in San Jose has been at the forefront of using psychodrama and sociodrama to enrich education and engage families in school communities.[[1]](#endnote--1) Providing coaching, tutoring, counseling, after school programs and summer school to students is just part of what the program in San Jose does. In addition, a crucial ingredient is enrolling the families in the project of getting their children through school successfully. GEAR UP recognizes and acknowledges that educational enterprises are not likely to succeed if parents, community workers, and teachers are not allied and invested in the goals for the 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 the mainline educational establishment and keeping lines of positive communication open has been a wonderful way of working with ethnically and otherwise diverse segments of American society. For instance, GEARUP coaches will call parents to let them know of achievements and efforts made by their students. The aim is to acknowledge achievement and assure that families are not intimidated by school staff or only expect to be contacted if schools have complaints about their children.

In June 2011 two of us trained 60 GEAR UP staffers in San Jose, CA in techniques of psychodrama and sociometry. The 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, all working to retain and engage students, and give the families of the students an active role in supporting their kids’ progress. Our goals for this group of trainees included:

~ staff members getting to know one another, building group cohesion and encouraging support for each other in their work;

~ introducing them to the method of psychodrama as an effective and direct form of intervention specifically addressing barriers to learning and lack of motivation;

- exposing them to the use of sociometry and sociodrama to build community and peer support for students to increase attendance and interest in learning;

~ experiencing and gaining skill in doubling, role reversal, mirroring and role playing, all techniques that in turn build community and common ground; and

~ adapting specific techniques to working with students and parents.

WARM-UP PHASE

Most of the trainees did not know one another when we began working with them. They were employed at different sites in the San Jose metropolitan area 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 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 settings. We will explain what we did and why.

We began with a few locograms in which group members were asked to place themselves on the map of the world to show where they were born, then the place they considered home, where they most wanted to visit, where they would like to live. Spectrograms were used to display length of time they had been in GEAR UP, their knowledge of psychodrama, and to gage their confidence in roles of coach, mentor, community liason, etc.[[2]](#endnote-0)

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

Each of these icebreakers caused the group members to move around the room and talk about why they had chosen as they had. They began to get a sense of how diverse they were as a group, as well as a sense of similarities and concerns shared. During this phase they were also invited to greet each other with specific emotional tones such as friendly or hurried or cranky as called out by the trainer. This served to create a playful environment and the notion of role taking, role playing and role development was introduced. Opportunities for discussion and feedback were offered and participants were challenged to consider how they might use any of the activities with their students or their students’ families.[[3]](#endnote-1)

ROLE REVERSAL AND THE SUBJECT OF MENTORSHIP

We moved into a double circle exercise where 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. They were asked to recall a character from history, literature or reality that had served as a mentor for them, and after they had each fleshed out the details of the mentor they were to role reverse with the mentor and speak from that role as mentor. The partner in the facing chair would question and interview the mentor in an effort to develop the character fully. After each had had a turn they were able to reflect on the experience and what it meant to have this mentor and how having a mentor may be significant in their roles as student advocates. 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 the partner they had had, the outer circle was asked to move one space to the left, and each now had a new partner. This time they were asked to think of a time when they had had trouble understanding something in school or completing an assignment. They took turns telling their partners what those experiences were like for them, specifically asked to be placed mentally in those moments of difficulty and feel the feelings associated, and describe those feelings to their partners. They were then asked to reverse roles, so that the partner 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. Role reversal as a psychodrama technique was then discussed with the group, and the idea of using role reversal in various other situations introduced and encouraged. Obstacles to education were covered in discussion and instructors stressed the progressive use of one on one communication to develop group cohesion.

In another round of the double 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 the antagonist. They were instructed to reverse roles again and the protagonist to make a closing statement to the antagonist. They were then asked to share with each other how it felt to play those roles and to identify what felt like common threads of experience that partners shared. Each of these rounds took time and considerable discussion in the large group, and each made a concrete demonstration of some of the most basic elements of psychodrama. By using very ordinary small tasks, psychodrama techniques can be experienced, deconstructed in discussion, serve as an instructive source appropriate for use in educational settings, without becoming emotionally overwhelming.

ROLE TRAINING

The double circle activity was the perfect entrance for demonstrating Role Training as the next step. We asked for volunteers who would like to get the help of the group in gaining more ideas of 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 and doubling statements was explained. 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. The protagonist was offered coaching statements from others in the group that covered a wide spectrum of possibilities. 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.

SCULPTING

Family sculpting is a dynamic way of discovering the quality of family relationships and getting a visual impression of perceived place in family. The trainers modeled a few demonstrations with volunteers from the group. Each member of our training group 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-presentation, gave the lines, sounds, and poses and a brief description of each person in the family so that the auxiliaries selected were informed about the roles they took. The exercise explicitly invited inclusion of family members who had passed away but were still important, and the inclusion of distant but significant others, as well as allowing those not significant to be omitted. The idea was emotional connection and relevance. The group members were thus introduced to the idea of the social atom, and the notion that an understanding of the kinds of relationships a person has tells something about the person’s overall health and social/emotional well-being. [[4]](#endnote-2)

VIGNETTES

We also had group members present via vignettes the ways in which their families supported or did not support education, and their attitudes about it. Small enactments showed how family members acted toward school and schooling. Roles were assumed by group members and demonstrations made regarding how the protagonist could correct the way a role was being played. Gender roles and how those figure into the family view of education were included, as well as birth order issues. We asked the participants to be mjndful 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 their education if they wanted a change. Of course this technique is one which GEAR UP staffers could take and use directly with their student clients.

DOUBLING

Trainees were instructed in the use of psychodramatic doubling and the different kinds of doubles depending on the need of the protagonist. 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.[[5]](#endnote-3) Each group member then presented a small piece of action in which she or he was torn by different urges or desires where the role of double 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.[[6]](#endnote-4) Group members also got a chance in this exercise to serve as directors for one another’s pieces of enactment.

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 then enacted. We also had them take the role of a student they work with do future projections of how college would be or how they had imagined college would be before they got there. For the students of the trainees 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. 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?[[7]](#endnote-5)

SOCIODRAMA

Participants generated a number of salient issues that impact 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 a major concern in immigrant families, or the concept of outgrowing one’s family education level can be threatening to a 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. The participants chose roles to play and, after taking their roles, had a chance to develop those and introduce themselves to each other.[[8]](#endnote-6) 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.

BIBLIODRAMA

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. The idea was to create an engagement in action with highly valued books. [[9]](#endnote-7) We worked to winnow these down till we had about 6 or 8 books, each of which had a group of admiring followers.

This book then 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!

OTHER TECHNIQUES

We demonstrated the empty chair technique and taught non -verbal doubling using body language. We had them do spontaneity training—where they each had a partner and a series of non-verbal assignments so that they interacted as for example in very short unplanned segments: parent and toddler, parent and teenager, sun and seedling, tsumo wrestlers, tea and ice. The participants gained practice in playing living and non-living things, concepts and ideas. They were now ready to engage in play back theater and the magic shop and got a taste of each.

We had them present in action via short enactments situations they encountered as GEAR UP staffers that were worrisome, or troubling, or frustrating. The importance of following the phases of warm-up, action and sharing were stressed and modeled. We taught them the 5 elements of psychodrama: protagonist, audience, stage, auxiliary ego and director. We had them practice directing one another in small pieces of action. We taught them the importance of confidentiality in this work.

Outcomes

More than a year after the training ended, a Director of San Jose GEAR UP reported that many of the trainees from the four day workshop have been using the psychodrama techniques they were taught in their work adapting to their own particular settings and needs. They translated the techniques they were shown into applications specific to their contexts and situations. One of the most frequent applications they have found is classroom management.

GEAR UP staff often deal with students who arrive at after school and weekend learning programs carrying major stressors: family trouble, disagreements with friends, romantic breakups, etc. Those students require very flexible management skills from GEAR UP teachers, counselors and the like if they are to remain engaged in educational programs. Diverse staff members came to training with differing expectations, some with no idea what the training might offer, some with small prior contact with any expressive arts. The four day training workshop helped the staff in dealing with a multiplicity of issues besetting students and families. Staff must be prepared to deal with all kinds of problems that students import into the GEAR UP settings which, if not dealt with effectively, can be very disruptive and destructive. Psychodrama techniques such as doubling and role reversal help staff members do just that, and help discover the underlying issues students are responding to. The more techniques they have, the better they are able to cope with whatever students bring in with them to the program. The purpose is educational, not therapeutic. Educational progress is the main and central goal of the program. This use of psychodrama to support educational institutions is important and does not call for in depth therapeutic analysis or training. [[10]](#endnote-8)

GEAR UP in San Jose has had very high retention rates and very high attendance at its after school and weekend programs. The program has been so successful administrators have had to respond to insistent demand for more offerings. When budgetary concerns suggested cutbacks, diverse minority student participants demanded that the program **not** cut back on Friday after school or Saturday offerings, because students wanted to be able to attend.

Psychodrama can be used to augment reading and math programs, and the GEAR UP staffers have found ways to do that. One of the GEAR UP coordinators took what she learned in the workshop to create a conflict resolution model that helps diffuse aggression in her very tough school setting.l Action learning techniques generally increase student interest and evoke continuing learning. Further, the techniques allowed staff to recognize and evaluate their won belief systems, and to consider the values of others from differing backgrounds. Respect for and acknowledgement of diverse approaches are valued and enhanced by such personal experiential learning. The San Jose experience affirms the relevance of psychodrama to institutional and educational settings. J. L. Moreno would have loved this application: it takes psychodrama to the streets of one of the nation’s most diverse cities and applies it to some of its least advantaged citizens.

Conclusion

At the conclusion of four full days of training in psychodrama techniques designed to serve education, we had 60 GEAR UP staffers who were excited to have a set of new methods to work with in their capacities 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 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 both available for any 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 the sense that poor and immigrant families are important to the schools serving their children is truly a noble task.

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Keywords

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This paper describes a training offered in 2011 for a group of 60 staffers to a GEAR UP educational grant for the San Jose area. Diverse trainees were taught in 4 full days of hands-on, active engagement training exercises how to use techniques of psychodrama to engage poor and minority students and their families in middle school , high school and college retention.

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9. Kim & Hall. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
10. Jenkins & Guthrie. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)