

Role Playing As a Classroom Group Procedure

Bernice Grunwald

Alfred Adler Institute of Chicago

Introduction

The technique of Role Playing enables the individual to absent his own role and assume that of another person, or of an object, for short intervals. The individual attempts to negate himself and assume another "skin," substituting his own perception of emotion and behavior of an other. A specific for that role may be assigned either by the group or the group leader. The individual may select the role he wishes to play. The action is spontaneous; there is no coaching.

Purpose of Role Playing

The end product of Role Playing is a change in norms, values and behavior of the individual or group. The process is not directed toward bringing about conformity and compliance. Rather the objective is the development of strategy for living which is in harmony with the society in which the individual lives. Thus, the individual, as a result of Role Playing, should be more individualistic as contrasted to becoming similar.

The individual, by participating in Role Playing, may be motivated to change through many approaches. A few can be enumerated. One, he might be helped to gain insight into interpersonal and intergroup relations. Second, it could be a means for educating him to solve problems. This would be of particular value in the school where the teacher at the present time assumes this responsibility for everyone in her classroom—an impossible undertaking. Third, the withdrawn individual might find Role Playing a bridge between unreality and the reality of the social community. For with Role Playing he can gradually become involved and then have an opportunity to test reality in a micro-society. He may transfer his learning to the larger real society of the school or community. Fourth, as it is almost impossible to participate in any group endeavor without dealing with values; it is impossible to avoid becoming effective in group discussion skills and a broadening of one's general attitude towards human relationships for participants in Role Playing.

The Role Playing leader uses different techniques suited to his own personality, training and situation. The approach illustrated by the writer, that of problem solving, is effective in the classroom. The children are helped to examine the problem from various angles, find possible solutions, make comparison and choose the one most applicable.

Role Playing for problem solving has the advantage of relieving the teacher of the unpleasant and often impossible task of having to judge and adjudicate a conflict. Furthermore, the involvement of the entire group in finding solutions to problems unites the class toward common goals and helps each member toward greater independence and feeling of security that comes from the feeling of belonging.

There are definite steps which must be followed in Role playing problem solving. First, a given situation which deals with a specific problem is reported. The situation must be reported exactly, with all its details each time a group role plays. Next, the leader invites the entire group to discuss the presentation and the solution the “actors” applied in solving the problem. The leader or group may assign various roles to new players if a replay is needed. The new group repeats the problem exactly as it was first presented, giving it a different ending or solution. Again, the new solution is discussed with the entire class, comparing the two different solutions and their appropriateness. The Role Playing leader tries to involve as many members of the group as possible. The discussion is usually animated. The leader is challenged in directing the class not to stray from the problem and to come to some agreement without getting into a fight. Often, the leader asks for a third group to role play the same problem, offering a different solution. The group has now three possibilities or choices for solution. They express their feelings and views about the various solutions and then choose one which they consider most effective. It may happen, however, that none of the solutions proposed by the various role players are accepted by the class. Should this occur, we may, at another time, repeat the same procedure until an acceptable solution is formed.

A Specific Problem -The Situation

Keith was crying because Henry tore up his arithmetic paper. Henry claimed that Keith was copying from him and that he was cheating. He asked him once not to copy, but as Keith continued copying, he snatched Keith's paper and tore it.

First Role Playing Session

Helen acted the part of Henry and Margo took the part of Keith. They acted out the situation exactly as was told by Keith and Henry.

Discussion

- Teacher: Let's first discuss what you like about the way this problem was handled.
- Maria: I liked that Henry asked Keith first not to copy before he tore his paper.
- Stanley: I think it served Keith right because he used to copy from me.
- Teacher: Stanley, please, let us now discuss only what happened today.

George: I think it was all right for Henry to tear up Keith's paper because it will teach Keith a lesson.

Teacher: What do you mean? Could you explain this more clearly?

George: Well, I think that after now Keith won't cheat any more because he knows what will happen.

Teacher: What do others think of George's feelings?

Anna: I don't agree with George because it won't teach Keith anything.

Howard: I didn't like the way Henry tore up the paper because it made Keith angry and they may have a fight later on.

Dorothy: I don't think that Henry had a right to tear up somebody else's paper. He could have talked to Keith.

Henry: Yes, but I did not want to get the teacher involved.

Teacher: We have heard many opinions. How many think that they could handle this situation in a better way? (many hands went up)

Teacher: Kenneth will you, please, take the part of Henry, and you, Gary, take the part of Keith.

Second Role Playing Session

Kenneth pretends to do his arithmetic and Gary pretends to look over his shoulder and copy.

Kenneth: Please, Gary, don't copy my arithmetic.

Gary: I'm not copying. (continues looking over Kenneth's shoulder and copying.)

Kenneth takes a piece of paper and covers up his work.

Discussion

Teacher: What did you like about the way Kenneth and Gary worked out this problem?

Stanley: I guess, I'm changing my mind. I think it was better, too.

Teacher: What do you think, Lydia?

Lydia: I don't know. I guess I like the second time better.

Teacher: Could you tell us why you liked it better?

Lydia: Well, he didn't make him angry and he didn't tear up his paper.

Teacher: I'm glad to know how you feel. (Let the class, not the teacher, give approval)

Dorothy: This is a good way of stopping somebody from copying without getting into a fight.

Teacher: I see Danny shake his head all the time. Looks like he disagrees with you. Let's hear what he has to say. Danny!

Danny: I don't agree because it doesn't help Keith, I mean, Gary, at all.

Teacher: Could you explain what you mean by this?

- Danny: It's nice that they didn't make each other mad, but Gary is cheating because he can't do the work, and this way we don't help him any.
- Teacher: I tell you what, Danny. Let's act this out one more, and you take the part of Henry, and show us how you would solve this problem.

Third Session

Danny takes the part of Henry and Sandra takes the part of Keith. Danny pretends to be working while Sandra looks over his shoulder and copies.

- Danny: Need help, Sandra?
- Sandra: Yes, I just can't get these problems.
- Danny: Maybe I can help you; I know how to do it real well. Do you think the teacher would mind if we went over to the blackboard and practiced?
- Sandra: Let's ask her.
- Danny: Mrs. G., Sandra has a little trouble with these arithmetic problems. May we go over to the blackboard and practice? I think that I could help her.
- Teacher: That would be very nice, Danny, Thank you.
- Danny: Mrs. G., if it takes long I may not be able to finish my arithmetic in time.
- Teacher: Don't worry about that, Danny. You do the best you can.

Discussion

- Teacher: What is your reaction?
- Maria: I can see now why Danny disagreed with us before.
- Miriam: I like this the best because Danny helped Sandra. If nobody helps her she will always have to cheat because she wouldn't know how to do the problems.
- Albert: That's what Nina and me do all the time. When I don't know something, sometimes she helps me and when she doesn't know something, sometimes I help her.
- Danny: Maybe Henry wouldn't mind helping Keith tomorrow when we do arithmetic.
- Teacher: I think we have found a very good solution to this problem. Maybe it won't ever be necessary to discuss this any more. I'm very happy that you realize that you don't have to copy if you don't understand how to do the work. Anyone who understands it will be glad to help you. How do you feel about this, Henry?

Henry: Well, I think this is a good solution, and I'm sorry I tore the paper.

Teacher: I'm sure that Keith and the others have already forgotten what you did.

The solution found to this problem will work with children who cheat because they do not know how to do the work and are eager to hand in the assignment. However, it may have little, if any, effect on the child who is passive, destructive and "lazy," or one whose goal is power, and who has to defeat the teacher. In such a case, role playing alone would not be sufficient.

The discussion that follows role playing for problem solving enables the individual member of the group to learn to analyze cause and effect of behavior, why they do the things they do, and possible contribution to the problem. The discussion properly directed provides the leader an opportunity to guide and instruct the group in better social relations and democratic living.

The leader must refrain from being critical no matter what solution a child may formulate. Mistakes may be made by the children and consequences may be suffered without the leader being too quick to jump in and rescue them. Children should be permitted to learn from mistakes. However, if the leader senses that the suggested solution, if accepted by the group, may have dangerous consequences, he must direct the group to re-evaluate their decision. This is done through a process of questions which lead to better understanding of the situation. However, the group members must be permitted to think through their own values and attitudes and come to their own realization of their mistakes. The leader must be careful to direct the discussion in a manner which does not allow individuals to "take over" or engage in meaningless argumentation. Above all, the leader must be constantly alert that he does not either talk too much or let the discussion become chaotic because of lack of direction.