

# A Psychodramatist in the Classroom

BY GRACE KENNEDY

*Grace meets with sixty high school students every day, in three separate classes, which focus on the study of literature and the development of literacy skills. At the local government school in which she works in Canberra, Grace supervises teachers of literature and the arts, and is a member of the school executive. Grace has submitted her psychodrama thesis to the ANZPA Board. She is involved in the management of the Psychodrama Institute of the ACT, and in 2001 commences work as a visiting teacher.*

## *My Experience as a Psychodrama Trainee*

It was in the process of training to become a psychodramatist that I first experienced education that took account of me as an individual, with a unique identity. I had lived for many years in a kind of emotional darkness. In my own family I had never experienced the warm and positive presence of a loving adult who accepted my world and was interested in it. I had only ever experienced the conditional love of 'if you want to enter my world, you must do things my way'. As a child, I did want to belong, so I tried to enter into things on the other's terms, but as a result I lost contact with my own world, my own ideas.

As I entered into close relationships with my psychodrama teachers, I began to experience my own world. I got to know myself. I could now begin to experience the presence of a trustworthy other person, who was interested in my world. I started to realise that my world didn't have to disappear if someone good was in it with me.

When I remember my childhood now, it is with a great deal of pleasure and awareness, because my own experience and values as a child are now alive and available to me. I can remember how good it felt to take a big bite out of an apple, run out to the clothesline on the hill behind the house, and stand in the wind as the bright drunken clothes wove around me, in and out of the broad blue lake of the sky. I climbed the big fir tree and read my book in its sheltering pungent branches, listening to the soughing of the wind.

My experiences as a psychodrama trainee have inspired me as a teacher to introduce certain principles and practices into the classroom. My approach reflects a developmental view of education which allows me to make the identity of my students central to work in the classroom. Before expanding on this approach further I will contrast it with two outmoded models of education still practised in Australia.

## Contrasting Approaches to Education

### TRANSMISSION

In the teaching of adolescents today, there is an old reliance on conditional methods of domination. The teacher in effect says to the students, 'You must master this material, so that you can eventually get a job. The better you master this material, the better will be your chances of getting a job. You may not get a job if you do not do this thing that I want you to do.' The teacher is saying, 'You must enter the world, on my terms, if you are going to be successful in life.' I have always felt that this method exiles the students, excluding the values and experiences of the adolescent. In the teaching of reading and writing, which is my day-to-day business, I have found the conditional approach unworkable.

The approach belongs to a traditional view of education – as a process of transmitting knowledge from the teacher to the student. The student is an empty vessel to be filled. Certain kinds of learning can be taught using this model. Driver education – where driving is seen as a series of competencies to be mastered – is a fine example of the proper application of this 'transmission' model. Theorists linked with this method of learning include Pavlov and B.F. Skinner. The 'transmission of knowledge' model does little to assist us to teach young people how to value themselves, or how to be reflective and then active in the world.

### TRANSACTION

Reform in education led away from the 'transmission' idea to the 'transaction' idea. Education is seen here more as an interactive process between the students and the curriculum, in which the teacher attempts to link the material to the developmental abilities of the child. Educators who worked from this perspective are Bloom, Dewey and later, Bruner. Most curriculum reform and innovation in the last thirty years has sprung from ideas about transaction. However, this broader idea about education attended only to the cognitive development of the child.

### TRANSFORMATION

The third step from 'transmission' and 'transaction' is 'transformation'. In this view of education the student is seen as central, positive, purposive, active and involved in organising her life experiences. The roots of this idea about education are found in the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Leo Tolstoy, A.S. Neill, Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and John Holt. Here are the main ideas of 'transformation' theory:

- *The experience of the learner is primary.*
- *Choice, creativity, values and self-realisation are central.*
- *People are intrinsically valuable and interesting.*
- *Interpersonal relationships between learners are important.*
- *There is an orientation towards social change and reflection upon one's actions.*

The kind of education based on these principles is the kind I encountered in psychodrama training, and can be termed 'developmental'. I will now introduce you to three educators from the twentieth century, who enacted this kind of orientation in their teaching and whose values and practices have influenced my own classroom practice. I link the work of these educators both to my experiences as a psychodrama trainee and to elements of my classroom practice.

## Three Inspirational Educators

### LEILA BERG

Leila Berg made a major contribution to the education of primary school children in Britain in the 1960s and 70s. She introduced a reading scheme which was based on the lives, experiences and language of ordinary children from working-class homes from all over England. She rejected the bloodless and lifeless old readers, with artificial stories and sanitised expressions, in favour of stories from real children she knew, about Dad being out of a job, about the problem of a leaking roof and the joys of fish and chips for supper.

Leila observed relationships between teachers and learners in primary schools, and noticed



that a mutually satisfying relationship between learner and teacher, conducted in an atmosphere of pleasure, is the best basis for language development. The relationship is central, not the curriculum. As I experienced this principle in psychodrama training, I began to practise it in my own classroom, taking account of the feelings and attitudes of the child, and of what they brought to me. In this atmosphere of pleasure and acceptance, many small writing projects were born and came to fruition, with the students' experiences and language forming the basis of the projects.

Leila observed that children have a desire to be competent in the world. This simple belief is very contrary to a pervasive doubt in most teachers' minds about the essential nature of children. Children do have a desire to grow up well. Leila believed that this motivating force is stronger than the dark and difficult things, which can hold children back from making progress. In the early years of my psychodrama training, I was constantly challenged to focus on my purpose and on my goals. I became aware of this life-oriented impulse within me, instead of only focusing on my fears and on obstacles. In the classroom, I began to focus on the often small yet tremendous signs of a child's urge to progress, rather than on their refusals. This has become the single most important idea that I carry with me into every lesson: children want to succeed and become competent.

#### **SYLVIA ASHTON-WARNER**

Sylvia Ashton-Warner taught Maori children in New Zealand during the 1940s and 50s. She made extraordinary contact with the alienated Maori communities in which she worked, and predating Leila Berg, created a series of readers for Maori children which was based on their experiences and their language.

Sylvia recalls how one of her pupils, Rangī, was not making any progress on the old English readers – with words like 'Look, Tom. See the cat.' Finally, Sylvia asked Rangī what was frightening him. Rangī told her that one day the police were coming to take him to jail, to cut him up with a butcher's knife and hang

what was left of him. It transpired that Rangī's father ran an illegal gambling den, and the whole family did live in fear of the police. Sylvia taught Rangī these words: 'police; butcher; knife; kill; gaol' and from this intensely personal beginning with words Rangī became a reader.

Sylvia's capacity for intimacy with Rangī was typical of her work, and mirrored the intimacy I was developing with my teachers and peers in psychodrama training. I took this new capacity for intimacy back into my own classroom, and using simple conversations, I embarked on a project of coming to know my students intimately, so that their learning to read and write could be based on the reality of their own lives and experiences.

#### **PAULO FREIRE**

Paulo Freire was born into a middle-class family in north-east Brazil, in a repressive and totalitarian state. He was very poor in the 1930s and was often hungry at school, listless and unable to learn. At eleven, he vowed to dedicate his life to fight hunger. When he later became a teacher, he taught illiterate adults living in Brazil's slums. His radical new methods of teaching resulted in the creation of a huge program to make five million Brazilians literate. After a military coup in 1962, he was imprisoned as a subversive. He lived in exile for fifteen years, but in 1989 he was appointed Secretary for Education in Sao Paulo.

Freire's principle for working with the 'oppressed' was to work with the themes and concerns of the group, not on imposing the teacher's agenda. My own teaching job has required me to work with the 'oppressed' in school – children who are being failed by the system. A constant theme of this group is the pain, suffering and humiliation these students have experienced at school, and elsewhere in their lives.

In psychodrama training, I was able to display the painful truth of my own life experiences, and to have others involved with me in dealing with the pain. Back in the classroom, I became better able to permit expressions of pain and rage from angry students. I continued to experiment in my work with these students,

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creating class meetings, where students' concerns could become the focus of our interactions and my interventions.

I also began to develop an advocacy role to champion the cause of these particular students, by giving lectures and conducting demonstrations elsewhere in the education system, at both local and national professional development days.

### *Summary*

I have attempted to illuminate a method of working in the classroom which allows me to use principles of learning from my psychodrama training to promote the development of each student's identity. In applying these principles, I acknowledge the influence and confluence of the lives and practices of a number of eminent educators: Leila Berg, Sylvia Ashton-Warner and Paulo Freire.

### *Bibliography*

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