

Interventions with Kerry, a Twelve-Year-Old Student

by Frances Porter

Frances was Deputy Principal at an Intermediate School near Wellington when this paper was written. She has worked as a teacher and manager for more than 25 years. This article draws from material in a social and cultural atom paper completed as part of her training as a Psychodramatist. She has passed her psychodrama practical assessment and is close to completing her thesis. Currently Frances is Senior Team Leader in the Primary division of the Correspondence School.

INTRODUCTION

As the deputy principal of an intermediate school, catering for 500 11–13-year-old students, I function as both a disciplinarian and a guidance counsellor (among many other things). Kerry¹ first came to my attention because of extremely disruptive and uncooperative behaviour. In the course of my work with him I came to know his family, his friendship network, his relationships with the other thirty students in his class, his teacher, and his relationships with staff in the school, through his eyes. This extensive contact assisted me to perceive Kerry's social and cultural atom.

THE INITIAL MEETING

I met Kerry incidentally many times during his first year at Maidstone school. It was late in the first term of his second year that his teacher sent for me. Kerry had refused to leave the room (*Desperate*

Avoider, Reckless Gambler, General Custer), having already refused to settle to work (*Aversive Student*), and was angry and mouthy (*Angry Rebel, Fearless Showman*) as he moved around the classroom. It was not unusual for him to misbehave, but he had carried it to a new level.

I walked in (*Sheriff, Respected Authority*), caught his eye, beckoned to him to follow, and walked out again. This was a very dramatic moment in the life of the class, and every individual was aware and focused on what might happen. Within a split second the *Relieved Capitulator* appeared in Kerry; he left the room and followed me. I think the fact that I did not stand there and watch him allowed him to choose to leave, thus retaining some dignity.

As we walked back to my office Kerry hung back (*Ashamed Victim, Apprehensive Anticipator*). I asked him to keep up with me, which he did (*Cooperative Captive*).

I chatted with him in a low-key conversation designed to establish rapport and show him I was not intending to be punitive. I used the short walk, which probably took about a minute, to be a *Warm Companion*.

Once in my office Kerry took a seat, and so did I. He looked around (*Interested Observer of Surroundings, Accepting Cruiser*), and kept returning his gaze to the screen saver on my computer rather than to me (*Shy Self-Protector*). I asked him questions about himself, and his family, and he answered willingly (*Animated Storyteller*). As Kerry relaxed and warmed up he became an *Engaging Entertainer*. By now I had begun to make an initial role analysis, and the roles I observed emerging during this meeting are illustrated in the following diagram.

Beginning with the *Paralysed Learner* and moving clockwise, the first part of this diagram shows the negativity of Kerry's relationship with himself. He was in this

main role during much of his time at school, certainly in his public interactions. He was only able to move out of it when taken out of the classroom by me. A positive set of roles was then revealed in the security of my room. A negative identity is more acceptable to many of Kerry's peers, and Kerry himself, than a positive one, which is stigmatised with such epithets as 'nerd' and 'goody good'.

KERRY'S SOCIAL ATOM

Kerry lives with Dad and his 13-year-old sister, Sharon. She recently returned to live with them, and Kerry thinks Dad conciliates Sharon to keep her there. Dad sounds like a larger version of Kerry (later confirmed by Grandmother), though Kerry goes out of his way to have me think well of Dad (*Loving, Loyal Son*). Dad's girlfriend Rosie and her two-year-old son Hayden live in the same town. Kerry speaks very warmly of Hayden (*Affectionate Stepbrother*). His mother, who

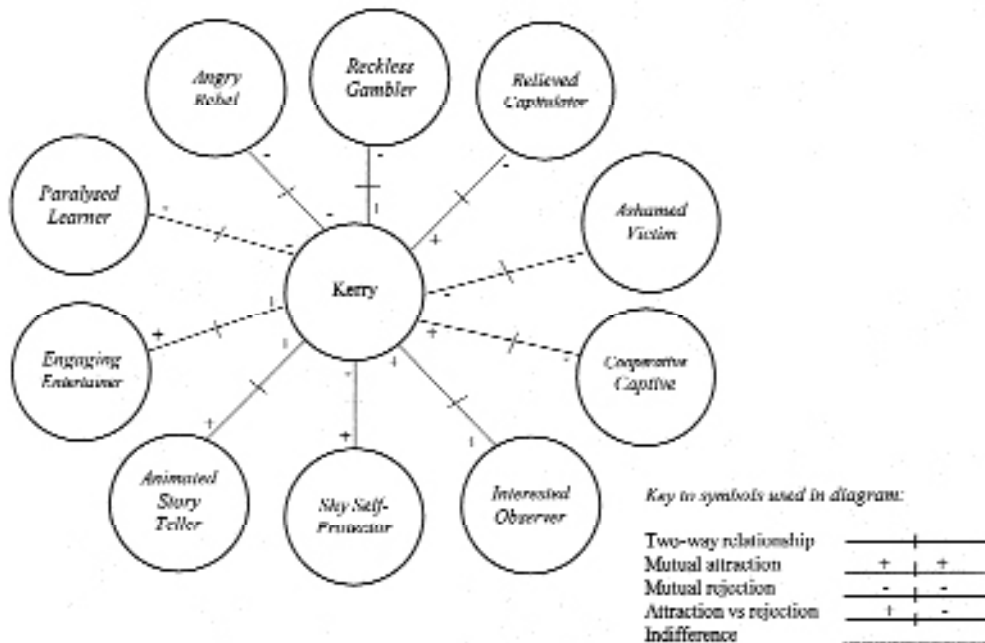


Figure 1: Kerry's cultural atom

does not get on at all with his father now, lives about 20 km away and he doesn't have her phone number. He wants to live with her (*Pleading Beggar*), but can't even speak to her when he wants to (*Sad, Hopeless Waif*). He has recently spent a week with her, misbehaved dreadfully (*Boundary Pusher, Angry Rebel*) and ended up running back home (*Hit and Run Artist*). These relationships are depicted below, and the role systems are analysed later in Table 1.

In response to questions about himself and his functioning in his classroom, Kerry informed me that he was dumb (*Self-Condemner*). Absent was any evidence of a self-valuing role. I spent time as a *Warm Companion* as I explored what it was like to

be in a class where most kids were operating at a more competent level. Wanting him to wake up to himself, I mirrored back to him his intelligent response to the questions I'd asked. This elicited an *Astonished Disbeliever*. I added that I'd been a teacher for years, talked to lots of kids, and knew an intelligent kid when I heard one. By the time the interview ended Kerry was using his considerable ability to positively engage me (*Charming Engager*).

The dramatic changes in role were brought about firstly by his perception of me as *Respected Authority*, which enabled him to surrender his out-of-control behaviour, and then by my respectful, warm valuing of Kerry, as I showed interest in *him* rather than

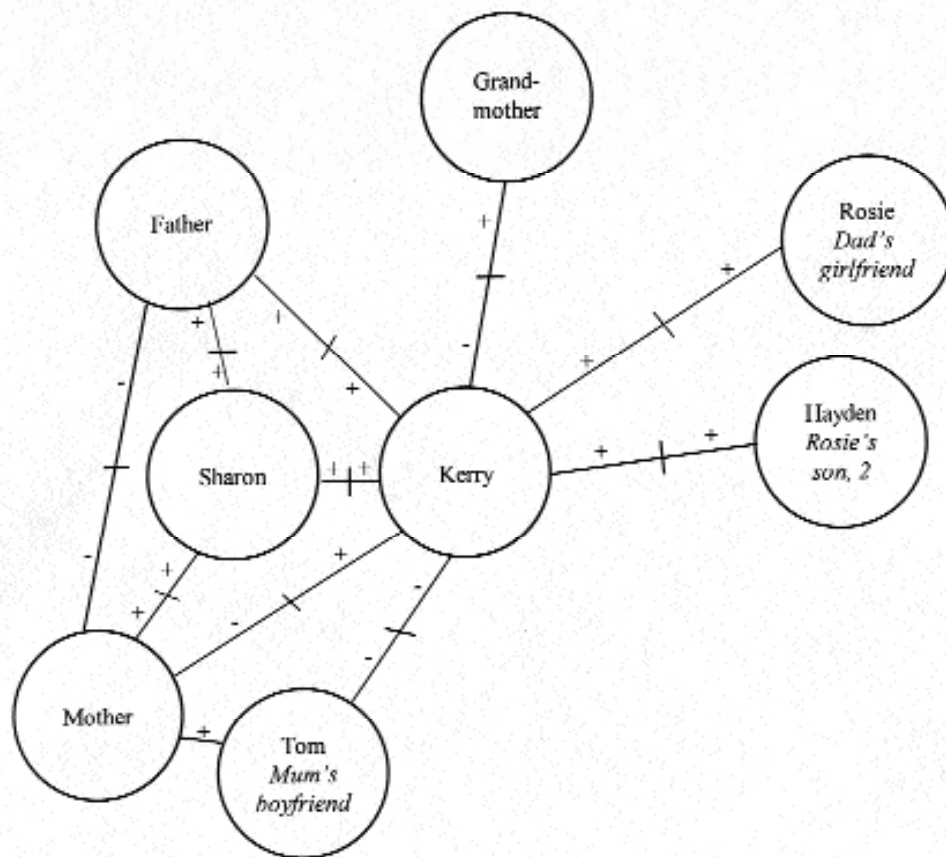


Figure 2: Kerry's family social atom

disapproval of his behaviour. This began the process of social atom repair.

At the end of the initial meeting, and from other observations, I was able to make a more comprehensive chart of Kerry's roles, illustrated below by Table 1. In looking at this chart you can see that there are many roles in the coping and fragmenting systems, and few roles in the progressive system. This reflects Kerry's spirited response to the stressful challenges of both home and school, as well as the limited opportunity he has experienced thus far to build more progressive roles.

The central role in the fragmenting system is the *Despairing Paralysed Learner*. Kerry is acutely aware of his inability to do the

basic tasks he sees others managing easily, and has condemned himself as 'dumb'.

His impatience with himself and demand that he not be singled out have led him to reject proffered help. He has to be coaxed and bribed to work with the teacher aide appointed for him. As such tasks are the substance of every day, Kerry is compelled to spend most of his time in a school system that is, by now, toxic to him. With six years experience (it is not known whether he was previously offered extra help) at other schools before he began at Maidstone, this role is absolutely fixed. He has used the coping role of *Agent Provocateur* to create alternatives for himself in the classroom.

The trouble that constantly results from this is clearly less distressing than facing the pain of his learning gaps. On several occasions

Progressive Roles		Coping Roles			Fragmenting Roles	
Well Developed	Developing	Moving Toward	Moving Away	Moving Against	Diminishing	Over-developed & Unchanging
Affectionate Step-brother	Interested Observer	Pleading Beggar <i>(to mother)</i>	Hit and Run Artist <i>(Home/School)</i>	Agent Provocateur	Jealous Brother <i>(of Sharon)</i>	Despairing Paralysed Learner
Loving Loyal Son	Opening Rose	Loyal Sidekick <i>(of Dad's)</i>	Astonished Disbeliever	Angry Rebel	Sad Hopeless Waif <i>(Mum)</i>	Rock of Gibraltar
	Sparkling Entertainer/ Storyteller	Shy Self-Protector	Desperate Avoider	Boundary Pusher	Angry Outcast	Distrusting Victim <i>(at school)</i>
	Charming Engager	Cooperative Captive	Apprehensive Anticipator	Fearless Showman	General Custer	Ashamed Victim
		Accepting Cruiser	Self Condemner		Reckless Gambler	

Table 1: First Role Analysis²

at school, during unsupervised breaks with fellow students, he has become a *Heartless Bully*. When confronted he has assumed the role of *Rock of Gibraltar*, refusing to consider the significance of what he has done.

When Kerry can be lifted out of the formal class work situation (as on this occasion) other more progressive roles emerge. When – working on social atom repair – I mirrored his intelligent conversation back to him, he had seven years of experiences to the contrary to set against what I was saying. He had no concept of himself as capable of formal learning such as doing school work. The role of the *Competent Learner* is absent.

FIRST GROUP SESSION – A SPONTANEOUS EVENT

As can be the way in a school, I thought little more of Kerry until a week later when another emergency call came out. The scene in the classroom was similar. The difference was that this time I had a teaching commitment, with a group of sixteen of the brightest students in the school who belonged to the Future Problem Solving group³. Kerry came willingly, and I simply took him with me. He sat cross-legged on a desk, the only furniture there, to the side of the group (*Interested Observer*).

I began my discussion with the group who were working on the theme of violence. I was conscious of Kerry's presence, and of the fact the group were also conscious of him, and somewhat curious. Almost immediately it occurred to me (*Spontaneous Actor*) to say to them that they might get some first-hand information from Kerry on the subject. As we all turned towards him I added that he might not be willing to answer their questions. He replied without hesitation, his eyes dancing, 'Oh, yes I would!' (*Eager Beaver*).

I think the roles of psychodrama director sometimes intersect with the roles of teacher. In previous discussions I had already tended to use roles such as *Creator of Group and Role Warm-up* to enliven the discussion, and to awaken in the students a greater consciousness of the impact various issues we discussed have on themselves and on people in general.

The first question directed to Kerry was, 'Why are you violent?'

He paused, then said: 'Because I've been brought up in violence.' (*Sincere Self-Revealer*).

This question and answer had a huge emotional impact on us all, and blew the discussion and all the participants wide open. The students proceeded to interview Kerry for about 40 minutes, during which time he was an *Expansive Self-Examiner* who relished all the attention and validation he was getting. There was also an embryonic *Self-Valuer*. The group ended up getting a first-hand insight into life in a family where the relationship between the parents has been violent, and warmed up to being *Empathic Enquirers*. Kerry changed his warm-up to a group of people he would formerly have regarded as unrelieved nerds (embryonic *Respectful Acknowledger*). This showed some repair of his social atom. I worked to keep the communication open and two-way by clarifying, coaching, modelling, mirroring and doubling, for group members as well as Kerry. The atmosphere was intense, and we all remained passionately involved throughout. Figure 3, overleaf, charts the roles evident in this session.

The value of this session was immense. Kerry became a positive star whose opinions were sought and valued as he experienced the

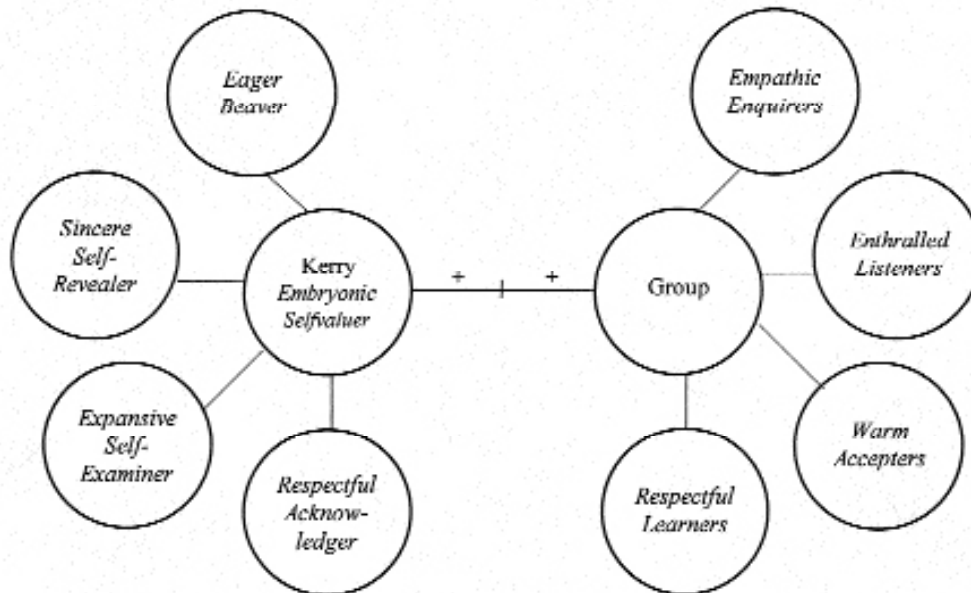


Figure 3: Diagram of group session

warmth of the group in an atmosphere of mutual acceptance. This contributed to the emergence of the embryonic *Self-Valuer*, a vital new role in his cultural atom.

SECOND GROUP SESSION – A PLANNED EVENT

I understood from Miss Gray that the real issue remained Kerry's total unwillingness to work, for his disruptive behaviours were all produced in lieu of engaging with school work. I suggested the possibility of my conducting a session (called a class meeting) with him and the class. Miss Gray was agreeable to the idea. Class meetings are becoming part of the culture at Maidstone, and are a place for any member of a class to raise issues of concern to them. They operate through an agenda to which every member of the class has access. I have introduced them and make myself available to model respectful ways of working with children – including using my psychodrama abilities. The idea for this meeting came from the

success of the first session with the FPS group. Offering it broke new ground for me, and gave me further insight into integrating psychodrama into my work in the school. Also central to my decision to offer this was Miss Gray's openness and willingness to learn a new process from me.

I sent for Kerry, and told him he would be going on a learning/behaviour contract. Behaviour contracts were beginning to be a recognised part of the discipline system at Maidstone. They are negotiated between the student and a teacher, and contain provisions a student must meet, with regular checking times during the day. These regular checks turn into positive strokes, and surprisingly some of the toughest students like the way they assist with personal control. When I, as Deputy Principal, become involved, they are taken even more seriously by the student. I asked Kerry to tell me what contract provisions he thought would be helpful to keep him on track in class. He identified appropriate guidelines and they were written

in. One, for example, said without hesitation, was 'I will be courteous to the teacher' (*Truthful Self-Analyst*). We walked back to class with the contract.

When Kerry and I arrived the class were already gathered on the mat with Miss Gray, and we joined them. I said to the class that they all knew Kerry had been working with me, and I thought it would be good if he heard from them. I asked him if he thought he would be able to listen even if they told him the things he did that upset them. (In hindsight I regret that I did not emphasise equally the importance of their mirroring to him positive aspects they liked in him. This omission makes his response clearer.)

'Oh no,' he replied, 'I'd get too angry!' (*Apprehensive Victim*)

'What if people speak in a way that doesn't put you down and is thoughtful and caring?'

After assurance that he would be looked after during this process Kerry agreed somewhat apprehensively (*Courageous Investigator, Apprehensive Adventurer*).

I explained the terms of his contract even though the necessity for it was apparent to everyone. In giving this explanation I established myself as the leader, as well as creating a clear focus for the work of the meeting.

Over the next 20 minutes class members let Kerry know what upset them in what he did, including his aggravating behaviours to them and Miss Gray. They specially mentioned Bill, the class isolate, who would do anything Kerry required. Again, I coached, mirrored, modelled and doubled very actively and quickly for any participant, whenever the established boundaries were

breached. Though I had overlooked asking for positive comments, in this process I mirrored and coached students who were in anyway negative in what they said, to be good auxiliaries for Kerry in this effort to create a positive identity and healthy social atom.

Individual students told Kerry what they were willing to do to assist him to fulfil the conditions of the contract. The class members adopted the role of *Caring Supporters*, and it was clear that their sustained interest validated Kerry (*Self-Valuer*). The positive tele in the room was palpable. This positive response from the group was facilitated by their seeing the warm, positive relationship between Kerry and me, and by my work as a director with them in their role as auxiliaries. The intensity of their involvement showed me that the experience was very real for them, underlining their deep interest in themselves, each other and class relationships.

Miss Gray, who was very warmed up and positive to Kerry, then went on to develop a completely individualised program in contract form for him to work on, representing hours of her own effort.

Kerry had experienced much success in his first year at Maidstone in the role of *Agent Provocateur* in his class. He was with a teacher who eventually was only saved from a complete breakdown (a situation to which he contributed significantly) by being persuaded to take sick leave, and his class was supportive of him in that role. His second year class was better managed. Miss Gray was learning to recognise when he took up that role and send him off for 'time out'. Now the class supported her rather than him, and cooperated with her in bringing about a norm in the group that promoted a

Progressive Roles		Coping Roles			Fragmenting Roles	
Well Developed	Developing	Moving Toward	Moving Away	Moving Against	Diminishing	Over-developed & Unchanging
Sincere Self-Revealer	Courageous Investigator / Risk-taker	Eager Beaver	Accepter of Time-out	Agent Provocateur	Despairing Paralysed Learner	Rock of Gibraltar
Truthful Self-Analyst	Sparkling Entertainer / Storyteller	Apprehensive Adventurer			Heartless Bully	
Interested Observer	Self-valuer (<i>embryonic</i>)				Puppet Master (<i>with Bill</i>)	
					Distrusting Victim	

Table 2: Role analysis from both group sessions

positive approach to learning. This increased the likelihood of the development of a positive identity.

The table above shows the success of the interventions, with a big reduction in the number of roles in the coping and fragmenting systems, and an increase in the progressive system. Most significantly, the *Despairing Paralysed Learner* has moved slightly.

Encouraged by the contract, and armed with a totally individual learning program he could manage, Kerry had several productive weeks (*Emerging Learner* and embryonic *Willing Worker*). During this time several other students he mixed with outside school went seriously off track. They were neighbours and gang companions, with whom he had been in trouble with the police. He met me before school one morning (perhaps on purpose, maybe by chance) and told with great relish the story of how two

of them had met him on the way to the bus stop. They let him know they were going to wag, and invited him to join them. He refused, and when they called him names, turned and walked away to catch the bus. Pointing out that he had never been able to resist such temptation before, he was bursting with pride in his new found strength (*Hercules*). Kerry went on to tell and retell the story to his teacher, teacher-aide, the special needs teacher and the principal. It began to assume something of the feeling of an epic.

The *Vengeful Saboteur* subsequently emerged on several occasions when he ostentatiously ripped up work Miss Gray had prepared for him, and completed work of his own. In his rage he was prepared to sacrifice his own work to hurt her. Roles in the fragmenting and coping systems were still to the fore and roles in the progressive system still undeveloped.

CONCLUSION

It was clear that the role development/social atom repair process was still very much in progress. Kerry struggled through to the end of the year with a number of crisis times. He went on to a second contract specifically to avert the imminent prospect of suspension, brought about by an unprovoked physical attack on another student. It is a measure of the success of the work that he was not suspended, and was able to stay out of further trouble.

Achieved was the *embryonic* development of several crucial roles:

Believer in Self

Self-Valuer

Emerging Learner

This change was brought about through the conscious application of role theory in individual and group sessions with Kerry. This focused on relationship systems both externally and within Kerry himself, and built on the relationship I established with him. The role of the *Despairing Paralysed Learner* that I previously assessed to be over-developed and unchanging, began to diminish. This is a significant change from a clinical perspective – the evidence of real social atom repair. It enabled Kerry to begin developing the progressive roles outlined above.

The nature of the work with Kerry differs in several respects from a classic therapeutic relationship – one that usually results from the client actively seeking contact with the therapist, and taking responsibility for maintaining it.

First, I chose to actively establish a strong connection with him, knowing it had to be

based on roles other than those associated with negativity in order for any new solutions to emerge. In this, he readily engaged with me. I also suggested to him that he could see me of his own accord. Kerry did not formally take this up, though he did talk informally to me when I was out and about. He was unable even to take up the offer of choosing his own time out, always requiring an intervention from Miss Gray. Nonetheless, even through some very challenging times later in the year when suspension seemed inevitable, Kerry continued to accept me as a person interested in his welfare. If I sent for him he was generally pleased to come, because I persistently mirrored a very attractive self back to him. My focus was on finding ways to keep him functioning in the school.

Second, I was not able to maintain a regular contact with him – I would have liked to be able to do more, but my role did not permit. This had an effect on what was achieved, as did the fact there was no support system anywhere else in Kerry's life to build on the work done at school. It was an anticlimax to the work of previous months where in many moments Kerry showed the development of new roles and the beginnings of new relationships. This situation illustrates that in order for new roles to be sustained, a significant number of strong positive connections may be needed.

SUBSEQUENT DEVELOPMENT

The year Kerry began secondary school, he lasted only a week before being suspended, and was suspended again around mid-year. It is clear that the supports he had at Maidstone, in the form of his teacher, teacher aide, the other children and me, were not present. In addition, the secondary school system moves students from teacher to

teacher many times each day. In order for new roles to develop to an adequate level, a student like Kerry needs a social atom that includes at least one strong positive relationship, where there is understanding and encouragement. This may often be achieved with a teacher. The existence of one such strong positive relationship can make it possible for a student such as Kerry to simply *survive* day by day, and possibly begin to feel himself of value.

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POSTSCRIPT

Kerry called into school later in his first year at secondary school and told me his school had sent him on an anger management course. He looked and sounded happy and said he is managing day to day life more successfully now. He is feeling happier with himself and with what he is doing.

Endnotes

- 1 I have changed Kerry's name for this paper, as I have with all individuals mentioned. I have not changed the name of the school.
- 2 The role category descriptions 'progressive, coping, fragmenting' are taken from Max Clayton 1995, The preparation and writing of a social and cultural atom paper, *Australian and New Zealand Psychodrama Association Inc. Journal*, no. 4, 43-50.
- 3 Future Problem Solving (FPS) is a program that trains students to develop specific thinking strategies to work on potential problems of the future. It runs as a competition, works on a set of themes and requires prior research, and the competition has a strict time limit within which teams must work.