

Proud to be Apologising

LYNLEY McNAB

The contents of this article were originally presented as part of a workshop at the 2008 ANZPA Conference in Melbourne.

ABSTRACT

In New South Wales, high school students who have been suspended from school must attend a suspension resolution meeting with their parents and the school counsellor before they are allowed to return to school. Often, the students who find themselves in this predicament are already disengaged from the school community and feel blamed, shamed and resentful. Their parents, also caught up in the punitive system, are often angry and embarrassed by their child's actions. This paper tells the story of Ahmed, his serious offending, suspension and subsequent return to school. The story is intended to illustrate how psychodramatic action methods can be used with young people to assist them to develop the necessary skills to re-enter their school community with a sense of purpose and belonging, and some ideas about how to repair their relationships with peers.

KEY WORDS

psychodrama, psychodramatic principles, facilitation, warm up, integration, education, school, counsellor, multi-cultural, disadvantage, suspension

'There is a way to be good again.' — *Khaled Hosseini* *The Kite Runner*

Introduction

I work as a school counsellor in high schools in South West Sydney. One aspect of my job involves working with students who have been suspended from school for committing serious offences. My task is to help them re-enter their school community

in an appropriate way. The cases can be complex, as the students in these schools come from diverse cultural backgrounds and have frequently experienced various layers of social and economic disadvantage and/or trauma. Their punishment isolates them and labels them as 'bad', and the journey back can be a daunting one. This paper illustrates some of the ways that I use psychodramatic principles and action methods as I help these young people find ways to be good again.

The System

In New South Wales schools, students may be punished with a long suspension of up to four school weeks if they commit a serious misdemeanour involving violence, weapons, 'persistent disobedience' or anything else at that level of seriousness. Before students are allowed to return from a suspension they, and hopefully their families, are required to attend a meeting with the school counsellor. The purpose of the meeting is to assess their readiness to re-enter school, and to identify possible strategies for the repair of the original situation.

These re-entry meetings can often feel like a further round of punishment, reinforcing the blame and shame messages that accompanied the original suspension. Like many other systems, the high school environment is often preoccupied with authority and control, especially when it comes to disciplinary procedures. The culture is punitive and the processes routinely pessimistic and unsympathetic. This strikes me as unnecessary and counter-productive. I want to create a system that takes away the shame, and to make the process that unfolds between me, the students and their families genuinely therapeutic and collaborative. These re-entry interviews present an opportunity for learning and role development — for the student to deepen self-awareness and for the family to strengthen relationships. My goal is to promote and support these possibilities even in the midst of a system where blame and punishment are endemic.

I have found that, if the student and family are willing, the use of some simple psychodramatic techniques within the session can bring about real healing and change. I have noticed that students are able to take on the roles of others honestly and congruently. This seems to bring about a shift in how the parents view their children, how both parents and children view the misdemeanours, and it allows room for spontaneity to emerge in the student. The students are then able to access their own creative ideas for resolution of the situation and begin planning to return to their school community with a sense of purpose and belonging, with less shame and with some ideas about how to repair the situation with their peers and family. The re-entry meeting then becomes less a robotic disciplinary process and more a space where profound moments of healing are possible.

Let me illustrate by telling you the story of one particular student . . .

Ahmed's Story

I wish to introduce you to Ahmed, a 15 year old boy from a Lebanese Muslim cultural background who is in Year 9 at school. The youngest child, he came to Australia

from Lebanon with his family five years ago. His family have generally settled in well. Ahmed's Dad is a respected member of the local community, and some of Ahmed's older siblings now own small businesses or are married with children. Ahmed, however, is turning out quite differently from his siblings — to the disappointment of his Dad. Ahmed has struggled to learn English and to fit into this new country and the school's complex social and learning environment. He has a moderate intellectual disability, a mild hearing loss and serious language and learning difficulties. Nonetheless he is generally regarded as a friendly, affable and curious boy and has a reputation for participating well in his classes.

The Incident

On this particular day, Ahmed is in a high school corridor with classrooms stretching down each side. He is about to run into a collision between his developing awareness of his sexual attractions and his limited social and emotional literacy. The corridor is filled with students. It is the change-over time between periods and the teachers have not yet arrived to let the students into the classrooms. The students, according to the unrealistic hopes of their teachers, are supposed to be waiting patiently and quietly in line readying themselves for their next class. In reality, students are doing a large range of things. Yes, some are lined up in anticipation of their next class, while others are lined up simply because it has been asked of them by teachers and they are happy to comply.

Many students, however, are taking this opportunity to pursue other adolescent priorities including their major actual curriculum area — meeting their social needs within the school day. For some, this means finding ways to meet needs for belonging and fun. There are small knots of peers chatting together amicably. Other students have embarked on more public displays of behaviour including flirting, teasing, rough housing with friends, bullying, showing off, being the corridor clown, strutting and intimidating. A few use this opportunity to fulfil their power needs in either a very public or quietly menacing way. And there is another set of students, the social outsiders, who are not really talking to anyone much, but are vigilant for possible harassment or just watching from the sidelines.

It is into this sophisticated, complex, fast moving, high energy social milieu that Ahmed steps.

Also in this corridor is a Year 8 girl who has long, curly brown hair and a beautiful smile. Ahmed has noticed her on several occasions, as have many other boys. She does not know him at all. Unbeknown to her peers, this young woman has been working hard with the school counsellor (me) and her Mum for the past year to address old memories, body responses and nightmares from a time when she was sexually assaulted as a seven year old in a public toilet.

Ahmed walks casually over to this young woman, one of so many in the corridor at this moment. He punches her full in the face, calls her an 'effen' c**** and laughs. Ahmed then stands back, apparently expecting her to laugh and flirt with him after what he apparently imagines has been a very cool 'come-on' approach. He is mystified when she bursts into terrified tears and other students drag him away from her. He keeps

saying 'But I was only joking!'. Teachers intervene and Ahmed finds himself sent to the office and ultimately on long suspension from school.

Two Weeks Later

Ahmed has been at home for a fortnight and has now come in with his Dad for the formal 'Long Suspension Resolution Meeting' with me, the school counsellor. His period of suspension can be concluded or extended depending on the outcome of this meeting and at the discretion of the school principal.

Ahmed already knows me well and is relaxed and comfortable in my office. Ahmed's Dad has also met me on two previous occasions. Ahmed's Mum does not attend school meetings. She does not speak any English, and in any case I doubt whether it would be considered culturally appropriate in this family. Dad is dressed in his absolute best clothes and is extremely polite, proud and respectful. He makes minimal eye contact with me. He is clearly ashamed of his son's behaviour, and is struggling to hold in his rage and mortification at what his son has done. This incident has reflected badly on the whole family and disturbed its functioning. Ahmed tells me at a later time that his Dad had beaten him severely for what he had done and demanded that he apologise to resolve the issue.

In the interview with Ahmed and his Dad, I am at pains to make clear that this will not be like their earlier interview with the school principal, that this is a different sort of meeting. I explain that this is a time to talk honestly about what happened, to work out what Ahmed may have been thinking and feeling, and to also reflect on what it may have been like for the girl. This will be a time for Ahmed to work out some ways to put things right so that he can come back to school again and have the issue resolved with the girl.

We run through what happened. Ahmed is open, honest and ashamed. He looks down and is red-faced, and his hands are shaking. He fiddles with his hat in his hands. He speaks in short, vivid, restricted sentences congruent with his level of ability to story-tell in English and the fact that his Dad is watching. Ahmed's father watches and listens as his son speaks, and looks proud of his boy's honesty and ownership of what he has done.

Ahmed repeatedly attempts to say that he is sorry and that 'it won't happen again'. To me, his words appear rote learnt and disconnected from his feelings — perhaps something that his Dad has demanded as the right thing to say. I tell Ahmed that saying sorry like that does not count, that it is not from his heart, and I touch my heart. His Dad really picks up on this and starts trying to get Ahmed to say it from his heart. Ahmed appears to become more ashamed and more frightened of his Dad. I decide to move into action. Too much talking and too many words may just confuse Ahmed. I am worried that he might shut down in the face of his Dad's demands.

I ask Dad to stand up with me. This man clearly has no idea what I am going to do, but jumps up and is ready to become involved. I ask Ahmed which boys were with him in the corridor. He tells me. I tell Ahmed that his Dad is now him and I am one of the other boys. Ahmed is still sitting down and I tell him that he is the girl. Dad and I

face off to the girl, who is sitting. We stand there imposingly. I am not sure how much English Dad really understands, but it does not seem to matter. Dad is fully present, alert and involved.

I leave Dad standing there holding the role and move toward Ahmed. I intend to interview him for the girl's role. Even though Ahmed's intellectual disability means that he is often confused by talk, he knows exactly what is going on. He has changed body position and keeps looking up from under his eyelids at Dad as himself. I ask what he is feeling. He says 'scared' and actually looks it. I am very proud of Ahmed's willingness to enter into this enactment. He has just taken on the role of another and articulated her experiences from that role. No amount of talk with Ahmed would have got him there so quickly and so clearly. We talk about what it is like to be a girl and whether she has ever noticed Ahmed. She says no. I ask her what she thinks Ahmed is doing. She becomes very embarrassed and stutters out that she thinks that he likes her. This is the first time that Ahmed's real motives have been articulated. I realise that it must have taken courage for Ahmed to admit to himself and to publicly state in front of his Dad that these were his real feelings for the girl. Ahmed blurs the roles as he is embarrassed as himself in admitting this. I look at Dad. Dad is standing, taking it all in, watching, not interfering.

I next position Ahmed as himself, and Dad in the double position behind him. I stand to one side and ask Ahmed to look at the girl in the empty chair. I put Ahmed's hand on his heart. I ask Dad to lean over his son and put his hand over Ahmed's hand. I ask Dad to coach his boy to say sorry from his heart. I suggest that he speak in Arabic. I take up the role of the girl. Dad just goes for it. I can see that he is telling his boy to look at the girl. Ahmed says sorry again. I say, from the role of the girl, looking frightened, 'No you're not!' Dad carries on with his coaching in Arabic. I can tell from his tone that he is being supportive, encouraging and expectant. Another unconvincing 'sorry' comes out. Dad continues totally enveloping his boy from his doubling position with both his and his son's hands still on Ahmed's heart. The room is intense and feels full. Suddenly, Ahmed crumples slightly, his breath catches, he looks at the girl with tear filled eyes and in a totally congruent manner — softly and with deep feeling — he says that he is 'so sorry, that he didn't mean it, that he didn't know it would scare her so much, that he had made a big mistake and did not know how to fix it'. I accept his heart-felt apology as the girl. Dad is excited. He beams at his boy and grabs him in the biggest hug, quietly speaking to him in Arabic. It is done.

We sit quietly in the aftermath of this powerful and potent healing moment between father and son. There has been such exciting role development. Ahmed now says that he would like to apologise again, this time in actuality to the girl. He asks me, 'Would that be ok or would she be too scared of me now?' I am again moved by his new ability to reverse roles with the girl and to realise that she will be frightened of him. He has also come up with a creative resolution that he wishes to enact. Dad is right there and compliments his boy in English for wanting to apologise in person. He tells Ahmed that it is the mark of a good man that he can apologise to the girl, face to face and from the heart.

The Apology

On my recommendation the school principal agreed to facilitate a meeting between the two students, with me attending as the girl's advocate. I was cautious, and interested to see whether Ahmed could stand up to this huge role test of such a newly integrated role. I should not have been so worried. It did not flow easily, but he was real and congruent when he made his apology and the girl knew this.

She and I had rehearsed her responses and she had also practiced at home with her Mum. From her developing new role, she told Ahmed how scared she had been. She told him, 'Never do that to me again. If you want to talk with me, just say hello'. I was proud that she could say to this boy what it had felt like, and could make clear boundaries around herself. While I would never wish such an incident on anyone, I am sure that this meeting has actually supported new role development in this girl as well, and thereby brought some more healing for her past situation. Although she has never been able to face down her original attacker, she was able to confront Ahmed and state her truth, express her feelings, and experience these being respected and heard.

Reflections

The use of psychodramatic action methods was a powerful intervention for all players in this story. These techniques supported the emergence of new and more functional roles in both Ahmed and the girl, and opened up an opportunity for rich and deep healing to occur in each of them and between them. The approach also enabled Ahmed's Dad to move from being ashamed, enraged, embarrassed and separate from his son, to a place where he could speak his truth. He was able to support Ahmed to change in a way that is valued in his culture, as well as valued by the Dad himself. He was able to see his son as a person who wanted to be honest and to change, rather than as a naughty boy who had shamed the family.

I find that these techniques serve me well also. I can become anxious when I am working with angry young men who are unwilling or unable to verbalise their experiences. These are the very sorts of boys who often end up in long suspension interviews. When I persist in asking them questions and encouraging them to talk, the tension escalates. It often feels wrong. Action frees me up to work in ways that are easier and more natural for myself, as well as for the students.

Having said that, I do not use psychodrama in every situation. In fact, sometimes I simply cannot. When the students or family members are unable or unwilling to enter into this type of relationship and interaction with me, I use other methods. But, when I do use psychodrama, it does seem that the techniques allow easier access to self-awareness and a much easier and non-shaming way of reversing roles to gain empathy and understanding of the other person. Then, because the young person has a strengthened relationship with their family members, the dynamics have shifted. There is no blaming or shaming, and new roles have emerged. The young people are able to be spontaneous and creative. They can then suggest ways to sort out their situations. They can truly, honestly and with integrity reconnect and start to restore and re-enter the

situation with their peers.

The following is my list of specific positive possibilities that have arisen for young people, through the use of psychodramatic action techniques in resolution meetings at my work.

- A chance to practice expressing their own wants, needs, thoughts, actions and feelings in front of their family members
- A chance to work towards identifying, expressing verbally and owning their own behaviour in a safe environment
- A chance for role development through being mirrored and doubled in the interview, sometimes by family members
- A chance to step into another person's shoes and 'become that person' through role reversal
- A chance to see themselves through the 'victim's' eyes and experiences
- A chance to initiate and practice dialogue through role reversal
- A chance to manage their own shame, initially in a more private setting
- A chance to begin creating restorative solutions — how to sort out a difficult situation and plan for how to put a resolution into action at school
- A chance to think through and plan ways to re-integrate back into the school community

Discipline in schools can often feel overwhelmingly bureaucratic and unforgiving. My vision involves striving to create spaces and opportunities in which genuine repair and healing can occur across school, family and community systems. In the midst of a punitive culture in which blaming and shaming are the norm, moments of grace can occur and such moments feed and nourish me deeply.

Postscript — In His Own Words

Below is a copy of a letter that Ahmed wrote to the school principal, requesting permission to return to school following his final resolution session.

Dear Mr Demeter,

I am sorry for what I have done. I will try to never do it again. I know what she is

feeling after I hit her. She is feel angry and sad and she is very scared. I don't want her to feel these things. I feel embarrassed what I have done. I wish that I didn't do it. I wish that I didn't say anything mean and I wish I said Hello to her and not make her feel angry and upset. I wish what I said was what did you do yesterday? I think she will feel happy.

Mr Demeter can I come back early please? I am going to be safe at school I am not going to be mean to the kids. When I feel angry I go to Mr Doyle or Ms McNab or hold in. I will talk to my friends about some people teasing me. Thank you Mr Demeter.

Abmed