Dramatherapy and Emotional Support in London Schools

Lauraine Leigh

'It is my personal belief that dramatherapy has so much to offer in educational settings but it is both under-sold, under-marketed and not fully understood by educational professionals...(it is) an under-used resource in education and has much to contribute in the future'. Professor Irvine Gersch in his keynote address to the first Dramatherapy in Education Now Conference, in July 2000.

I hope the following article will give some idea of the work dramatherapists can do in schools. There is so much work for accredited therapists and counsellors within the education system. We can offer several types of intervention in schools. Individual and group dramatherapy is particularly useful for teenagers and primary school children whose lives are seriously disrupted and unboundaried.

As therapists and counsellors, we can work flexibly in schools, with a more holistic and whole school approach, working alongside the teaching profession. This preventative-based work can include setting up Parents' Groups, and training young people to begin to counsel their peers; it can also include running supportive INSET days for teachers, for instance in Supporting Each Other.

The work seems to link up with Susie Orbach's address at the Psychotherapists and Counsellors for Social Responsibility conference in June 2000, when she said that our field: 'has aspects of an answer that can contribute to addressing the political, economic and social problems of our time... It ... doesn't have the answer. It is simply a way into an answer, an extra conceptual tool.' At the same conference, Andrew Samuels spoke of the concept of 'good enoughness' and the empowerment which goes with it. 'What happens when we say that we need a good enough army, a good enough education system?.....the expectation of perfection is reduced; the inevitable paralysis that follows on massive disappointment is avoided, and we are therefore more free both the complain and to act.' Teachers have such pressures heaped on them by governments. Even as I type this, another change is in the pipeline - and it may be wonderful. But yet again, it means an emphasis for teachers on doing something new: changing things, adapting things, more paperwork, more demands.

An emphasis on shoring up relationships between teachers and pupils can lead to more enthusiasm in teachers, and a decrease in the stress which goes with 'holding the reins' all the time. Recently, my fellow dramatist, Deborah Lacey, and I have been working with circles in classrooms. Teachers are happier at the opportunity to play games with

their students, and are relieved that they can be seen in a different light by their pupils. This energises both teachers and students. The Head of the school where I work has just told me that she wants next year's new intake, Year 7, to work in circles every day for a month. The timetable will be waived for this.

Who Benefits?

Therapy with the most needy children and teenagers does not always have a fixed outcome; it won't necessarily mean that the child works better, particularly in the early stages of therapy. The focus is to allow the child to be contained, held within an accepting environment. To offer help, in some cases, means just to be there as a therapist, regularly in the same room, where there is paper and coloured pens, paints, play dough, fabric, puppets, and model animals and people. If a child comes in, it can be a real step forward. We are there to enable him or her to begin to develop a sense of self; a sense of his own boundaries, his own choices, a sense of being accepted.

The autistic spectrum disorders is one of the most difficult categories of special needs. We are all concerned at the growing number of children in mainstream schools who exhibit this. There is much discussion at the moment about the triple vaccine. What and how is autism caused? The nature/nurture debate continues. These children, together with the rising number of identified dyslexic children, have difficulty in large classrooms. Apart from the trauma associated with bereavement and separation, 'many children with a wide range of special needs are at risk of low self-esteem and personal distress'. Riddick 1966.

We work closely with the Special Needs Co-ordinator, and other professionals involved with the child in school, looking together at taking children out of classes, and teaching them in smaller Learning Support Units. Circle work in LSUs is a useful beginning to the day, focusing on how we can be together without put-downs; how we can begin to be alongside each other; how we can say 'Pass' and feel OK about it; how we can become better at listening, and take more time to think about things than is normal in the classroom situation.

It feels particularly useful to be developing family-based work with children in schools; our links with Child, Adolescent and Family Units concerning statements and diagnosis are increasing. School takes up a major part of a child's life. Schools reflect society's pressures, sometimes acutely, so it is good to see that the NHS and schools are working together more.

At this point in history, it seems particularly important to think about how we can work with conflict, with pair work, in larger groups of teenagers, and also with teachers, parents and children. Many of us in PCSR and education already promote ways of supporting people in conflict in schools. Money spent on this work now saves a significant amount in future. This means fewer youngsters on the streets, fewer adolescents in Young Offender Institutions, fewer in prisons and fewer lives in tatters. It is important to stress the inclusive and preventative aspects of therapy in schools. If we are concerned about the mental health of our society, it is important to look at what pressures young carers are going through, and how that is reflected in, for instance, their absence from schools. Because

of the very weight they carry, which often includes their being secretive about these ordeals and responsiblities, they are often picked on and bullied.

In city schools, teachers and other staff can be stretched to their limit working with children and teenagers who have very real difficulties around the learning process and its environment. In schools, hierarchy is the norm. Bullying happens very easily, unless a school seriously begins to take stock of children's and teachers' feelings. It is the same in our homes. We can all bully, and we can all be bullied, overtly or in tiny undermining ways. The city adolescent is a master of the art of the 'put down'. Using it in drama games or in role play provides a container, an outlet and a lot of fun. But when you are the victim, or the scapegoat - as happens a lot in schools - it is misery. That misery can lead to mental breakdown.

The approach and boundaries of therapy differ significantly from teaching, and I feel strongly about the word and concept of therapy being separate. Of course, it is linked, if we work in schools. To illustrate: with the best will in the world, a teacher cannot relate to a child as a therapist, if she has needed, as a teacher, to discipline him earlier. It blurs the boundaries, which does not help the child. This is why the parent-child-teacher-therapist alliance is so important within the school, particularly for teenagers, but also so that teachers and parents can feel supported. This feels most possible when Heads, senior staff, parents and students are clear about the aims of therapy, and how it supports their work.

Therapy in education works alongside teaching. The aim of therapy or counselling in schools is to *underpin* the child's or teenager's ability to learn. We all know that it is difficult to learn anything if we are in turmoil. Add to that the intrinsic difficulties of being a teenager. Klein refers to the 'psychological difficulties and striking personality changes which appear very frequently in children at the onset of puberty... If, as so often happens, parents and teachers are unequal to the heavy calls made on them at this period, additional damage will naturally result. Many parents will spur their child on when what he needs is holding back, or else fail to give encouragement when he wants their confidence and trust' (Klein 1922). Eighty years have gone by: today may be very different culturally, but the point about putting pressure on young people is just as valid now; and the dilemma for teachers and parents/ carers is vividly illustrated.

An integrative, eclectic and holistic approach by the therapist is particularly useful for social inclusion. Work is not just with young people referred because of special needs. Lunchtime Drop In clubs are a means of self-referral. Adolescence is a time of special needs. Like young fawns, teenagers are jumpy, hesitant, fearful, interested; like tigers, they can present fearsome exteriors, especially en masse, and they can be so in your face. In groups on the street, they are threatening; and they don't always realise this. In turn, they encounter prejudice and hostility from older people. There is a lot of fear around them, and for them. Therapy in schools is essentially about communication and relationships, which can provide a useful balance for these children.

The dynamics of working in a school can, at least until the work is understood, be complex and difficult. We need to be clear about our status with the kids, and with the teachers. And we need to know when to be low-key. Once teachers begin to see we are there in a supportive, non-judgemental role, they can begin to see us as helpful, and not setting ourselves up in competition. The process of settling in and being accepted as one of the staff can be problematic. It takes willingness to find time to explain the difference, and the supportiveness of the process. Good supervision, good personal therapy are important for *us* when we work in schools.

Background

Perhaps it would be useful to write about the start of the work in an East London school, just over three years ago.The Head was interested, and listened when I described dramatherapy, and how it might be useful for some of the pupils with difficult behaviour. Three dramatherapy groups (with five pupils in each) took off shortly after at the school, which was then under special measures. The Head is a woman of vision and courage: with the support of the Staff, she has turned the school around in a short time. The Year 9 boys (14- and 15-year-olds) had difficult histories of being excluded, some from other schools. The whole process of meeting each boy, setting up and running groups, receiving feedback from boys and from teachers, and looking at Evaluations with boys and teachers, felt worthwhile. Evaluations from teachers included several positive comments, such as 'Astonishing change!' 'He has turned around', 'Comes to me now,' 'He wants to work'.

Nowadays, the school has a notably multi-ethnic, multi-age, male-female balance of staff. This good stir of positives makes up the nourishing soup of what the school is achieving today. Fifty three languages spoken there could and sometimes do lead to difficulties and misunderstandings; but there is much good will and good listening. It is good to be part of this.

Dramatherapy groups: a tour through the process

It is always important to make contact individually with kids, and I met each boy for an initial assessment, to explain the boundaries of the work, and ask him if he felt he could keep them. Each boy agreed he would try to keep the boundaries. He knew there might be someone in the group with whom he would not normally get on, so was prepared for this, but knowing that he must keep the boundaries, helped him to feel stronger and safer. Each one wanted to try the work, and felt it would help him in school. Those who filled in their own evaluations, indicated later that they felt it had.

Three groups met initially twice a week, then once a week after the Winter holiday, for ten dramatherapy sessions in all. They filled in evaluations half way through, as did teachers (short ones because I did not want to add to teachers' paper mountains.) After the summative evaluations, I fed back to each boy what teachers had said, if it was positive. Even in cases where a boy dropped out, there was an interesting effect on their work and attitude. The clinical results of that particular part of the work may have been questionable; their focus was nevertheless strengthened.

Space, privacy and ritual

Our space and privacy was respected. This is not easy in schools. Notes requesting privacy on doors can attract unwanted attention.

Dramatherapy groups start with a sitting or standing circle ritual: standing in a circle, the boys might feel able to say their name, and make a shape, sculpt or movement with their body. The others mirror this by making the same shape. This might well be very half-hearted; it is very challenging for them in a group. They may opt out (depending on the dynamics around, which can of course change each session). Sometimes we sit in a circle and say a favourite colour as a warm up; something *safe*. If this goes well, we move on to the nitty gritty: the sort of difficulties which arise in any class in any school in Britain. Reflecting on these issues gives the boys distance, and helps them to identify. The therapist models 'a model of non-judgemental acceptance and appreciation of others' strengths as well as their problem areas, (which) help to shape a group that is health-oriented' (Yalom 1995).

For the warm-up (an essential in the dramatherapy session), the group might abandon chairs (which can feel so safe, even after a minute) and throw the large sponge ball to each other, each person saying the name of the person he was throwing to. Saying the name of someone else when you throw the ball to the person you look at is a variation. Looking at someone can be difficult for these boys. They begin to tap into a sense of play where there is no judgement about whether they can catch the ball or beanbag. Thus, they can begin to feel included.

Individual therapy: working with the transference

The warm-up to a session can include the use of soft dough. This is surprisingly popular. At times, young men in schools are using soft, boldly-coloured dough; this helps them find more of a sense of self and of their boundaries. If we are working with regression in school we need to be at our most sensitive and accepting, and to keep the privacy of that session paramount. One young man I worked with, several years ago, 1:1 in a city school, gave all the appearance of the cool, macho kingpin of the school. We had worked before this with metaphor, using some silky dark blue material to represent a river. He had picked up a feather and put it to one side of him, to accompany him. The story which developed concerned his crossing the river. His impatience suddenly erupted. My work with him needed to be tentative but holding. At one point I could not decide how to work with him. I began to feel a little out of my depth; it felt a little risky, a little uncomfortable. I realised transference was coming into the work, and that I needed to be very clear with him that I was alongside him in his journey; clear that I was there working with him professionally as a therapist. In a later session, the play dough provided an opportunity for him to express his deep needs. I held my breath as he began silently to make letters, to write in small pieces of dough a message to the special person in his life, who had died as he started school. He wished she could be there. It was an important moment; my voice needed to be very soft, holding his sadness that she was no longer there, enabling him to begin the frightening process of getting in touch with his feelings of grief.

This boy began to make good progress at school and after the long holiday he felt more comfortable in class, and was working well. This work was essentially finished, except for one or two short visits to talk about things, this time round the table with me. This often seems a good transitional development, instead sitting in chairs looking at each other, when kids are stronger, and when work is coming to a close.

Towards the end of a session, it is important for the client to begin to get back into his own shoes, now, in school. He needs to stand back from the deep feelings, if possible. This is not always easy, as we know.

Teenage pressures

'Stay with the chaos' Dr Sue Jennings says. This is tough and challenging. In groups these kids push you, whether or not they have agreed separately to keep the boundaries. Because the power of peer pressure is so insidious, much of the most useful general, emotionally supportive work in school, such as circle time, concerns keeping the boundaries, so that each child can speak for himself. Many of the children and young people with whom we work have no conception of boundaries. It seems that many have never played.

The American drama therapist, Renee Emunah, maintains: 'Dramatherapy has a unique and critical role to play in helping young people through the tumultuous life passage known as adolescence.' She speaks of focusing on universality, of commonality. (Emunah 1995). It is *not cool* to do many things today. In all secondary schools in this land, it is not cool to do anything much: kids need to be courageous sometimes to be around other kids at all. It seems that, with the increasing availability of drugs and the high profile of the drug scene, times are particularly harsh for teenagers. Jumping hormones are difficult enough. Take the irony and inequalities around the wearing of trainers, for instance, which symbolise so much to British youth, and which are often the nightmare of teachers who would like to be teaching, not correcting uniform. Poorer countries provide these expensive status symbols for very little remuneration; Western children pay the earth for them. It would be good to see these companies backing therapy in schools.

The dramatherapy groups make up stories: a scene around a kitchen table or a classroom desk; short, to the point, where role-playing can take place for those who want to play the part, for instance, of an adult in a powerful position. Or there might be the story of a teenager going through the process of trying to be himself; to assert himself with a parent or carer who will not listen. We see the frustration. We witness the difficulties for all the characters, because the boys express them and the audience sees them. Dramatherapy works through witnessing. 'Dramatherapy empowers clients by the use of dramatic projection, engaging with external representations of inner conflicts... In dramatherapy, projection becomes expressive rather than being exclusively defensive.' (Jones 1996).

Some boys want to play the part of the teacher. During the scene, which I help set up and direct, I play the part of a roving reporter, holding an imaginary microphone to their faces, and asking, 'What do you feel about that?' This helps their identification

with the character. On reflection later, they realise it is tiring being a teacher, and that they get angry as they try to explain something important, while the other boys play the students in a noisy classroom. They begin to see the situation from the teacher's point of view. The lad playing the part of the teacher becomes angry at the frustration. This isn't just about the story itself: in dramatherapy, it is the actual embodying of the role of that tested teacher (or a parent in a similar conflict) which makes vivid to the youngster that teacher's difficult feelings. This may be the first time he has put himself in someone else's shoes. It is interesting for me to note a physical change in the boy as this is internalised.

Scenes of conflict around relationships and power are built up, looked at, tried out, experimented with, role reversed, and then reflected upon. New ways of being and behaving begin to emerge. Trust builds between boys, and between boys and therapist; reflection and listening increase.

Once the boys have embodied the character, they are empowered. They can step away from the role, and reflect on what has gone on. Distancing techniques are important, especially where a boy has played a violent character, so that these feelings do not stay with him afterwards. One way is to ask him a very simple question, such as 'What is your favourite meal/place/park etc?'

Finally, we may do non-verbal work, so that the boys do not feel too exposed. One end of a spectrum (ribbon or string) represents 'I feel strong about keeping the boundaries'; the other end 'I do not feel strong about keeping the boundaries'. The boys position themselves on this spectrum. Then we create a second spectrum, on which they can place themselves according to where they would like to be during the next week.

Dramatherapy is not psychotherapy with a bit of drama added. It is psychotherapy, and it is a creative arts therapy. The drama is integral to the work.

Those who cannot roleplay may, at times, include kids with autistic spectrum disorder. One young man had a history of constant difficulties relating with anyone in his class. Late in the series of dramatherapy group sessions, he was working with another young man who spoke little English; they worked with soft pastels and a large sheet of paper, separate yet together. Both boys were grounded by this quiet, undirected and focused work, and they were able to look at the piece of artwork as a whole, as they reflected with and without words. After this, one of these boys was more able to communicate with me verbally; the other boy's behaviour in class improved considerably. Non-verbal work is important with children with ASD, and where youngsters are particularly vulnerable and angry.

Work with the family and child in school

During the past three years it has become clear that regular meetings with mother and son are important and influential in the child's development. Creating a space where each child is accepted for him/herself, with a parent and with the therapist, is enabling. The opportunity to hold the frequently intense relationship between mother and son, often single

mother and son, which can so often be problematic, is particularly useful. Growling lions are difficult to live with, if you are a single mother. Steve Biddulph in 'Raising Boys' looks refreshingly at difficulties and at gender difference. Schools and training colleges would do well to look at increasing the numbers of male teachers. If there are more male teachers, they have a good chance of making vitally useful relationships with the young men of today. Schools need men who can provide a sense of fun and fair play, and also maintain respect. Therapists in school can help teachers to realise how important they are to boys who act out, who challenge all the time. School represents for some children the only stable thing in their lives. I used to underestimate this, until I watched boys (often the ones with difficulties) staying behind in the playground after school, not wanting to go home; and when I noticed the extent of the ungrounded behaviour which comes into the Circle after a school holiday.

The man of the house

Working with families, we are looking at the tensions around growing up in the home: a young boy being the apple of his mother's eye; often at a vulnerable age having to assume the status of 'the man of the house'. This can instil a useful sense of responsibility, but it can so easily become a real pressure. But there he is, growing up, becoming a young man; needing to identify with men and males, and learning, unfortunately, so much of what society is showing him - macho behaviour. At fourteen, in particular, teenage boys are sharply aware of their masculinity. There are tremendous tensions for young men in British schools, and I think that the meetings we can offer to mother and son within school are helpful. We can make a particularly useful contribution when the mother finds a new partner, a situation which so easily becomes dynamite in the home. Our work can help to empower the relationships, if we can look together in the family group at what is difficult, what might just be OK for the youngster, and perhaps what they would all like in future together, etc. In our meetings with a boy and his mother, we can begin the process of enabling her to 'let go'. She can begin to stand back and see her son as a separate being, and allow the maleness, the essential individuality of the boy to *be*, so that he does not feel that he must deny himself for fear of upsetting her.

At such times, a youngster can begin to be his own person: a young man with more confidence, aware of his own needs. Once they begin to feel OK with each other, with teachers and with themselves, teenagers are on the road to more assurance: they are more able to take care of themselves; and more able to focus on school work and relationships. It is not easy to combine therapy with family work: the priority is the child.Yet, it is possible to be supportive to both; particularly when one is aware that the mother has real mental health difficulties.

School refusers

Education Welfare Officers know all about truanting, and we can work with them. A few years ago, I worked with a youngster whose demeanour was of serious concern. Peter, we'll call him, was bowed down, a long-term school refuser, and significantly underweight.

Initially, I wrote to the mother, and spoke both to her and to Peter. He took some time even to come into school, into the room where I told him he would be able just to sit, if he wanted, with me there, without having to say or do anything. It was essential to accept him as he was, and not to rush him. After a while Peter began to talk.

Gradually, we began the process of a family meeting with his mother and myself. She was seriously depressed and had tried to commit suicide in front of Peter. She had a serious alcohol problem, and could not function other than to lie around. The home was miserably chaotic. Peter would watch TV all night, and go to bed in the very early hours, missing school for weeks. The whole situation was a vicious circle. His mother did want to change the situation, but felt ineffective. The Education Welfare Officer had tried many times to get the boy to go to school. Peter would occasionally come if his mother accompanied him, but would often turn back and run home at the last minute. He had been bullied at school because of his looks, his poor quality clothes, etc. It was no wonder he was a school refuser.

Peter's father came to a second meeting. Peter normally saw little of his father, and missed him very much. His father was well-dressed, and living with a new younger woman, and they did not really want to have Peter around. It was convenient for him to project all the difficulties and blame on to Peter's mother.

She surprised us by coming late to this meeting which we'd set up some time before. Peter's father had just been telling me she was useless. When she appeared, the situation felt like a real opportunity for Peter. For an hour we were able to be together, and all of them were able to express feelings that had probably never been brought out into the open before. Peter saw that his parents both hoped he would come back to school, and attend regularly. His mother saw that Peter was sometimes sad, frightened and worried about her. His father heard that Peter wanted to see more of him. Both parents were able to say something positive about their son.

Peter did, in fact, attend school fairly regularly over the following year, with further support in school. School interventions helped him feel better about himself and his boundaries, better about being with others in school. He looked better fed, dressed better, and was cleaner. He smiled, and was a bit mischievous. During the time I worked with him, sometimes with Peter and his mother, or his mother alone, I watched Peter grow in confidence. He managed his lessons well in a smaller class.

Thousands of young carers in our society, like Peter, suffer immense pressures. Unfortunately he began to truant again. It is difficult for us as professionals to see destructive patterns re-emerging, when perhaps our own work has moved on, and we have no time to offer. He had at one point been able to express quite a difficult point of view in front of bigger boys who held other views. Earlier in his school career this would have been impossible. One hopes that the brief period of assertiveness will stay with Peter at some level. Communication with social workers and other professionals is important in cases of this sort; the joined-up, connected approach means that everyone feels more supportive and supported.

Observation and experience of working in conjunction with parents leads me to promote this particular approach in schools, especially where children's lives are very painful and difficult, unboundaried, and sometimes abused and abusive. Work with an abusive parent and child is possible, and it is needed in schools; if a combined approach between Senior staff in schools and therapists is possible, that is particularly useful. Child and Family Units work with families away from schools in essentially important ways. But when an appointment comes to see the Child and Family Consultation Service, the family can find it difficult to turn up. It is too challenging. So this is another reason for therapists to work in schools, in co-operation with CAFCS. Providing space and time for this in school means it is easier, and less of a stigma for families and children. Echoes I have realised that many parents of children who find school very difficult have themselves been in the child's shoes (labelled a troublemaker) a generation ago; in other words, there is a family pattern. Sometimes, the same school is the key: this luggage needs to be unpacked a little, in a non-judgemental atmosphere.

One example is interesting here: I once spoke for just five minutes to the mother of an 8-year-old child, whose behaviour was causing the teachers to growl and roar. This mother was very unhappy and angry, and felt impotent. It seemed like a deadlock situation.

The mother managed, after a phone call to remind her she had wanted the meeting, to come to the last five minutes of the meeting we had set up. She brought her mother-in-law. The important thing was, the mother came in to meet me. She said she had had a terrible childhood, and had been very unhappy at the same school as a child. I realised that each time she was called in by angry teachers and the Head, it was necessary for her to run the gauntlet of seeing the same judgemental person at the reception desk, who had known her during her own unhappy and disruptive childhood at the school. We were now able to link her own history with her son's difficulties. The following week she did not come to our arranged meeting, but when I spoke to her on the phone, she sounded so different. 'I feel as if a weight has been lifted', she said. She had contacted Education Otherwise, and decided to educate her son at home on the computer, with a special programme which proved that he was working. He was loving it, and loving being with her; she was loving being with him. She was empowered. The image of the little boy and his mother loving being together is one I have recalled several times since.

Adam Phillips writes:'Something essential is lost, or at least attentuated, in the process of growing up.' In conclusion, the work we can do in schools underpins the teaching. It has everything to do with Dib's curiosity when he asks Miss A. :'What is therapy?' Her answer is:'A time when you can be the way you want to be. A time you can use any way you want to use it. A time when you can be you.'

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