

Group Psychotherapy

with teachers and administrators in a public school

IN the past 20 years there has been increasing interest in the possibility of integrating factors into the elementary and/or high school curriculum which would serve to reduce the later incidence of mental illness among public school graduates. As some writers have pointed out, the school is the one institution with which practically every member of our society has long and relatively intense contact and that for this reason, as well as because of the close relationship that exists between education and personality development, the school is a logical and practical place to begin a program in preventive mental hygiene. The author has reviewed the rationale and development of these ideas in two earlier papers.¹

None of the attempts that have so far been made to introduce a program of preventive mental hygiene in a school system has met with definitive success. The First Institute on Preventive Psychiatry held at the State University of Iowa emphasized the multitude of complicated factors that will have to be taken into account before a definitive

program can be devised. The results of this conference also showed up the very primitive stage that our knowledge on this subject is in at present and the confusion that exists as to where is the best place to start.²

Everyone agrees that in order significantly to affect mental health, any school program will ultimately have to affect the pupil personnel of our schools, and most programs have started by trying to affect pupils directly. However, it has been the experience of the author that this approach is not sufficient because the emotional attitudes of teachers play such a crucial role in the effectiveness of any program, and these attitudes are not significantly affected by purely educational means. Herrold has commented that most teachers, because of the authoritarian nature of their basic professional preparation, have been rendered too insensitive to work with students in any but an authoritarian and repressive manner.³ He says, and I agree, that "A teacher prepared for professional service in the conventional manner is not pre-

¹ Kenneth Helfant. "A Project in Human Relations and Mental Health." *Educational Leadership* 11:434-39; April 1954.

"A School Project in Preventive Mental Hygiene." *Educational Leadership* 14: 102-10; November 1956.

² Ralph Ojemann, Editor. "Four Basic Aspects of Preventive Psychiatry: Report of the First Institute on Preventive Psychiatry." State University of Iowa, 1957. 122 p.

³ K. Herrold. "Applications of Group Principles to Education." *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 4:144-82; 1954.

pared attitudinally to accept blocking, hostility, and regressive behavior."

A Work Conference

A report of a work conference of high school teachers under the leadership of Jersild and Helfant which explored ways in which the school might help pupils to acquire healthy ideas and attitudes concerning themselves emphasized that such a program would require greater emphasis on emotional aspects of life than the school usually has provided. The participants recommended that in order to help their pupils, teachers need a deeper grasp of the meaning of mental health and greater opportunity to grow in an understanding of themselves.⁴ A recommendation was made and approved at that work conference that experiences in self-understanding such as would be involved in group therapy should be made a part of every teacher's preparation. It was with the background of this thinking that a three year group therapy program for teachers was instituted in 1955 in the Manhasset Public Schools, Manhasset, New York, under the sponsorship of the Manhasset Board of Education.

Human Relations Workshop I

During the first year the program was offered as a "Human Relations Workshop" in the in-service education program of the school. Twelve teachers enrolled. The group met for 20 two-hour weekly sessions and was led by a group therapist who conducted the workshop

⁴ A. T. Jersild, K. Helfant and Associates. *Education for Self-Understanding*. New York: Bureau of Publications, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1953. 62 p.

along the general modified group therapy lines outlined by Berman.⁵ Three of the teachers dropped out of the group after the first semester (ten sessions). The remaining nine teachers attended all 20 sessions reasonably faithfully. All sessions were attended by the author, who served as recorder for the group.

At the end of the 20 sessions, group members were asked to evaluate their experiences in the group. Everyone reported that he had benefited from the experience to about the same degree that he would have benefited from a regular graduate course in mental hygiene, and it was apparent that the participants regarded the experience as about equivalent to such a course. The fact that the "therapy" offered had had no really significant impact was apparent both from the comments of the participants and from the fact that when the "course" was offered for a second year, there was insufficient enrollment to justify its continuance.

Human Relations Workshop II

The program here being described was from the beginning enthusiastically subscribed to by the administrative staff of the school. Several members of the administrative staff wanted to be members of the first year human relations workshop. However, because of the possibility of role conflicts in a mixed group of teachers and administrators, it was decided to limit the workshop to teaching personnel. During the second year of the program, however, in view of the only lukewarm interest generated in the teaching staff, the workshop was offered to the administrative staff only. The entire administrative staff of 11 persons participated. Meetings were held on the

⁵ Leo Berman. "The Mental Health of the Educator." *Mental Hygiene* 38:422-29; 1954.

same time basis as with the teachers except that three additional meetings were held at the end of the year at the request of the workshop members so that there was a total of 23 rather than 20 meetings for the year. All meetings were electronically recorded on tape. In the opinion of the workshop members as well as of the author of this paper, the sessions with the administrative staff were highly successful. This was confirmed by the fact that two years after the sessions the administrative staff was still making requests for consultations regarding their own functioning. It was apparent that the administrative staff members had gotten hold of the idea of the "problem solving" approach to human problems and that they had made excellent use of it in their relations with each other and in their relationships with their subordinates. These results are similar to those of Klemes and Kollajian, who found that group therapy was highly successful among executives of a corporation.⁶

Human Relations Workshop III

Armed with the information and experience of the two years of the project here described, the program was launched for a third year with the human relations workshop offered again to the teaching staff. This time, primarily due to the enthusiasm of the administrators and a recruitment program conducted by the author (who was at that time employed as full-time school psychologist for the Manhasset Junior-Senior High School), a group of 10 teachers volunteered for the teachers workshop. Once again at the end of the teachers workshop it was apparent that it had been

no more successful than the preceding teachers workshop.

Comment

One of the purposes of this paper is to explore the reasons for the success of the administrators workshop and the relative lack of success of two attempts to launch a similar workshop for teachers. The author does not have definitive answers to these questions but does have some ideas which hopefully might guide future research.

The experience described here throws some light on Slavson's contention that small communities and residential institutions cannot serve as fertile soil for adult group therapy.⁷ This idea was certainly confirmed by our experience with the teachers. Following the workshop, some of the teachers were asked in confidence why they felt that the workshop had not been more successful. The most frequent reply was that the teachers were afraid to reveal things they felt might be used against them in their working relationships with each other. The teachers came from various teaching levels and, although they were acquainted with each other prior to getting together, they had never existed as a group before. The administrators, on the contrary, had been meeting in regular administrative meetings for some time and were used to functioning as a group. Likewise, the administrators, because of their previous experience with each other, had gathered a great deal of insight into each other's behavior which they had never had a chance to reveal. It appeared that the administrators had, in effect, almost a stored up treasure of

⁶M. A. Klemes and V. J. Kollajian. "The Group Psychotherapist in Industry: A Preventive Approach." *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* 5:91-98; 1955.

⁷S. R. Slavson. "Racial and Cultural Factors in Group Psychotherapy." *International Journal of Psychotherapy* 6:152-65; 1956.

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"insight" in their group which was missing in the teachers group. It could also be said in general that the personalities of the administrators were more secure, that they were more ambitious than the teachers, and that the general level of adjustment was unquestionably higher in the administrative group than in the teachers' group. It seems, therefore, that Slavson's statement about the effectiveness of group therapy within institutions has to be modified, in that certain situations such as those of school administrators seem to offer unusually fertile soil for the type of group therapy described in this paper.

As Lifton has pointed out in his article, in the *Review of Educational Research*,⁸ the whole status of group therapy is at present in a markedly primitive state and there is a need to clarify the area that is covered by "group therapy." It is the belief of the author that the experience described here cannot be classified as group therapy in the strict sense of the word; on the other hand, it is something that goes beyond the seminars and workshops described by several others. At

the present time the best description seems to be a modified group therapy in which corrective and preventive rather than therapeutic aims are paramount. It also served as a highly effective teaching vehicle in the case of our administrative workshop for helping key people comprehend the "problem solving" approach to human relations problems. It served to objectify problems which otherwise were very puzzling to the people themselves and tapped self-corrective resources within the group. There was no attempt to go into the deeper dynamics of the personality of the individuals concerned; the whole process remained on the level of what Wolberg has described as "re-educative" rather than "reconstructive" therapy.⁹

In summary, the author has described an attempt to apply group therapeutic principles in a mental hygiene program in a public school. Because experience has shown that any program, for ultimate success, will have to start with a modification of the people who administer it, the program was conducted as a human relations workshop for teachers and for administrators.

The workshop was found to be much more effective with administrators than with teachers. Some reasons for this have been suggested. In general, the contention that group therapy cannot be successful in a small community or resident institution is supported in the case of the teachers but not in the case of the administrators. It would seem that the use of group therapy for the modification of the attitudes of administrative personnel offers a highly promising avenue for the construction of a truly effective preventive mental hygiene approach.

⁸ Walter M. Lifton. "Group Therapy in Educational Institutions." *Review of Educational Research* 24:156-65; 1954.

⁹ Lewis R. Wolberg. *The Technique of Psychotherapy*. New York: Grune & Stratton, 1954. 869 p.

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