

Interventions and Methods of the Theatre Action Group

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In this article I will review three types of psychosocial interventions done by the organisation Theatre Action Group (TAG) in Jaffna, Sri Lanka, aimed at successively children, their parents and the community, and teachers. The methods used during these interventions can be compared with counselling methods: where counsellors provide a therapeutic space through meeting the client in private and showing their genuine warmth, respect and interest, TAG creates a therapeutic space through games and theatre, showing warmth, respect and interest in a similar way. This results in a healing process, manifested by signs of improvement in mental health such as an increase of self confidence, as well by significant changes for the better in the community.

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Introduction

The Theatre Action Group was formed in 1990 by a group of artists who were lectures and students at the Department of Fine Arts of the University of Jaffna. As a result of their public performances, the group was enlarged with secondary school students, teachers and others. TAG works in refugee camps and schools in the war torn North and East of Sri

Lanka. TAG also regularly performs in rural villages and has training programs for performers. In 2000, TAG presented about 90 performances, 35 workshop of 2 or 3 days, and 4 training courses.

Interventions aimed at children

Making contact. All interventions aimed at children start at a school, so first the cooperation of the local school administration has to be secured. The school is visited weekly, for 2 ½ hours, by TAG staff members. During the program all children (amount may vary from 40 to 60) are invited to join the TAG staff members in dancing to the rhythm of drums.

Sharing problems. After dancing, the children are stimulated to talk about what is on their mind. They usually come with stories about violence in their homes, poverty, their reasons for sometimes not attending school, conflicts in their village community and so on. During the year the intervention is done, the stories of the children are transferred into scenes in a drama, put on stage by the children who play themselves and the roles of the adults around them. These drama's are later performed by the

children in front of their parents and other people in the community.

Teachers who are interested can be present during the interventions, and the TAG staff members invest ample time in talking with them about the program. In this way a good rapport and cooperation with the teachers is secured.

Effects during the program. During the the course of the program, the school attendance of the children increases significantly. The contact between parents and the school also increase in frequencies and more parents become involved in these contacts.

Long term effects. The teachers often observe striking changes in the behaviour of some of the children: they establish that shy children become more assertive, that aggressive children become more manageable, that miserable looking children smile more often and so on. Some of them become very interested in the work of TAG, and can be engaged in making contact with other teachers in their district.

Similarities to counselling. During the sessions, the children are offered a safe space in which they can express their emotions and talk about their problems. The TAG staff members, like counsellors, listen with empathy, show their care and their respect for the children as individuals, offer emotional support, and engage the children as a group in emotionally supporting one another. This results in changes in the behaviour of children, changes that suggest improvement in mental health. It also results of a more positive attitude of the children towards the school and a

higher attendance.

Interventions aimed at the community

Making contact. When TAG has secured a good contact with the children and their teachers, they will slowly start spending time in the village of which the school is a part, trying to talk with the people living their. The contact can be intensified by doing games with the children somewhere outside in the village, then adults will come to watch. Sometimes the children engage some of the onlookers in the game.

Sharing problems. Then the TAG staff members may perform a drama, based on the stories of the children. The onlookers are invited to give their comments. This usually results in a discussion in which the parents of the children may complain about the teachers, or about problems in the community. Others will react by explaining that being a teacher in a school with few facilities is not easy, and that when parents may have trouble in controlling 6 children at home, teachers will have to deal with 30 or more children. All these stories may also be acted out on 'stage'.

Long term effects. As a result, some members of the community may get into action and start to bring about changes in the village. In one village (Yangaravur) parents decide to stop the illegal trade in home made alcoholic beverages because of the bad effects it had for the community as a whole.

Workshops for teachers

When a few teachers in a school have become interested, they are stimulated to organise a meeting with all teachers in the district. Last year such a meeting was held in Trincomalee, where 200 teachers participated and were made acquainted with the work of TAG; with the help of a group of children. These children performed a drama made by themselves on their life in their village and their daily problems. Fifteen of the teachers that took part were so interested that they were willing to take part in a two days residential workshop, an intervention developed for making teachers reflect about their attitude towards children..

Making contact and breaking the ice. This workshop starts with all participants, including the TAG staff members, doing a group game (Goats and House).

Goats and House

The participants are divided in two groups: goats and houses. There are twice as much houses as goats. Two people who are house link their hands in the air to form a house with a roof. A third one, the goat, squats between them.

One person is neither goat or house and leads the game. If he calls: 'goat!', all goats have to get up to find and go to a different house. The leader can use this opportunity for squatting into a house: he then has become a goat. The goat that cannot find an empty house becomes the leader.

If the leader calls: 'house!' all people forming houses have to move to another goat and find a partner to form a house. The leader can use this as an opportunity for taking the place of one of the persons playing house. The person that cannot find a partner to form a house becomes the next leader.

The leader can also call: 'all!'. Then all participants have to move, and the leader can become either goat or house. Whoever remains alone, becomes the leader.

During this game the participants loosen up and become acquainted with each other.

Self reflection. After the game, the participants are asked about how they felt before the game, during the game, and after the game. At some point, participants will observe that the game made them feel more free, as they were when they were children; describing their present adult state as 'not free', 'frozen', 'oppressed' etc. That is the cue for the TAG staff members to invite the participants in thinking, with their eyes closed, on when and how they lost the 'freedom' they had in expressing themselves as children, how and when they got 'frozen', where and how they got 'oppressed'.

Catharsis. After some time of reflection in silence, one of the TAG staff members starts to play a traditional drum. Without talking, the participants are invited to move their body to the sound of the drum. Eventually they will start dancing, expressing their feelings. During this time the TAG staff members try to keep contact with each participant, with or without talking. The movements during this dancing often become quite intense, suggesting that an emotional catharsis takes place. Some participants may cry.

Insight and integration. Later on, the participants discuss their thoughts and feelings during the dancing and the insights they attained. They reflect on their past life, their present problems, and their picture of the future. At the end of the workshop, they discuss plans for contributing to the welfare of the children in their schools. After the workshop, participants meet regularly; so

that the process of integration of their newly developed insights can continue in an atmosphere of mutual emotional support.

Long term effects Afterwards, many participants describe this workshop as a turning point in their personal life that resulted in important changes in their attitude of behaviour. For example, some teachers mentioned that they stopped using the cane for disciplining children, or that they lost their feeling of disgust for children that come to school in dirty clothes. Many of them say that they have gained in self confidence, enjoy their work more than before, have less physical complaints and have become more optimistic about their future.

Similarities to counselling: The workshop for teachers in many ways resembles group counselling: the residential setting and the presence of TAG staff members who show their care, respect and empathy, provides a safe, therapeutic space in which emotions can be expressed. In this therapeutic space regression takes place, accompanied by emotional catharsis. This results into new insights of the participants in their functioning, which are verbalised in their stories to one another and integrated in discussions about their present life and their plans for the future.

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