A Psychotherapeutic Approach with Elementary School Teachers

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ABSTRACT: The traditional "lectures delivering" approach to classroom teachers used by mental health practitioners is investigated in the present study. An attempt is made to demonstrate the validity of preventative work in helping elementary school teachers as important agents in the promotion of more positive mental hygiene in the classroom and by adding to the lectures the variable of group therapy—"ego-sparing" techniques type. The latter approach seems to promote a teacher's own sense of security, more security in dealing the pupils, an easier acceptance of differences in others, and, finally, it tends to stimulate the development of a teacher's own ability to deal more sensibly, more conscientiously, and more realistically with daily problems.

One of the major concerns of the community mental health movement focuses on the utilization of professional and nonprofessional personnel outside of the traditional mental health fields of psychiatry, clinical psychology, and psychiatric social work in creating new, or expanding old, preventive or therapeutic mental health services. This paper is concerned with the application of this broad tenet in the public school situation through training teachers toward greater effectiveness as observers of personal problems, and as agents toward their appropriate remediation, in the classroom. The concept of the public school as an area of community mental health activity is, of course, not new. One need only mention the work and formulations of Sarason (1966) at Yale Psychoeducational Clinic and the research carried out by Cowen, Gardner, and Zax, (1967) within the framework of the public school system in Rochester, New York. The present project, much less ambitious in scope, aims to increase the effectiveness of teachers as agents of community mental health by combining the traditional didactic approach with discussion—a group psychotherapy program. The assumption underlying this undertaking was that unexpressed and unrecognized attitudes and problems of a personal, social, and professional nature would stand in the way of absorption of factual mental health information and would prevent its utilization in the classroom unless an opportunity to air and work through these opinions, feelings, and beliefs were to be provided. The mode of application of these objectives is given below.

METHOD

Subjects

The total group of subjects Ss consisted of 56 teachers subdivided into two groups: one experimental group of 28 Ss; one control group of 28 Ss. The two groups were

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comparable in their representation of the two sexes. The 56 teachers for the present study were selected on a random basis out of a pool of 350 teachers who participated in a 1-day seminar on the "Exceptional Child," held in Newmarket, Ontario, Canada, under the auspices of the York County Mental Health Clinic and the Canadian Mental Health Association, York County Branch. The program of this seminar is reported in Figure 1.

Preliminary Observation

The teachers' participation during the seminar was rather active. The type of question asked of the various speakers suggested to the author the following considerations: (a) The teachers for the sake of meeting the educational objective in the classroom often unwittingly risked creating a neurotic atmosphere in their classroom; (b) most teachers feel an intense, yet usually unmet need to understand more specifically the basic principles underlying the mental hygiene in the school; (c) the daily problems shown by the pupils in the classroom are often interpreted in a rather exaggerated fashion, and often thought to be insurmountable by the teachers.

Development of the Program

These considerations provide the basis of the present work which was initiated in the following way. Letters were sent to the school inspectors and the principals informing them of the project. Several meetings were held to discuss with them the possibility of offering the teachers a series of lectures in child psychology and mental hygiene applied to the school, and eventually a psychotherapeutic program for the teachers who would wish to avail themselves of this approach.

Teaching Technique

A 12-week program of lectures on child psychology was set up for teachers of the area served by the clinic. The total number of lectures was 12 for a period of 12 weeks with one 1-hour lecture per week, which made possible a daily participation of 11 teachers per lecture, except on Fridays when the participants were 12. Each lecture took 35 minutes, which allowed a 25-minute period for discussion. The content of the lectures concerned itself with three broad topics: normal behavior, pathological behavior, and appropriate ways of handling a problem child (see Figure 2). The rationale for this lecture and discussion series was that teachers are in a unique position to foster the development of a better mental health climate throughout the school, thus providing the techniques for helping the children with any behavior or personal difficulties that are not self-correcting or amenable to traditional educational techniques for handling them.

Group-Psychotherapy Technique

The technique utilized during the group therapy meetings was based on the "ego-sparing" approach, as described by Szyrinski (1964). In brief, this type of group psychotherapy aims at creating a therapeutic rapport by establishing better interpersonal contact and accomplishes this end by focusing attention not on a teacher's own problem but on the psychological difficulties experienced by the children with whom the teachers are in daily contact.

FIGURE 1

Seminar on "The Exceptional Child"

9:30—Recognizing Emotional Disorders in Childhood
10:30—Movie: Child Behind the Wall
11:00—The Exceptional Child and the Average Class
2:00—The Importance of Playtherapy with Exceptional Children
2:30—Helping the Family of Exceptional Children
3:00—Movie: Angry Boy
3:30—Panel: Teaching the Exceptional Child
4:30—Conclusion