The Application of Adlerian Principles in a Classroom[1]

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I teach socially and emotionally maladjusted children from the ages of nine to twelve years in a special class. These children are referred to my class after they have been examined by our school physician and studied by the school psychologist. Except for the ability to write their first names, few of these children have any academic skills. Almost all of them dislike school.

As one can well imagine, the first few days of the school year are very rugged for the teacher who takes over a class of such children, especially when the class consists of more than twenty students. The teacher is confronted with a group of "children with problems" who have already formed definite concepts of, and attitudes to society, and have also formed their own ways of meeting these difficulties. Having been successful in reaching their goals through their already developed techniques, they try to use the same methods in this new class. It takes considerable time before the teacher can find her way to these children, gain their confidence, and thus bring about the security which such friendship achieves. They test this adult who does not resort to authority, by all sorts of provocations.

The first day of school is very important for it initiates the basis of our future relationship. It is important that the teacher create an atmosphere which avoids associations with previous experiences in the classroom, namely, that of "failure." In this class the child must feel that he is a respected and wanted member of the group. Here he must find a place not because of his ability to perform scholastically but because he is himself. However, it is important to help the child understand from the very beginning that he cannot operate successfully in the class if he operates upon wrong premises. The question is how to achieve this aim.

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Potentially normal children who have difficulties in school have difficulties with life in general. Their inabilities to adjust to school are often the direct results of their inabilities to solve their life problems, and are not, as so many parents believe, the cause of home problems. There are, of course, cases where unhappy experiences during the first year in school may cause problems that did not exist before. However, generally these children are able to make the proper readjustment after a short time. For the reason that both the difficulties at school and those at home are really manifestations of the same problem, it is necessary for the teacher who works with maladjusted children to work at both ends simultaneously. As soon as the home relationship improves, the school problem improves also.

The First Day of School

At the very beginning of the semester, I must get my "foot in the door." In order to achieve this, I begin "plotting" long before I have my first encounter with the class. I study each child's record. This rarely gives me an adequate picture of the child's problems, but he is not an entire stranger to me when we meet. Anecdotal reports by previous teachers are especially helpful. Greeting a new child with, "Did you have fun at your grandmother's farm this summer?" or, "Have you been able to find your dog?" helps establish contact.

On the first day, the children may move around freely doing whatever they wish as long as it does not disturb the other children in the class. The teacher exercises a minimum of intervention. After several hours of free activities, I approach the class with the problem that concerns all of us, namely, what we intend to do during the school year. In a casual way, I mention that I know they had some difficulties in school up to now and that they are probably frightened of reading and so on. But I state that I have known many other children with similar problems who worked them out successfully and are now doing well in school. I assure them that together we can find ways to overcome many of their school difficulties. In this way, the children are put at ease and are not worried about "discoveries" about them that I may make.

Sometimes a child offers to tell about his difficulties. Once the first one begins, others follow, for most children enjoy talking about themselves. To be a good listener is a great asset to any teacher. Many conscientious teachers will cut the child short because they are pressed

for time, and will insist that he come to the point. With the disturbed child, it is important to let him talk. In time, he will learn how to stick to the subject and come to the point. I listen attentively, not only to what he is saying but how he is telling his story. In this way, I get to know the degree of social feeling, the purpose behind his behavior, and the means he uses to attain his goals. This requires careful, attentive and continuous observation of the child.

The first directed discussion with the group refers to the planning of the school activities. This often results in skeptical and provocative remarks, especially by the older and more cynical children. Such remarks are met with statements such as these: "All of us together will make a decision." To a very aggressive child I might say, "Now that we have listened to your opinions, let us find out what the others think." Such remarks will pacify such children usually for a little while. Generally, there is no difficulty in getting the program rolling after a few days. In the beginning, the activities consist mainly of the kind which children can indulge in without fear of competition or failure.

At the end of the first week, we take inventory of what we have achieved; how things are going in general, where we might have planned poorly and how we can improve. At this time, I suggest that we have a student council and I explain how it functions. This suggestion is received with great enthusiasm. The student council always has worked out very successfully, but only after what are usually some trying weeks. There is considerable confusion at first which may discourage teachers who do not have sufficient confidence in children. It is always amazing how well young children can handle their own affairs with proper encouragement and guidance.

The student council consists of three to four members of the class plus a chairman elected by the group for a limited time. The function of the student council is to plan activities, to take up grievances, to consider suggestions, to conduct discussions, to summarize the developments of the week, and to evaluate class progress. The opinion of the council, which meets every afternoon in front of the entire class, carries considerably more weight than the opinion of the teacher. If the council discusses the disturbance that John creates by tapping on the desk and distracting the others, this problem is invariably solved more satisfactorily than if the teacher had reprimanded John.

It takes time before the children are trained sufficiently to conduct their discussions in an orderly and democratic manner. As the child

learns to accept the values of the group, his concepts of himself and that of his relationship to others change. Thus begins a solution to some of his emotional problems.

During the first part of the year, I participate actively. Although I rarely give any direct interpretation, where the discussion strays I do try to lead the group back by injecting questions in very much the same manner as we do in our child guidance centers, questions such as: "Could it be that Mary felt left out and therefore . . . ?" Or, "Aren't we getting away from the subject?" In time, the children learn some of the reasons for their behavior, the nature of their goals, and why they pursue them in the particular manner that they do.

The teacher participates as a member of the class. Of course, she influences the children's thinking so that they can come to their own understandings. For example: Sally caught on quickly when I suggested that "Perhaps Sally cries in order to get sympathy from others. She wants sympathy so others will do her work for her." Explanations are always short and simple.

Together with council meetings there are, of course, personal conferences between the teacher and the individual pupils. For some children these conferences are of even greater importance than the council meetings. Many withdrawn children who are unable to participate in group discussions become able to do so in time, after having had the personal discussions.

Every child behaves purposefully. His purposes may or may not be known to him, and when they become evident to us, they may seem either illogical or just stupid. But insight into these purposes serves as a guide to understanding the child. Consequently, it is of the greatest importance to learn each child's concept of himself and the techniques he uses to attain his goals. A classroom provides many opportunities for observation of goals and methods. However, the teacher should operate with great caution in giving interpretations. I try to present them as tentative hypotheses, stating, "Could it be that you do such and such in this manner because of such and such reasons?"

The Goals of Children

Each child has its unique goals and basic patterns of behavior. Dr. Rudolf Dreikurs in his book *The Challenge of Parenthood*[3] has

[3] Duell, Sloan & Pierce, New York (1948).

identified four main goals of children which are also, but less systematically, stated by Dr. Alfred Adler.

Attention-getting

Every normal child seeks attention, but when it is excessive, it becomes a problem. The class clown, the bragger, the over-shy child, the show-off, the great "hero" are examples. Let us consider Jerry, who appears to be a discouraged and frightened child, who will not play ball because he fears getting hurt, but who created a commotion one day when he climbed the outer ledge of a second story window to gain the admiration of other children.

Power Contest

The child with an enormous drive for superiority and power is difficult to handle. Every situation is a challenge which he must meet and conquer, otherwise he considers himself a failure. The bully, the sly child, the cruel child, are examples. Let us consider Jack. He came late to school explaining that he had to take care of his dog who had been hurt. Another child volunteered the information that he had seen Jack playing with his dog that very morning and that there was nothing wrong with him. Jack insisted the dog was hurt and that he had to bandage his leg. During the lunch hour that day, Jack hurt the dog's leg, bandaged it, and brought the dog to school as "proof." Several days later the true story came out. Jack's motivation was to win the argument because he could not bear to be wrong.

Revenge

This goal is closely related to the power drive. Both are difficult to deal with. In the case of the power drive, the goal is to exalt the self; in the case of the revenge drive, the goal is to lower the other. In this respect, they are different aspects of the same goal. Susan's behavior indicates such a drive. She asked to go to the washroom while I was in the midst of explaining a new lesson, and I asked her to wait a moment. Susan thereupon surreptitiously wet her dress with water from a fishbowl. Then she began to cry and to blame me for what had happened. In this way, she tried to make me feel guilty for having frustrated her immediate desire and was able to feel that she had been mistreated.

Discouragement

Discouragement requires a great deal of patience on the part of the teacher because so often it takes a very long time to build up suffi-

cient security in the child so that he will "try." There is danger here that the teacher may become discouraged herself and give up trying to train the child to help himself. Such a child creates compassion, and calls on others for help. By their passivity, they put others in their service. Everybody feels sorry for the child who cries, "I can't!"

Some children may have more than one goal. Marcia is a good example. She stated she was stupid and ugly, that no one liked her, and that she didn't care. One day, I complimented her on her perfect spelling, but she insisted hat I must have been mistaken because her work could not be perfect. When I proved to her that the paper was faultless, she became furious, crumpled up her paper, threw it on the floor, stamped on it and burst into tears.

The case of Marcia is of especial interest not only because she represents a child who is deeply discouraged—she could not bear to think that anyone could possibly consider her capable of doing perfect work —but because her behavior demonstrates how in a complex way all the other goals are involved. For example: by insisting she is imperfect, she gains my attention and when I try to point out her false conception of herself, by showing her that she really did well, I enter into a power contest with her, and she achieves a second goal. Finally, by taking her perfect paper and tearing it up, she gets revenge against me.

How can the teacher best meet the problems that beset her from the complex interactions of pupils, especially when they have so many problems? The final answer will not be found here, but we may examine some aspects of some answers.

Encouragement

Encouragement without understanding, just blind faith in the ability of the child, is probably of little value. Telling a discouraged child that he can succeed will only discourage him more because he may feel that by his failures he has let the teacher down; or, he may sense her insincerity if she merely uses words in which she herself does not believe. Encouragement must be positive, but it must also be realistic. Praise should be given for real accomplishments no matter how slight they may be. Praise must also be given for mere "trying," even if there have been no visible accomplishments. However, one needs to be careful not to let encouragement become the primary goal of the child, for he may then operate, not to succeed in the activity, but to get the favorable attention of the teacher.

Discipline

Discipline is a matter of great concern for most teachers. I take the attitude that I cannot expect my children to follow the accepted social rules of behavior, because they do not *know* them. Most of these children come to the class with the intention of rebelling against law and order. They have to learn that discipline is necessary and to learn actually to want it because they have discovered that life can be much more pleasant if it is conducted according to rules. Imposed authority can never make a person obey except for a short time, and unless there has occurred a really basic change in attitudes, no worth-while progress has been made. What is called for is re-evaluation by the child of himself, and a change in attitudes towards others. Only when the child is ready to be fair with others can we begin to give him specific standards of behavior to help him to guide himself.

But what can the teacher do until the child has developed this social feeling? Can she simply overlook infractions, misdeeds, and generally wrong behavior? Of course not. Training goes on from the first moment so that the child will know that certain behavior is permitted and some is not. Overlooking even one small infraction of unpermissible behavior may appear to the child as a "go ahead" signal for other misdeeds. In many cases, a simple remark, one put unexpectedly, will take care of the situation. To a child who talks too loud or to one who whispers, I might say, "Will you please talk louder so we may hear you better?" Or "Don't you think Mary ought to be given a chance to be heard? Maybe she has something important to say." All these correcting remarks are made with a smile and yet with gentle firmness. Often it is necessary to avoid an issue at the time because in this moment of disturbance the teacher and the pupil are apt to become excited. But all such instances must be taken care of, either right then and there if they can be handled properly, or later during the afternoon council meeting when the incident may be brought up spontaneously by one of the students or by the teacher.

Rewards

"Good behavior" and accomplishment should be its own reward. For this reason I make no use of gold stars, special honors, or other awards. Not only may they create the desire to get the awards by doing disliked work, but the awarding of special attentions to one child may create the feeling of greater discouragement on the part of others. Most people make the best progress if they derive pleasure and

satisfaction from what they are doing. The case of Paul is an excellent example of how rewards may instill false values in the child. Paul's mother promised him five dollars for every "A" on his report card. He worked hard in order to win the money. However, when he brought home seven A's, his mother decided that one dollar for each would suffice. Paul rebelled violently. There was no longer any incentive to put forth so much effort in school. To punish his mother, he took no interest in his work and became one of the worst problems in class.

Punishment

Related to discipline and reward is "punishment." Many parents still demand that the child be punished for his misdemeanors, claiming that the good old paddle never hurt anyone. They ignore the fact that they have used corporal punishment without good results. Paradoxically, although they now question the validity of corporal punishment, they nevertheless cannot dissociate themselves from their belief that "this is what the child needs." They actually expect the teacher to use methods that they have found ineffective, and they expect the teacher to succeed better than they have done.

The case of Mike may be cited; a rebellious child who was accustomed to severe beatings from his father. Almost daily he begged me to spank him. "Don't you think that I deserve a spanking?" he would ask. Once, he even brought a paddle so that I could not say I had nothing to beat him with. Mike's case is not exceptional. Numerous children have demanded corporal punishment in order to be set free of their guilt and thus free to "sin" again.

Natural Consequences

Both reward and punishment induce false values. For example, the child may desire to do well not because he enjoys his activities but only to reap the reward. If the reward is taken away, he no longer has an incentive to do well. The same may occur with punishment. Instead of associating the pain with the action, he may associate it with the punisher.

The most effective answer to this lies in the concept of natural consequences. This means that the child must experience the consequences of his behavior in such a way that he will relate pleasure or pain only to his own behavior and not to the intervention of any-

one else. The "reward" and the "punishment" will then be regarded by the child as a *consequence* of his own behavior.

Natural consequences should be discussed with, understood, and accepted by the child before their application can be most effective. Otherwise, the child may regard natural consequences as just another way in which adults are unpredictable and cruel. The *why* and *wherefore* of natural consequences should be discussed not only in terms of specific examples but in terms of the general theory. In a comparatively short time, most children understand the general rule. Let us consider this point a bit more carefully.

If the teacher does not permit Johnny to draw during the period when other children are drawing because he was dawdling when he should have been working on his arithmetic, he may well feel upset, because he will consider himself deprived of his just right without any reason. If, on the other hand, during the council meeting, the group accepts the principle that anyone who chooses to dawdle during arithmetic time must do the arithmetic assignment during art time, Johnny no longer can feel resentful toward the teacher who is only putting into application the very principle that he supported.

There is no pat formula to natural consequences. What will work effectively with one child may not work with another. Jack, who likes to go outdoors, may be more affected by being kept in during recess time than Mary, who hates to go out. Therefore, by treating Johnny and Mary in different ways, similar results are obtained, and since each accepts the teacher's reactions as fair under the circumstances, neither feels that he is being punished. It must be remembered that the use of natural consequences requires an understanding of the child and of the situation. *When* to do *what* and to *whom* requires judgment which takes in a very large number of imponderables, so that every situation becomes unique.

The concept of natural consequences is readily acceptable by the children and they tend to apply it to their out-of-school lives. We may quote some cases to illustrate.

Susan's younger sister had to be coaxed and helped to dress in the morning in order to be in time for the school bus. One day Susan said to me, "May I have permission to be late to school for a few days? I have finally convinced my mother that she should let my sister take the consequences and miss the school bus if she doesn't get ready in time. She will then have to walk to school, and I would have to walk with her. I don't mind, but my sister won't like that long walk. I'm

sure that after a few days she will be ready in time." Susan's plan, it may be interesting to know, worked exactly as she planned.

Lawrence said one day, "Boy, did I fix my mother yesterday! She cooks carrots every day and she knows how I hate them. She makes me eat them because they are supposed to be good for me. Well, yesterday she prepared a new kind of dessert. She was all excited about it. But I didn't eat it, and I told her that carrots had so filled me that I could not eat anything else. Was she disappointed!"

Bobby said one day, "Will you please call my mother and tell her yourself! She won't believe me, but maybe she will believe you. My brother throws tantrums every time he can't get what he wants. Mother gets so worried, she gives him everything. He does it all the time. I told mother to leave him alone and that we should all walk out and let him have his tantrum. But no, she is afraid."

Natural consequences should apply to everybody, not just to the students. Sometimes, the teacher has to suffer the consequences of her behavior. Once, having hastily written an assignment on the blackboard and leaving the room for a few minutes, I came back to find several letters of my message encircled in colored chalk, and at the bottom of the blackboard, these words neatly written, "Careless, please do over." I made the corrections without any comment, which everybody in class took as a matter of fact. On another occasion when I forgot to announce that there would be a movie showing in the afternoon and as a consequence the class failed to attend, the students asked for twenty minutes longer on the playground as their perfect right. Several teachers to whom I related the incident felt that I had allowed my students to be disrespectful; others felt that such permissiveness leads to disorder. This becomes a matter of opinion. I cannot share this pessimism. Children have greater respect for elders who do admit their mistakes, who respect the child's opinion, and who share equally in privileges. I feel no threat to my prestige by being equal with and not "above" my students.

Parent-Child Relations

As stated before, the relationship between home and the school is directly connected; the better adjusted the child is at home the better adjusted he will be in school. The sooner we remove the conflicts in the home, the quicker will be the progress at school. Working with parents is an important part of a teacher's responsibilities. I try to have meetings with both parents; however, most often it is the mother

who comes to conferences. It is amazing to discover the number of parents who are totally ignorant of the basic rules of child training. They want to do the best for their children but manage to use the most improper methods for attaining their goals. Nagging, punishing severely, comparing with other children, threatening without being consistent, humiliating the child, etc., are still very prevalent. Although parents often state that they recognize the necessity for changing their methods, they attempt the newly suggested methods for a few days and then fall back to their old procedures. They expect immediate changes in their child, and become discouraged if the "miracle" does not happen. Often the parents are completely discouraged and have no faith whatsoever in their child. How often have I heard the phrase, "There is really no use; I have tried everything. You're wasting your time."

The following example may well indicate the value of working with parents. Terry's mother announced that she was sorry for the teacher who had to have her son in her class, because he was really totally incapable of learning. She explained how once she and her husband, the boy's stepfather, made Terry practice the word "is" one hundred times, and how at the end he still did not know how to spell the word. Terry was then ten years old and was as discouraged as a child can possibly be. It took months to obtain the slightest change in his attitude. During this time I had frequent conferences with his mother who carried my "message" to her husband. Gradually, the relationship improved with the parents. Simultaneously, Terry became an entirely different child at school. He made tremendous progress within a short time. Today, he is a comparatively well adjusted child.

Summary

To summarize, in this paper I have attempted to handle only some of the aspects of the work of a special teacher who deals with "problem" children. My orientation is Adlerian, which means primarily that the child's behavior is viewed as being meaningful and purposive rather than "abnormal" or perverse. We take the attitude that all children can learn. They not only can, but they want to learn, and they are interested in learning about life in general. They want life to be meaningful, orderly, and secure. If we succeed in our endeavor to help them achieve this, their resistance to learning will cease.