

# Interpersonal Conflicts in Elementary School Classes

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In this paper I will discuss interpersonal conflicts which I have observed in elementary school situations. My analysis of these conflicts will be based on the propositions of Individual Psychology. According to Adler, the basic dynamic force behind all human behavior is a striving from a feeling of inferiority towards superiority, perfection, totality. This striving is mediated by the individual's need to belong to a group. Because the child soon learns he cannot live comfortably in isolation from other people and because his evaluation of himself is largely dependent on group comparisons and consensus, the need to belong to a group becomes intimately associated with the child's striving for significance. Thus, Adler (Ansbacher, 1956) is of the belief that: "...all important life problems, including certain drive satisfactions, become social problems. All values become social values."

While the individual is socially embedded, social concern may or may not accompany the individual's striving for significance. It is the development of social interest which marks the successful socialization of the child.

Adler (1949) states:

We have seen that every child has a striving for superiority. What a parent or educator has to do is to direct this striving into a fruitful and useful channel. . . .What is the basis of differentiating between useful and useless manifestations of the striving for superiority? The answer is interest in the community.

Adler describes interest in the community, or social interest, as an attitude towards life, "a desire to cooperate with others in some way and to master the situations of life" (Dinkmeyer and Dreikurs, 1963). A child who has not developed a sense of social interest will feel that being in the forefront is the only way to maintain his position in the group. In describing such a child, Adler (1957) writes: "If there is no chance—according to his own evaluation of the situation—to be the first by achievement, he may shift to the useless side and become the 'worst,' either by misbehavior, drinking, gambling or illness." When an individual resorts to destructive means and to mechanisms of defense, we may not at first recognize his striving for significance and his associated need to belong for what they are. It may appear that he does not care about belonging; however, this impression is illusory. As Dreikurs (1957) comments:

...even the child who misbehaves and defies the needs of the situation still believes that his actions will give him social status. He may try to get attention or attempt to prove his power, or he may seek revenge or display deficiency in order to get special service or exemption. Whichever of these four goals he adopts, his behavior is based on his conviction that only in this way can he function within the group."

The specific direction which the striving for significance takes in an individual can best be explained by illuminating the goals of the individual. It is a basic proposition of Individual Psychology that behavior is purposive. The goals of the various acts which an individual performs are compatible with one another in the sense that they may be thought of as forming steps towards a final goal. Thus situations where an individual appears to be torn between two goals are misleading. In fact, although the individual may not admit it even to himself, the two goals may be thought of as working together to move the individual to a more distant goal. As Dreikurs (Dinkmeyer and Dreikurs, 1963) writes: "The individual is not seen as a battleground of psychic forces that are at war with one another." The conflicts which an individual confronts are seen as arising between the individual and other people in his society. These conflicts may have reverberations within the individual. For example, he may become conscious of things he was not previously aware of, or he may change the tactics which he is employing to achieve his goal, but the relational system of which his striving, his final goal, and his life style are the main components will remain undivided.

The value of the propositions of Individual Psychology will become clear as interpersonal clashes observed in elementary schools are discussed.

### **The Case of the Cat in the Class**

It was a hot Monday morning. One of the sixth grades at a school in Dessa had just returned from an outdoor physical education class, in which the students, thirty altogether, had run against one another in a series of trials to determine the fastest runner. The classroom had two doors, one of which led directly outside. This door was left open so as to increase the ventilation. Seven students representing one of the five reading groups into which the class was divided, had assembled around the teacher in the front of the room. While the teacher instructed this group of seven children, the other children were to work on their own reading assignments individually. Five minutes after the reading period had begun, a cat entered the room through the open door. The attention of the students who were working individually became focused on the cat as it moved across the room. When the cat paused at one student's desk, five or six students from various parts of the room congregated around the cat. At this point the noise distracted the teacher, who stood up and commented in an

annoyed voice, "Alright, what's all the commotion? We have a visitor (referring to me), you know." A girl who was standing near the cat responded, "Mr. Lawler, there's a cat in the class!" Mr. Lawler: "Well, put him outside." The girl: "We can't; he has a limp." Mr. Lawler: "Animals have a way of taking care of themselves. Roger, put the cat outside." Roger, who had been kneeling next to the cat, picked it up by the back of the neck and carried it outside, as the other five or six students who had left their seats followed, commenting on the seemingly inhumane way Roger was carrying the cat. No sooner had the students returned to their seats than the cat re-entered the room, and again the same students with three new recruits stood up to watch the cat. This time the teacher told the students to continue working and to forget about the cat, or he would have to put the cat outside himself and close the door. Closing the door would have meant that the room would become unbearably hot, since it would stop the breeze which was filling the classroom. The teacher's comment quieted the class, and the teacher was able to spend the rest of the morning working with each of the five reading groups in turn. The students who were working individually spent part of their time reading and part of their time inventing devious means for paying their respects to the cat. Regardless of whether a student left his seat to sharpen a pencil, to get a dictionary from a table near the window, or to borrow an eraser from a friend, he would manage to route himself past the cat, where he would pause and play for a moment with the cat, while other students looked on.

In this case, the students are giving the cat attention so that the teacher and other students will give them attention. Had the students been at home or outside, it is doubtful that they would have given a cat so much consideration, as they had all seen cats before. In the classroom, however, the students' striving for significance is linked to their ability to command the attention of the teacher and of other class members. The presence of the cat creates an opportunity to command such attention. Dreikurs (1957) writes: "The attention-getting mechanism. . . is operative in most young children. . . Unpleasant by-products like humiliation, punishment, or even physical pain do not matter as long as his (the child's) main purpose is achieved. Children prefer being beaten to being ignored." Dreikurs notes that attention-getting activity will be most prevalent when the child feels that more socially acceptable means of gaining significance are not available. This case tends to confirm Dreikur's observation: it is the students who are not being directly engaged by the teacher that employ the attention-getting mechanism.

When the teacher first reprimands the students, only one student challenges the teacher, indicating that for most of the students the attention which they have received by the reprimand has satisfied their immediate goal. The girl who

challenges the teacher (“Mr. Lawler, there’s a cat in the class. . . . We can’t he has a limp.”) is seeking more than just attention. It is probable that the girl is trying to prove her power in her relationship to the teacher. With regard to the goal of power, Dreikurs (1957) writes: “The child tries to prove that he can do what he wants and refuse to do what he ought to. No final ‘victory’ of the parents or teachers is possible. In most instances the child will ‘win out,’ if only because he is not restricted in his fighting methods by any sense of responsibility or moral obligation.” Note that in the case we have described, the teacher ultimately loses the power struggle, because the cat is eventually accepted into the class. While attention-getting mechanisms are employed the rest of the morning, they are primarily directed towards gaining the attention of other students and not towards gaining the attention of the teacher. (The students “would pause and play for a moment with the cat, while the other students looked on.”) The reason the scope the attention-getting mechanisms is limited and further power struggles avoided, stems from the fact that the teacher has imposed a logical consequence. (“. . . the teacher told the students to continue working and to forget about the cat, or he would have to put the cat outside himself and close the door.”) Dreikurs and Grey (1968) distinguish logical consequences from punishments on the basis of four criteria:

<b>Logical Consequence</b>	<b>Punishment</b>
1. Expresses the reality of the social order, not the person.	Expresses the power of a personal authority.
2. Is intrinsically related to the misbehavior.	There is no logical, only an arbitrary, connection between misbehavior and consequences.
3. Involves no element of moral judgment.	Inevitably involves some moral judgment.
4. Is concerned only with what will happen now.	Deals with the past.

The teacher’s statement of intention clearly satisfies the last three criteria of a logical consequence. I am not sure, however, how the students interpreted the teacher’s goal; and therefore, it is difficult to determine whether the first criteria was satisfied or not. The value of logical consequences lies in the fact that unlike punishment they do not exacerbate inferiority feelings in the child. Furthermore, they direct the attention of the child towards the interests of the group rather than to those of a personal authority. The next case further illuminates the distinction between logical consequences and punishment.

### **The Case of the Secret Hide—Away**

During “milk time” in a third grade class at Alexis School, the children are allowed to associate with friends and to play three and four man games, after cartons of milk have been distributed to each child. I was sitting in the back of the room next to a table. Four boys sat down at the table and began playing a game

similar to Parchessi. One of the boys was explaining the game to me as it progressed. Before the game was finished, one of the boys suggested that they go hide in the closet. The idea was eagerly accepted by the other three players. As they were leaving for the closet, the boy who had been explaining the game to me told me of his own accord that they would finish the game later. The teacher, who had been occupied with another group of students, spotted the closet door closing behind the last of the four boys to disappear. The teacher stormed over to the closet, told the boys that they knew better than hiding in the closet, and ordered them to return to their seats immediately. The students did as they were told, although after a minute or so, they were up and about, mixing with the other students. The game they had been playing was never completed. The closet episode was repeated later in the morning by the teacher and two of the same boys.

This case clearly illustrates the ineffectiveness of punishment. The non-chalance with which the four boys go to the closet suggests that this particular attention-getting mechanism is not new. The teacher's reaction satisfies all of the criteria of a punishment: It expresses the power of the teacher, it involves moral judgment ("you know better than that"), it is not intrinsically related to the boys' misbehavior, and it deals with the past. The teacher's reaction is ineffectual, for the incident is repeated later in the same morning. A logical consequence which the teacher might have imposed would have been to tell the boys to stay in the closet until they felt that they were ready to abide by the classroom rules. The boys' need to belong to the class might then quickly convince them that a closet was no place to be. If the teacher's fear was that the boys might destroy valuable supplies, then he might simply have locked the closet and explained to the students that because he was afraid of supplies being damaged, the closet would stay locked, until the class arrived at rules which would serve to protect the supplies. Because the students need supplies for their art work, which they enjoy, keeping the closet locked for a period of time would have informed the students of the value of the supplies and of the need for abiding by rules which protect the supplies. Logical consequences can work fully only if the standards which the teacher is trying to enforce are standards shared by the group and not merely personal standards. When rules become necessary which are not already a part of the value system shared by the students and the teacher, they must be formulated through democratic class meetings. Teachers who dictate rules, like those who impose punishments, frequently deepen inferiority feelings in their students and needlessly strengthen personal striving at the expense of social concern.

The misbehavior considered so far has been oriented towards attention getting and power. The next case illustrates the behavioral goals of revenge and withdrawal.

### **The Case of the Airport Trip**

Students of a second grade class at Jackson School were returning from home after their lunch hour. The students were more excited than usual, for they were anticipating a trip to the airport. The teacher had asked me before the students returned to help her maintain discipline on the trip. It was soon evident that I would have a difficult task. When the teacher tried to call the class to order, the children continued to wander about, as if oblivious to the teacher's repeated calls for order. After the teacher had shouted commands to students for two or three minutes, the majority of the students were seated, although five or six continued to wander around the room. Whenever the teacher would seat one of these students, a student from another part of the room would stand. Finally the teacher took roll despite the fact that not everyone was in his seat. When the roll call was completed, the teacher called on students individually. Each student who was called upon was to pick a partner and to line up at the door with his partner. After all of the students were in line, I led the class to the bus. The main fears which the teacher had communicated to me were that the students would stand in the bus, be noisy, run up and down the aisle, and stick their arms out the window. When the students were seated, however, it was clear that they could just barely see over the edge of the window, and that they could not see in front of themselves because the seats were much taller than they were. I therefore, allowed students to kneel on the seats. It was impossible, however, to tell from where I was sitting or from where the teacher was sitting, whether the students were kneeling or standing; so the rule that students not be allowed to stand was not enforced. During the bus ride two students, John and Alberta, continually left their seats. Not surprisingly, both John and Alberta had been among the last students chosen as partners by other students. These two students were not friends and were not interacting with each other, although both were acting in similar ways. Both Jon and Alberta would tickle, pull hair, or in some other way annoy other students. When we arrived at the airport, we got out of the bus and went over to a wire fence from where we could see airplanes landing and taking off. After we had been watching the airplanes for about five minutes, I turned around and noticed John walking around the corner of an airplane hangar about a hundred yards away. I walked quickly after him and found him crying on the other side of the hangar. I asked him what was the matter, but he refused, or was unable, to tell me. I put my arm around his shoulders and walked back with

him to the other students, together. I was unable to comfort John and he appeared to resent the fact that I had made him return to the group. On the return bus trip, John remained quiet and forlorn. Alberta, however, began acting aggressively towards other students, as she had on the way out.

In this case, the goal of the initial behavior of most of the students was attention-getting. The students knew that they were supposed to sit down, but waited until the teacher explicitly told them to do so. The fact that some of the students had to be told several times to sit down and even then remained standing suggests that some of the students had chosen the goal of power. The teacher intended her harsh verbal commands to be a form of punishment; in effect, she was rewarding both the students who were seeking power and the students who were seeking attention. In this situation it would have been easy for the teacher to have imposed a logical consequence. For example, she might have said: "I have to have the names of everyone who is going on the trip, so that I will know if anyone gets lost. I can't get your names, if everyone is wandering around, so we'll just have to wait until everyone finds his seat, before we can leave." Such a statement does not involve moral judgment and is not concerned with the past. It is intrinsically related to the students' present behavior, and the fact that the teacher needs the names of the students who are going on the trip is likely to be accepted by the students as a principle of the social order governing the class.

The method which the teacher used to divide the class into pairs may have stimulated some of the misbehavior that was encountered later on. The method used can create a vicious circle, since a student who is one of the last to be chosen as a partner by other students may tend to become compulsively aggressive or withdrawn. If this is the case, then the next time the class divides into pairs the chance that this student will be readily picked as a partner becomes even less, and the student may become even more compulsive in seeking compensation. In the situation described above, the two students who left their seats during the bus trip were students who had not been chosen readily by other students as partners. Perhaps a more random system of pairing the students would have been quicker and less damaging.

The inferiority feelings of a child stem partially from his small size. One of the rules which the teacher and I imposed on the students was aggravating to the students because of their size and, therefore, increased their inferiority feelings, although neither the teacher nor I realized this at the time. The rule that students should not stand in the bus, when translated by the students, became "students should just be allowed to see tree tops and telephone lines when they look out the window, and when they look forward they should just be permitted to see the back of a bus seat." By increasing the students' inferiority feelings, this rule increased the students' striving for compensatory goals. It is significant that the rules which did not exacerbate the students' sense of physical smallness,

namely the rules that the students should not run up and down the corridor, and that students should not stick their arms out the window, were not challenged by the majority of the students.

Albert and John, who did challenge these rules as well, were not simply seeking attention, since their behavior was not altered when they received attention. Furthermore, they were not seeking power, for power demands followers; but Alberta and John were alienating themselves from everyone. Their goal was one of revenge. Describing the child whose goal is revenge, Dreikurs (1957) writes:

The child no longer hopes merely for attention or even power; feeling ostracized and disliked, he can see his place in the group only by his success in making himself hated. Children of this type know where they can hurt the most and take advantage of the vulnerability of their opponents. They regard it as a triumph when they are considered vicious; since that is the only triumph they can obtain, it is the only one they seek.

Although I cannot recall a specific comment or act, it is possible that in our attempts to keep John seated, we seriously discouraged him, for he later abandoned his goal of revenge and displayed his "weakness" by crying, with the goal of being freed from the demands of group participation. That John's goal was more than attention-getting, power, or revenge was evidenced by the facts that he was not comforted by my attention, that he did not persistently engage me in a power struggle, and that he was not actively hostile towards me or the others after the airplane hangar incident. In describing the child whose goal is to get special exemption or service by displaying his deficiency, Dreikurs (1957) writes:

A child who is passive, or whose antagonism is successfully beaten down, may be discouraged to such an extent that he cannot hope for any significance whatsoever. He expects only defeat and failure and stops trying. He hides himself behind a display of real or imagined inferiority. He uses his inability as a protection so that nothing will be required or expected of him. By avoiding participation or contribution, he tries to preclude more humiliating and embarrassing experiences.

The goals of revenge and withdrawal can be altered with patient encouragement for acts which show even the smallest kernel of social interest.

These examples demonstrate the importance of sifting out the goals of behavior. Too often teachers and parents unwittingly reinforce misbehavior by increasing the child's sense of inferiority and by aiding the child in reaching goals that are not informed by social interest. Greater attention must be paid to understanding the child's logic and to formulating classroom standards which

truly represent the interests of the group. The propositions of Individual Psychology combined with democratic principles provide tools for proceeding in this direction.

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