

Report on Groups: Grade 3 and 4 boys at Leongatha Primary

Over a two term period, two groups utilizing art therapy were run. The participants were 5 grade 3 boys and 6 grade 4 boys. The boys were referred with issues ranging from: anger management, social issues- troubles with peers, and problems related to coming from single parent families. The groups were delivered with a sense of continuity, safety, trust and respect in order to encourage the development of resilience and emotional literacy. The idea was: to arm the boys with a positive means of dealing with their various issues; build a stronger sense of themselves in relation to their worlds, encourage and develop more positive behaviours.

Paradigm

An underlying premise that in large part defined the groups direction, was Pollack's (1998) idea of the conflict between society's new expectations for boys to share their vulnerabilities, but having this in direct conflict with the penalizing effect of the old 'Boy's Code'; a code that demands that a boy 'cover their need for dependency, and hide their natural feelings of love and caring behind the mask of masculine autonomy and strength' (Pollack,1998,p.13). Pollack, through his research, perceived the masking of feelings, whereby 'little boys are made to feel ashamed of their feelings, guilty especially about feelings of weakness, vulnerability, fear and despair' (1998, p.11), as leading to the manifestation of 'symptoms of depression, perpetrator or victim of violence' (1998, p.7).

The groups were important vehicles for challenging this status quo, in order to encourage each individual to 'help him love and feel comfortable with his genuine self' (Pollack,1998,p.7). In order to do this, the group's modus operandi was about creating an atmosphere in which the boys could talk, so they didn't feel afraid and ashamed to share their true feelings.

In order for this to take place the idea of 'Connection through action... rather than nudging a boy to sit down and share his feelings... but joining him in an activity... so that a boy may ... feel close and safe enough to share the feelings he'd otherwise keep hidden' was utilized (Pollack,1998, p.8).

Art Therapy

Art therapy was a valuable vehicle with which to engage the boys in activity so that they had a safe medium to mediate between themselves and discussions that took place. 'Art making is a way of dwelling in whatever is before us that needs our attention. There is a universal tendency to turn away from difficulty. Image making allows for staying with something while making that staying bearable through the pleasure available in the use of the materials' (Allen, 1995, P.17). The boys were no exception to this rule and the art was a useful tool to engage them in meaningful and sustained interaction. Another advantage of the application of art therapy in this context can be described thus :

The process of drawing, painting or constructing is a complex one in which the child brings together diverse elements of his environment to make a meaningful whole. In the process of selecting, interpreting and reforming these elements, he has given us more than a picture, he has given us a part of himself. (Lowenfeld, 1947, cited in Malchiodi, 1998, p.15)

Through discovering and making concrete parts of themselves, art therapy offered a springboard by which to have many insightful and sensitive discussions. The use of visual images often employs the use of metaphor, which was challenging for those boys who were developmentally not at the stage of abstract thinking. However, with encouragement they learnt through each other and developed new ways of looking at things. By having concrete images and an understanding of metaphor, they were able to more easily develop language skills to convey what was happening in relation to often complex feelings and perceptions.

Process

At the beginning of the groups the participants were all asked to identify their strengths as well as areas that they felt were problematic, through the use of strength cards. The boys identified problem areas such as: honesty, tolerance, bravery, generosity, cooperation, patience and respect. These were reviewed at the end of the group, the boys feeding back to each other whether they had observed improvement or not in each other.

As the group found its momentum, the boys were introduced to the metaphor of a cake. They were asked to consider the impact on their health of a cake filled with toxic ingredients and one filled with delectable ingredients. The toxic cake was identified as having ingredients such as lack of: respect, cooperation, forgiveness, caring, kindness etc. and thus named the 'bleuch' cake. The 'lurve' cake was packed with the opposite. This metaphor was the springboard for many activities, including role-play whereby they could build on their empathic skills. Trust was also explored in creative ways enabling the boys to develop cognizance of the importance of this to human relationship. Those boys who struggled with certain personal qualities were kept in check by various members of the group who through the activities, had tangible ways of challenging each other.

Over time the boys developed language that helped them convey various concerns and the confidence to take risks in doing so. One boy in the grade 4 group, who presented originally as being smart-mouthed and insensitive, admitted at the end of the group, to being scared of the other boys and had developed his negative persona to cope. Through the group process he had been enabled to have insight into the deleterious effect of this behaviour and therefore the possibility of making a different choice in how he was relating.

Resilience and Friendship

The group fostered positive concepts of friendship and the importance of it to their emotional wellbeing. Research on resilience indicates that a sense of connection and belonging are paramount to human wellbeing and decreases the chance of depression (Fuller, 1998).

As the boys were developmentally at an age to be encouraged to have closer more meaningful relationships, various team activities were employed to challenge them away from the egocentric behaviours appropriate to younger years. 'It is from childhood friendships that individuals learn how to create and sustain friendships throughout life... a foundation of friendship behaviours and attitudes needs to be established so that one will always have friends, in good times and bad' (Turner & Helms, 1991, p. 290).

Through activities focusing on empathy, greater sensitivity to others, and cooperation, closer ties were developed and more meaningful exchanges grew as the groups progressed. It is important for children in this age group to develop good social relations as it enables them 'to gain more insight into themselves and their developing personalities. Through interactions with others and inferences from their personal experiences, they gain a sense of personal awareness' (Turner et al, p.275). The group afforded the opportunity for this to occur through a positive, safe and intimate environment.

Evaluation

Through personal observation, I perceived the boys in both groups as generally displaying greater sensitivity and having more positive interactions with each other. In a process such as this, it will be time that conveys how much of what took place will take root. As with any planting of seeds, growth will be reflected in how fertile the ground was in the first place, and whether or not ongoing environmental conditions will encourage and sustain this growth, In this case whether family, social and school values will reflect back and affirm the personal experiences and values they have been exposed to in the group.

Comments from the boys in the feedback discussion ranged from:

"I feel happier"; "I had to work on honesty, because I was scared. I pretended to be brave and thought everyone could bash me up. I didn't feel strong"; "I used to give up easily. I didn't care about anything- like a car crash"; "Helped me improve in my anger... helped me not to go off my nut"; "Helped me be a better person in life"; "I've begun to make new friends"; "It's taught me how to get along and be thankful for what you get"; "Taught me to respect".

The boys also made comments about each other such as:

"He wouldn't talk and could ignore people. Now very open. He's not as quiet"; "He's started to care more"; "He is not so scary and much more friendly"(At the end of the group, this particular boy displayed much less egocentric traits and showed himself to be capable of being very caring and sensitive); "He gives nice compliments to everyone"; "A big improvement in fairness".

All boys reported that they had enjoyed the group and would miss seeing people in the group.

Conclusion

Having witnessed these boys ability to open up and share their feelings and thoughts on personal themes, I observed a marked improvement in their emotional literacy. Towards the end of the group there was a general display in confidence of expression and willingness to risk opening up. This showed itself in increased respect and more sophisticated interaction whereby they would listen to each other and exchange perceptions and feelings on sometimes complex issues. The boys reported that having a place on a regular basis where they could open up without fear of reprisal had led to a reduction in anger outbursts, frustration and sadness. Perhaps their group experience, reflected through their feedback and behaviours, could to some degree be encapsulated in the words of one of Pollack's (1998) subjects: "It's all about getting a connection with the world. And you improve and you get better and better. You just never stand still" (p.375)

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