

# Finding My Place: The Use of Sociometric Choice and Sociodrama for Building Community in the School Classroom

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**ABSTRACT.** The case study concerns issues in a 4th grade public school classroom in Toronto, Canada, where certain children were being excluded, placed in an unpopular subgroup based on physical attributes (hair color, weight, size, or skin color), alternative ways of thinking and behaving, or limited academic abilities. The authors used sociodramatic and sociometric techniques to reduce conflict and teach students to be more compassionate toward one another in the classroom environment. The results of the case study support using action sociodramatic and sociometric tools and providing students opportunities to practice and implement conflict resolution skills in the classroom.

**Key words:** inclusion/exclusion sociodrama, role play, scene setting and reenactment, sharing circle, sociometric choice and sharing in action, trust and safety,

**WHEN MORENO TOLD STORIES AND PLAYED GAMES** with children in Augarten Park in Vienna, he called on the young children's spontaneity. In brief, Moreno used many socio- and psychodramatic techniques when telling tales to the children. For example, he challenged the values inherited from their parents and teachers and inspired the children to invent tales or find new names for themselves (Marineau, 1989).

In 1932, Moreno was appointed Director of Research at the New York Training School for Girls in Hudson, where he practiced the sociometric and

psychodramatic methods. [He also] introduced the young women to role-playing to foster a change in their ways of thinking and their negative behaviors (Marineau, 1989). Although the term sociometry was coined by Moreno and used as early as 1916, it played no role in his works until his arrival at Hudson (Bjerstedt, 1956). It was here at Hudson that role-play training was born. “Moreno’s experience with the girls at Hudson can be considered as one of the most important movements in the history of group psychotherapy” (Marineau, p.113).

Researchers have documented the use of role-play as “a technique especially useful in helping students in school settings improve their social understandings and their social relations skills” (Gronlund, 1959, p. 259). When therapists are identifying issues to be explored in a classroom, interpersonal difficulties emerge from the students’ experiences or may be obtained from stories illustrating problems in interpersonal relationships. Most role-playing situations arise spontaneously from classroom events and occasionally from discussions that trigger issues to be explored. Researchers assert that role-playing, as an action technique, has the unique advantage of creating healthier social relationships. For example, putting a conflict into action allows students the opportunity to act out the dilemma and gain insight into various possible constructive solutions. Thus, the role-playing technique is extremely safe for use with students in human relations and social skill training because it fosters healthier human relationships. Once students are identified, the situation must be clearly defined and roles cautiously illustrated (Gronlund).

According to Blatner (2002), “[r]ole playing isn’t to be viewed as a particularly psychological procedure. Certainly it has been used as a part of many different types of therapy, but this is because it is a natural vehicle for learning” (p. 2). That view supports the appropriateness of role-playing as a vehicle for dealing with social issues in school classrooms. Blatner goes on to point out some of the problems that arise when teachers try to do role-playing in the classroom. For example, educators who experienced difficulty when using role-playing techniques usually have not described the modality fully to students, failed to describe the situation in detail, and were not explicit about the roles to be enacted (Blatner, 2002).

The classroom teacher or facilitator needs training and experience in doing sociodrama with students. Students need experience in the development of roles and in the inclusion activities that build a sense of trust and safety among class members. Gibbs, the author of *Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together* (1995), has developed an excellent structure and series of activities focused on building a classroom community. Included in her program are warm-up games and role-training activities for elementary students, which can be used for any age group. That type of program, when carefully implemented, provides a social network in which role-playing activities can begin

to resolve conflicts and provide a better understanding of the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion in groups.

Role reversal is another dramatic device that involves the players changing parts so they can begin to develop many practical and emotional insights into the others' situations (Blatner, 2002). In *Lessons for the Living* (Clark, Dobson, Goode, & Neelands 1997), the authors point out that role-play is the imaginative extension of the self into the "shoes of the other" (the role reversal), and that the experience provides the potential for a significant broadening of viewpoint. The technique works well, particularly with older elementary students, because it helps them become more conscious of their ambivalence. It is our experience that children below the age of 6 years have not developed strong enough egos to make the most of the role-reversal procedure. However, we have found that the use of puppets often provides a way for young children to express the role of the significant other, such as mom, dad, or friend.

### **Sociometric Position Within the Classroom**

Aware that sociometry is a multidimensional method, we chose to use descriptive sociometry to implement the method in education because it allows the investigator to learn the various social structures within the classroom. In the context of this article, we use sociometric choice to refer to an individual's perception of his or her role position in the enactment and reenactment of a group sociodrama. "Probably foremost in Moreno's writings has been his insistence that sociometric choices should be based on criterion which reflects an actual situation or activity in which the group members have a real opportunity for participation" (Gronlund, 1952, p.7). We have used sociometric choice and sociodrama in the classroom as a way of forming work groups and have found classroom conflicts are connected to students' personal issues. We found that the younger the children the more readily they express their concerns and conflicts in an uninhibited and spontaneous manner.

#### *Background of Case Study*

We report on a case study that took place in a fourth-grade public school classroom in Toronto, Canada. The 24 pupils were heterogeneously grouped with respect to ability levels. There was only one child of color and two children from Sephardic Jewish backgrounds. Six of the students were from gentile backgrounds, and the rest were from upper middle class Jewish families. One of the authors, trained in role-playing and sociodramatic techniques, worked directly with her students in the classroom and was assisted by a teacher's aide. The students met daily in the classroom for a sharing and

check-in circle meeting that lasted for 40 min in the morning and was coupled with a 10-min closing session at the end of each school day. In addition to being a source for the accumulation of interpersonal conflict data, the sharing circle and closing sessions result in another outcome, a sociodrama that lasts for 1 week. The number of sociodramas that emerge during the academic year average roughly two per month.

#### *Purpose of the Sociodrama*

In this case study, our purpose in using sociodramatic and sociometric exploration was to reduce conflict in the classroom and on the playground and to explore the dynamics involved in the exclusion of certain students. Our hope was that after the class's exploration, the students would move toward a more inclusive classroom community in which individual characteristics were valued and appreciated.

#### *The Problem in the Fourth-Grade Class*

Some students in this fourth-grade classroom teased their classmates and excluded them from group play activities. The conflicts usually occurred in nonacademic spaces such as on the playground or in the lines before school. Parents and the students themselves were reporting the incidences to the classroom teacher. Some children were traumatized to the point of not wanting to come to school.

*Our Hypothesis.* We predict that teaching children classroom sociometry and specific role-training techniques will cause a decrease in the unstated hierarchal structures that foster exclusion within the classroom and playground and cultivate a supportive and less antagonistic student environment.

#### **Implementing Sociodrama and Sociometry in the Classroom**

Sociodrama can be adapted to any age group, but it is essential that students have daily experiences in activities that facilitate inclusion and build a sense of trust and safety in the group. Gibbs (1995) describes opportunities for providing inclusion activities and games in classrooms. For example, each morning students sit in a circle in the classroom with the teacher and teacher assistant. As an object, such as a special stone that can be called a talking piece, is passed around the circle, only the student holding the stone is allowed to speak. The activity is called a sharing circle, and it is in the circle that the participants engage in inclusion activities. The children have the opportunity to introduce themselves by describing themselves, not only their

physical characteristics but also their interests, feelings, talents, or special qualities. Individual students describe their expectations of what will happen during the group sharing. Each student receives acknowledgment from the group as having been heard, welcomed, and appreciated.

An example of a sharing circle inclusion activity is “When the Wind Blows.” The activity provides group members with the opportunity to find out what they have in common and also what makes them different from one another. Topics for sharing in the circle are the following:

- What makes me happy?
- What makes me scared?
- What worries me about school?

The students may also give a compliment to their neighbors in the circle. The procedures in the sharing circle, as well as in class sociodramas, are governed by a clear set of rules that students review, practice, and then agree to follow. The rules are outlined in the manual *Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together* (Gibbs, 1995). They include the following: (1) attentive listening (focusing on and showing interest in what the speaker is saying), (2) appreciation and no put-downs (acknowledging the positive value of each student’s contribution and avoiding negative responses), (3) mutual respect (valuing each student’s statement), and (4) the right to “pass.” When students can choose not to share, the facilitator always gives pass participants another opportunity to speak.

After teachers have involved students in weeks of community inclusion activities, the information put forth gives teachers insight into classroom dynamics and helps them identify class leaders, particular friendships, less popular students, and possible behavior problems. As a result of that information, teachers can organize class learning groups based on an informal sociometric choice test. The first step is to discuss with the students the concept of class groups and what people need to learn to work together. The teacher discusses with the students the criteria for making choices such as the following: With whom can I write stories, or who can help with math or social studies projects? Because younger students tend to make choices based on who is their best friend at that time, it is important to spend time on the differences between someone with whom a person likes to play and someone who can help with the editing process in writing a report or can listen carefully to one’s ideas. Then the teacher distributes four—a number that varies with the size of the group—index cards to each student. The students write on each card the name of a class member with whom they want to work in a group. Younger children can be interviewed one at a time as they give the names of their choices. The teacher makes it clear to the children that only one of their choices will be in the group with them. In that way, the teacher can distribute the isolates, the behavior problems, the negative stars, and the stars among the various groups.

The children engage in a number of role-playing and role-reversal experiences in their group. Some of the activities involve taking the roles of characters in a story that the children have just read and being interviewed in role by the group. Each student in the group reverses roles with different character types in the story and then shares with the members feelings of being in the role and as oneself.

“Roles People Play in Groups” is an activity from *Tribes: A New Way of Learning and Being Together* (Gibbs, 1995 pp. 342–343). For the activity, we give the students written descriptors of the helpful and unhelpful roles that people play in groups. With the younger children, we use cartoon pictures to show the different roles. Helpful roles include the encourager, the organizer, the peacekeeper, the helper, and the idea person. The unhelpful roles include the joker, the boss, the sitter, the put-downer, and the talker. The purpose of the activity is to promote an awareness of helpful group roles. We ask the children to study the descriptors and to decide which role they usually play when working with others in their group. They write their responses and share them with a partner. Then each group plans and presents a brief role-play in which one of the students chooses to play an unhelpful role. The children in the groups watching are to guess which unhelpful role is being demonstrated.

After each group has had a turn to perform its role-play, sharing takes place, guided by the following reflection questions:

- What happens when even one individual is acting in an unhelpful role?
- What roles do people play in your group?
- How do these roles make working together easier?
- What did you learn about yourself in the role-play ?

We have found that these activities provide students with the necessary interpersonal skills to explore in greater detail the effects of being excluded in a classroom environment.

### **The Sociodramatic Exploration**

The following technique, sociodrama, is designed to manage group conflicts. It is important to mention here that this type of sociodrama may take a week to develop with elementary school children and may need to be revisited several times a year.

#### *The Warm-Up*

For the warm-up, we use the poem *When the Wind Blows* and adhere to the following rules and procedures:

1. Participants sit in a circle, preferably on chairs or desks (each person

must have a seat). Each participant is asked to think of a characteristic that makes him or her feel different from others or of something about which he or she has been teased at school. The students are to give examples.

2. One person volunteers to be first. It often helps if the teacher or group leader goes first to provide a model of the statement. The person's chair is removed so there is one less seating place in the circle.

3. The volunteer stands in the middle of the circle and thinks of an attribute that is true of him- or herself and says: "The great wind blows everyone who has been teased about not being able to run fast or wearing glasses."

4. Everyone who has been teased about either of those attributes, even if it is only one other person, moves out of his or her place and finds an empty chair, and [that includes the student who made the statement] If no one moves, the volunteer thinks of another characteristic that is more inclusive, such as hair or skin color. Each student only gets two turns to be in the middle. If he or she ends up without a place for the third time, he or she needs to choose someone in the circle who has not had a turn. If a volunteer can not think of an attribute, he or she can choose a friend to help or say "Pass."

5. Once the students move, there will be one person without a place to sit and that person is the next volunteer.

#### *Sharing and Reflection Questions*

In the sharing segment, the children consider the following questions:

- How easy was it for you to participate?
- What are some other characteristics that might be the subject of teasing in the classroom or on the playground?

The students in the fourth-grade class of this case study mentioned physical attributes, such as not being able to run fast or kick a ball. Children had also been teased about skin color and being fat.

#### *The Literacy Exploration*

For literacy exploration, an anonymous poem, "There Was No One Left to Speak for Me," is printed on a chart, and the class reads it together. We altered the criteria for using this poem so that it fits the age group. Other exclusionary characteristics could include homelessness, gender, and physical disabilities.

##### *There Was No One Left to Speak for Me*

They came first for the Jews—  
 But I didn't speak because I wasn't a Jew.  
 Then they came for the Catholics—  
 But I didn't speak because I wasn't a Catholic

Then they came for the “people of color”—  
But I didn’t speak because I wasn’t of color.  
Then they came for the fat people—  
But I didn’t speak because I wasn’t fat.  
Then they came for the skinny people—  
But I didn’t speak because I wasn’t skinny.  
Then they came for the old people—  
But I didn’t speak because I wasn’t old.  
And then they came for me—  
And by that time—  
There was no one left to speak for me.

—Anonymous

Before going to the next activity, it may be necessary to go over any questions or reactions that the students have about the meaning of the poem.

### *The Opinion Map*

The opinion map contributes to the student’s empathy-building process.

1. The teacher instructs the students to take a position in the room according to their agreement or disagreement with the following statements about the poem. The Yes position is on the left side of the room, and the No position is on the right side.

2. Once the children have moved to the yes or no position, they are to share why they made that choice with the other class members at the same spot.

3. The teacher or facilitator states the following criteria:

- “I feel angry at the one who didn’t speak.” (Move to yes or no position and share)
- “I connect (or understand) the one who didn’t speak.” (Move and share)
- “I have been one of the excluded.” (Move and share)
- “I have been one of the ones who excluded someone else.” (Move and share)

Children may be reluctant to own up to the last statement, and therefore, it is helpful if the teacher or other adult participants volunteer information about the times when they have excluded others.

4. For the reflection and sharing segment, the students share some of their reactions to the questions with the whole class.

### **The Sociodrama: Scene Setting**

Students have an opportunity to role-play the sociodrama scenes experientially, focusing on the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion of class members. The three scenes take place in the classroom. The time periods are before

recess, during playground recess, and after recess when students are back in the classroom reporting behavior.

1. The first step involves brainstorming the types of roles that can be depicted in the enactment. The students in this class have had role-play and scene-setting training as well as the experience of reversing roles. It is helpful for the group to have students take turns acting out each role type that is chosen for the three scenes. This type of sociodrama is most successful when it is conducted well into the school year, perhaps in January or February, when students have developed a feeling of safety in the class community.

2. The children are divided into three groups, one for each scene. The students take about 10 min to decide who will play each role in the action, using role choices offered during the brainstorming session. As a reminder, the role types are written on a chart. The students in each group develop a 10-min action scene for their group, using available props such as scarves.

3. The participants freeze as a group in the posture of the action. The teacher takes the role of the camera recorder, and when the camera approaches their group, the students begin the speaking and interacting in their roles. The first group portrays the classroom scene, and the other two groups watch. The teacher moves the camera to the playground scene for action and finally back to the classroom group, which are reporting the playground behavior. Each group has had an opportunity to observe and act.

#### *Sociometric Sharing: The Four Corners*

This technique provides an opportunity for the students to make an action choice on the basis of their individual perception of their positions in the classroom or in the sociodrama enactment, according to the following criteria:

Instruct the children to move physically to one of four corners. The signs posted in each corner are read aloud. The corners are designated as follows:

- Corner 1—I am popular.
- Corner 2—I have only a few close friends.
- Corner 3—Nobody likes me.
- Corner 4—I don't care if anybody likes me.

2. Then ask the children to move to the corner that best describes the role that they played in the sociodrama. Have them share their perceptions about the role they depicted with the people in their corner. If a child is the only one in the group, he or she can share with the closest group.

3. Next ask the students to move to the corner that best describes their perceived position in the school classroom. The children share their perceptions about being in this position with the others in their corner. It has been our expe-

rience that younger elementary school children are not always able to distinguish between their position in a role and their perception of their position in the classroom.

*The Reenactment*

*The sociogram in action.* Instruct the children to make a human sculpture with their group (e.g., the playground scene), portraying their sociometric positions in that original scene. There will be three human sculptures, one for each scene.

*A one-step change.* Ask the students to make a one-step change in their position in the scene toward their understanding of inclusion. It may be necessary to discuss what is meant by inclusion.

*The closure.* Invite the students back into the circle and have each share one statement about what the process was like for him or her and what each learned. At that point in our case study, the children were ready to come up with solutions to the playground conflicts and to work toward implementing them.

### **Results From the Sociodrama and Role-Playing Activities**

The use of sociodrama and role-playing with this class provided a powerful technique for getting the students and the teacher in touch with the group dynamics involved in the inclusion and exclusion of class members. We, the facilitators, learned that some of the students were inviting exclusion and teasing from class members by isolating themselves from group activities. Some children did that because of their fear of being rejected, and others did it because they did not mind playing by themselves. After the sociodrama experience, the teacher noticed that children were making an effort to include all the class members in play activities and to make more appreciative remarks to one another. The children began to come up with their own solutions such as supporting classmates during a conflict situation by making strong statements in the double role, such as “I don’t like to be teased; it hurts my feelings” or “How would you like it if someone said that to you?” As a result of this experience, these fourth graders and their parents began to request that conflict resolution activities be included as part of the school curriculum.

### **Ideas for Implementing Conflict Resolutions Activities in the Classroom**

It is helpful to have a school psychologist on site to observe and participate in the sociodramatic activities. The school psychologist can subsequently work in small groups with students who are being excluded by classmates and may be exhibiting behavior problems as a result. It is also effective to invite

the parents without their children to an evening meeting at the beginning of the school year and to have them experience some inclusion activities and sociodramatic games as way of explaining the need and rationale for a community-building curriculum.

We believe that a teacher or facilitator has to have sufficient training and experience in using role-playing and sociodrama in school classrooms. It is our experience that the most successful results occur when there is a strong feeling of trust and safety within the class community. Even without these prerequisites, role-playing conflict situations can provide valuable insight into the social dynamics in a classroom. However, students who lack trust and support from class members are often reluctant to share honest and negative feelings because of their fear of being laughed at or ridiculed by classmates.

Some psychologists suggest training students as peacemakers who would intervene in conflict situations, particularly on the playground, and help students resolve issues. Many schools in Canada and the United States have developed programs for training students for the role of peacemaker. The goal is to build a classroom and eventually a school community in which each voice is heard, understood, and accepted. The increasing occurrences of bullying, teasing, and violence in schools should make training of teachers in sociodramatic and sociometric process techniques mandatory so that each child can find his or her place.

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