

Empowering Institutionalized Children Through Social Work Intervention

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Introduction

At the threshold of the 21st century, children remain to be confronted with many challenges. Among them is poverty and powerlessness which is suffered particularly by disadvantaged children. Some children live in conditions of extreme poverty exemplified by malnutrition, poor sanitation, illness, exposure to communicable diseases and lack or no parental care due to socio-economic pressures on their family.

Other children equally suffer when parents fail to meet their emotional, educational and physical needs due to inadequate parenting ability. More often a child welfare worker unwittingly connives with the family to place a child out of the home to an institution, which seems to be a better alternative than the shanty or home environment where the child lives. Although we all agree that the first child welfare priority is to strengthen the family unit so parents can care for their children, there are still a large number of abandoned, neglected, and dependent children admitted into child-caring institutions.

In countries that profess to uphold the U.N. rights of the child and cherish strong family ties, the trend of uprooting these children from their families and placing them in residential care facilities or institutions can be disturbing. The ill effects of such a move especially on young children, who have to undergo the misery of feeling rejected by their parents and the trauma of living in unfamiliar surroundings and being with strangers, are often overlooked.

This article suggests that empowerment of children through social work intervention does not necessarily entail specialized techniques. The next section will briefly present two of these simple interventions: (1) the *concept of attachment* as a vital aspect in understanding empowerment of children and (2) the use of *serial drawing* as a medium for empowering children in residential care.

A case example will be presented to illustrate the process of empowerment in institutionalized children. The final section will highlight the results and conclusion of the study.

An Attachment Perspective in Working with Children in Residential Care

John Bowlby and later attachment theorists expounded the idea that children become attached to their caregiver regardless of how they are treated. A child with a solid emotional foundation carries an internal sense of accessibility to the attachment figure whether or not the figure is actually present at any given time. This attachment bonds are crucial not only because they protect the child and maintain his security but also they form an integral part of subsequent love relationships. In the course of interacting with others, their expectations about relationships are slowly internalized into working models of the world, self and significant others. This internal working models influence the way a person construes his experience and hence how he behaves.

Bowlby (1951) noted that children in institutions often believe that they were sent away from home because they were naughty. This misconception is made even more terrifying and distressing by the fact that it remained unexpressed. At other times, the children imagined that the breaking up of their homes was their fault. Despite these negative perception of their worth in the family, however, the deep attachment which these children had for their parents, even if they were exceedingly bad and had given them little affection, makes it difficult for them to change *loyalties*. Unless these confusions were cleared up and these loyalties respected, these children would remain anchored in an unsatisfactory past, endlessly trying to find their mother and refusing to adapt to the new situation to make the best of it. Failure of caregivers to acknowledge the struggle of children on the *issue of loyalty* is the source of problems for many children in residential care.

Bloom-Feshbach, et al. , (1987) noted that persistence of insecure attachment into adult life may impair a person's ability to modify his internal working models even when he is already dealing with persons who treat him in ways entirely unlike those his parents adopted when he was a child. Nevertheless, Bowlby (1979) acknowledged that change can occur with changing experiences. Greenberg, et. al., (1990) noted that the therapist can become the attachment figure to the client who uses him as a secure base from which he can re-examine his working models of attachment figures and of self, re-evaluate them in the light of subsequent experience, and revise them if they are perceived as no longer pertinent to his present circumstances.

Teyber (1992) pointed out that the therapist's role is not to encourage their clients to reject their parents but to help them come to realistic terms with their actual experience, change their own responses to problematic others in current relationships, and affirm their legitimate, unmet needs for more secure, positive attachments that are not fraught with excessive love withdrawal. More importantly, the therapist provides a corrective emotional experience by remaining available in a consistent manner to children with attachment difficulty. Leik, et al. (1991) further pointed out that if children are given the opportunity to be with an understanding adult to express their grief and anger, then the wound left by the loss and trauma becomes visible and can be healed.

Howe (1996) cites Aldgate (1991) as providing a useful review of the relevance of attachment theory for child care social work. In broad terms, social workers have to consider how to maintain, strengthen or provide "affectional bonds" and good quality attachment experiences for children brought to their attention. Behind these aims lies the concept of "permanence". Children need to secure permanent selective attachment to one or more loving and responsive caregivers if they are to achieve healthy psychological development.

The foregoing brief review underscores that although attachment is anchored on early caregiver-child relationship and can influence later relationship with self and others, it has the possibility of being modified through subsequent changes in the caregiver-child relationship and by corrective experience in a helping relationship. The concept is useful in social work with children and their families and could be incorporated from assessment to after care services. With this as a backdrop, this article will then move on to discuss the use of *serial drawing* as a medium for empowering children in residential care.

Serial Drawing as a Medium for Empowering Children in Residential Care

Client Empowerment has been a consistent theme within the social work profession for over a century. Responses to economic conditions included social reforms and the development of social work methods, ranging from concrete assistance to child protective services. Social work history attest to the changing perspective from focus on *social control* of the poor to an emphasis on self-determination and empowerment (Simon, 1994).

Empowerment seeks to help clients gain power of decision and action over their own lives by reducing the effect of social or personal blocks to exercising existing power, by increasing capacity and self-confidence to use power and by

transferring power from the environment to clients. Empowerment practice requires practitioners to understand the significance of power in social relationships.

In its most positive sense, *power* is (1) the ability to influence the course of one's life; (2) an expression of self-worth; (3) the capacity to work with others to control aspects of public life; and (4) access to the mechanisms of public decision making (Payne, 1997).

In this study, serial drawing was predominantly used as a medium to empower children. According to John Allan (1988):

Serial drawing is a therapeutic approach whereby the counselor meets on a regular basis with the child and simply asks the child to draw a picture. When children draw in the presence of the counselor on a regular basis, themes depicting trauma, the transference, the struggle with ambivalent feelings, reparations and healings are revealed. Many use one main symbolic theme as the vehicle for change, and with counseling the symbol changes from the initial damaged form to one reflective of healthy functioning. In the middle stages of treatment, children often use the content of the drawing as a bridge to direct verbal disclosures. Termination images tend to depict the emergence of self-confidence, restoration of the lost object, humor, the experience of nurturance, removal of attachment to the counselor, and emerging independence.

The time and place variables act as a sanctuary space, a time out of ordinary time, that together with a positive therapeutic alliance-fosters psychological growth and transformation. Over time, a relationship is formed, problems are expressed symbolically in the drawings, and healing and resolutions of inner conflict can occur.

The subject of this study were ten children ages 6 to 9 years old under the care of a government institution for abandoned, neglected and dependent children. The helping intervention consisted of eight regular weekly one hour casework sessions with each of them. *Serial drawing* was used as a medium to facilitate communication between the child and social worker. The child was simply asked to draw whatever s/he wishes in the presence of the social worker

and was encouraged to talk about it. Free or partially directed drawings were resorted to depending on the child's readiness. The *house-tree-person* series focused on the family was often suggested for partially directed sessions.

Each child was given by the caseworker a monthly calendar where the schedule for the next sessions was marked by the child or by the social worker in consultation with the child. This ritual was purposely introduced to allow the child to participate in scheduling the sessions and to experience relating with an adult who is available in a consistent manner during the helping relationship. After each session, the child colors the date in the calendar. The sessions were conducted in an interviewing room to give the child an experience of privacy and ownership of space even for a short period.

The flow of the individual treatment session could be briefly outlined as follows:

1. Brief friendly greeting exchanged between the child and the worker; child colored the date of the session in his/her calendar.
2. Child recapitulated the activities and feelings experienced while undergoing the activities during the previous session.
3. Child usually drew freely what s/he wanted or consulted the worker. Some children made comments or talked while drawing, while many drew in silence.
4. Child and worker discussed events and feelings evoked in the drawing as the starting point. Processing of child's feelings and modified holding technique prevailed.
5. Child summarized what was discussed during the session and his/her feelings about them.
6. Worker and child agreed on and marked the date of the next session; cleared up the table; and bade each other goodbye. Some children suggested the topic for the next session.
7. As early as the fifth (5th) session, child was informed by the worker that there were only three sessions left. Some children who negotiated for an extension at this point were assured that there was still enough time left for them to discuss their concerns during the remaining sessions.

8. During the termination of the eighth (8th) session, child was asked what topic s/he remembered most about the sessions. Each one of them was also given a box of crayons as a parting gift. This was thought as a transition object to symbolize the relationship that transpired with the caseworker. It helped enable the child to stand the stress of separation inevitable in the termination of the helping relationship.

Although a counselor in Canada developed *serial drawing* as a therapeutic approach, its universal applicability for use in working with children is evident. In the Philippines, drawing had been widely used as a diagnostic tool in the field of psychology. Social workers can take the challenge of exploiting its use as a *therapeutic* medium in working with disadvantaged Filipino children whose verbal capacity to express their painful thoughts and feeling may be hampered by a traumatic experience. Moreover, the use of drawing in therapeutic intervention has the advantage of being economical and easy to conduct considering that direct service social workers in general do not have access to costly therapeutic materials and equipment such as toys, dolls, etc. used for play therapy. This paper is an attempt to illustrate the use of drawing, a pictorial language, as a major tool for communicating and working with children.

A Case Example to Illustrate the Process of Empowerment in Institutionalized Children

RAYMOND, 8 YEARS OLD, GRADE I

Case background

Raymond is a son of a "hostess/call girl" who left him when he was still a few months old. The child lived with several families until he was finally admitted to the institution at the age of seven. He was referred to a child-caring institution by the media crew who found him in the street.

The social worker was able to locate the last family who took care of him about six months before he became a street child. This family with three grown up daughters was no longer interested in keeping him. According to the family members, Raymond is spoiled and troublesome; he even engaged in petty stealing when he was with them.

After a year of futile efforts to locate his birth mother, the child was declared abandoned by the Court. He was being considered for foreign adoption placement since no local family was available to adopt him.

Since he was admitted to the institution, Raymond has been performing well at his cottage (living quarters) and in school. Raymond's psychological test results, however, revealed strong feelings of inferiority, rejection and depression. He had an inadequate self-concept which made him develop anxiety in integrating with his environment. The psychologist also noted presence of sibling rivalry and "*un-attachment*" to a mother figure.

Since his overall score in the attachment projective test was fairly low, he was included among the children to undergo casework, using serial drawing as the main therapeutic approach.

The helping relationship also intended to prepare him for the separation from the institution and eventual attachment to a new family, both of which are inevitable in adoption placement.

CASEWORK SESSIONS

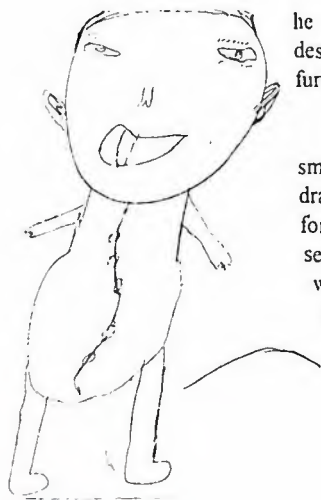
Session I

Raymond was asked to draw the house-tree-person (H-T-P) series. His house with stairs was very big in proportion to the tree. He spent some time erasing and reinforcing the steps represented by lines. He drew his family outside the house; he himself was a distance away as he was picking fruits from the tree. This same tree separated his father from his mother and his younger brother.



His mother was drawn bigger than all the other family figures. The color of his attire was similar to his father's while his mother and younger brother wore the same color. He gave the names: Pamboy, Letty and Jun for his father, mother and brother, respectively. Raymond seemed to perceive his mother as the dominant figure in the family and someone closest to the youngest child.

Since there was still time left for the session, he was further asked to draw a person. He described the person to be himself without further elaboration.



When asked how he found the session, he smiled and said that he felt "happy" (*masaya*) drawing. He asked when he would come back for the next session. The schedule for the next session was marked on his monthly calendar which he brought back to his cottage to be shown to his houseparent.

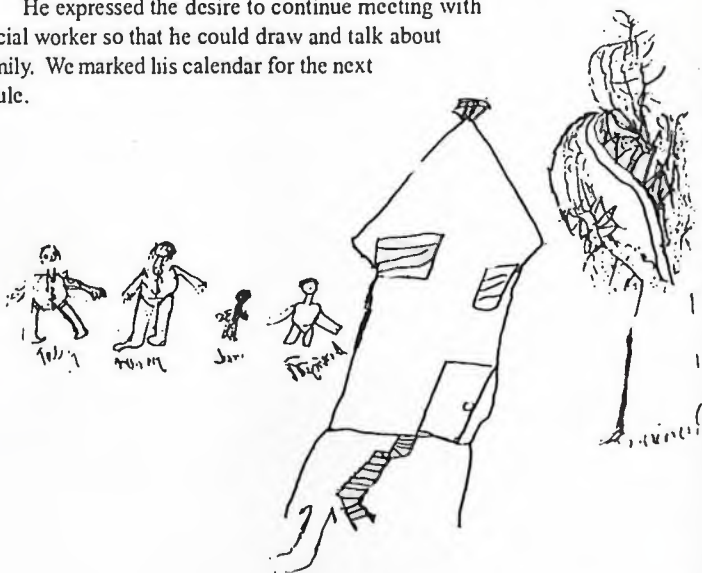
Session 2

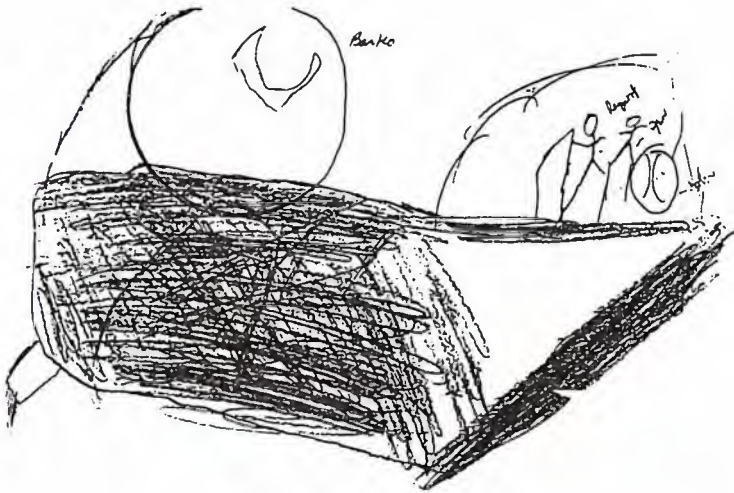
Raymond was instructed to draw anything he wanted and he again drew an H-T-P series. This time, the figures representing his family were smaller than those in the previous session. The mother, however, remained to be the dominant figure. The house separated the family and the tree. The mother and the father were beside each other while the younger brother and Raymond were next in sequence. The stairs of the house were more intricate, appearing somewhat winding. The tree was less leafy and without fruits but clearly rooted.

In explaining his drawing, Raymond said that his father was working as a driver while his mother was cooking and selling barbecue. He said he was playing with his younger brother. When asked if he wished to color his work, he simply blackened his younger brother and opted not to put any color on the rest. He narrated that he was angry with his brother for destroying his toy car so he hit him. As a result, he was sent out of the house.

Raymond was allowed to fully express his anger towards Jun by further coloring him. He did so and added the same black color. Although he sounded and looked sad while speaking, he said that, anyway, he prefers to live in the institution than in their house.

He expressed the desire to continue meeting with the social worker so that he could draw and talk about his family. We marked his calendar for the next schedule.





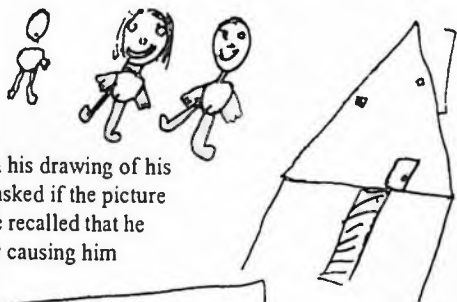
Session 3

Raymond was asked to draw whatever he wanted. He drew a round figure floating on a heavily shaded surface; at the other side were two boys playing with a ball. He preferred not to color his drawing.

With a mixed tone of joy and sadness, Raymond described his drawing to be that of his birthparents' boat trip to Batangas. They were away for three (3) days. He and his younger brother were having fun playing ball. He then expressed the desire to return home. However, he realized that his family could no longer be found so he is staying in the institution until he will have adoptive parents like the other children. He shared the prospect of eventually going abroad and joining an adoptive family in a matter of fact manner.

When he was told that the session was about to end, he asked for his next schedule.

Session 4



Raymond was shown his drawing of his family in session #2 and was asked if the picture reminded him of anything. He recalled that he was angry with his brother for causing him to be sent away from home.

He confided that he misses his family and every night, he prays for forgiveness from Jun by saying: "*Diyos, sana patawarin ako ni Jun*" ("God, I wish I will be forgiven by Jun").

The feeling of guilt was so strong that he was assured that Jun must be missing him too and surely had forgiven him. He willingly accepted the suggestion that he re-word his prayer into good wishes for Jun instead of asking forgiveness. With minimal help in writing down what he verbally formulated, he came up with a revised prayer: "*Diyos, sana ilagay mo po sa mabuting kalagayan si Jun at pati po rin ang Nanay at Tatay ko*" (God, I wish you will see to it that Jun is in fine condition so with my mother and father too").

It was proposed that he further add: "*Diyos, sana ihanap mo ako ng bagong magulang na mamahalin ako at mamahalin ko rin*" (God, I wish you will find me a parent who will love me and whom I will also love"). He repeated the prayer and memorized it almost instantaneously during the session.

Since there was still time left, Raymond was requested to draw what he wished his prospective adoptive parents would be. He drew a garden plot, a house and a smiling couple with one child. The mother had a more dominant head than the father did and a faintly drawn boy was moving towards the couple. He explained that he wished to be the first child and hoped that his adoptive parents will not be "*salbahe*" (unkind). He share that his former mother was "*salbahe*" because he punished him.

The difference between "parental cruelty" and "discipline" was clarified; the latter was qualified to be meant for his welfare. It was explained that adoptive parents are chosen for their good qualities so his desire and prayer for "loving parents" will possibly be granted.

Session 5

Raymond was asked to share what he remembered of the previous session. He recalled we changed his prayer for Jun and recited the revised prayer spontaneously as requested: "*Diyos, sana ihanap mo ako ng bagong magulang na mamahalin ako at mamahalin ko rin*" (God I wish you will find me a parent who will love me and whom I will also love").

When asked what he would draw during the session, he enthusiastically drew a cat and colored it. The cat's body was black while the face was violet. He explained that he is fond of cats. Right now, they are caring for a stray cat in their cottage which they house in the storeroom at night.

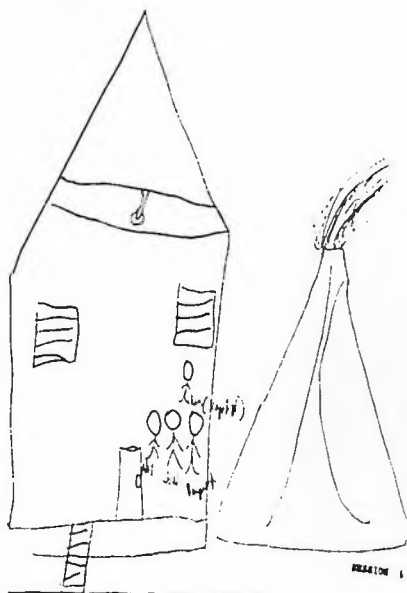
Raymond said he had a yellow kitten when he was still living with his family. We talked about CARING and he narrated that he likes to take care of the younger children in his cottage. He helps them wash up after going to the toilet and bathes them as he used to do with his younger brother, Jun. This personal quality of caring was affirmed as something he should cherish; he reacted with a smile.

He was informed too that the caseworker would be leaving the agency soon and that they would have only three sessions more. He counted the marked days in the calendar and negotiated if he could add two more days to make five more sessions. He was told that it might not be possible as the caseworker had to go back to teaching and he would also be going to school so it would be difficult to find a common time. He asked if the sessions could be scheduled on Saturdays since he had no classes. Raymond was assured of visits whenever the caseworker had some free time. He was reminded that they could still discuss many things with the three sessions left.



Session 6

Raymond drew a house near a volcano. There were four boys inside the house; three of about the same size were together while a smaller boy was behind them. He named the three to be Alex, Jun and himself while the small boy behind them was his younger brother, Jun. The four of them were playing in their house in the province. He recalled that they were happy and had lots of fun while on vacation in the province.



Since there was still time left for the session and Raymond had nothing more to relate, he was asked to recite his prayer for Jun and to draw himself praying. He joyfully drew a person in gesture of prayer with the hands folded. We wrote his revised prayer on the same sheet.

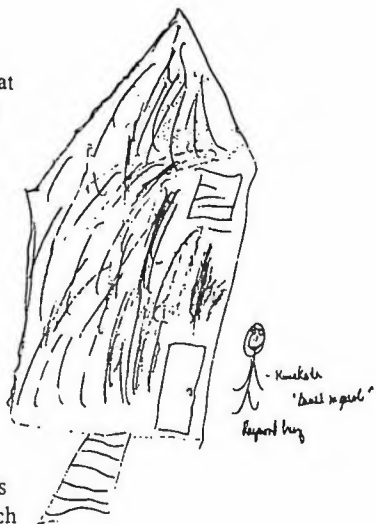
This drawing of the human figure looked more proportional compared to his earlier drawing of himself in session #1. He looked pleased with his output and with his ability to say the prayer by memory.



When asked how he felt about his family, he responded that while he no longer felt as sad thinking about them as before, he still yearned to see them. He also shared that he was happy to learn from his social worker that an adoptive family had been found for him.

Session 7

Raymond was asked to draw what he wanted and he came up with a house and a child standing outside but facing the door. He described the child to be singing the popular song about drug addiction, "*Bawal na Gamot*" (prohibited drugs). He confidently sang the song and remarked that recently, he almost got into a fight because his classmate from the community teased him as "*unano*" (dwarf).

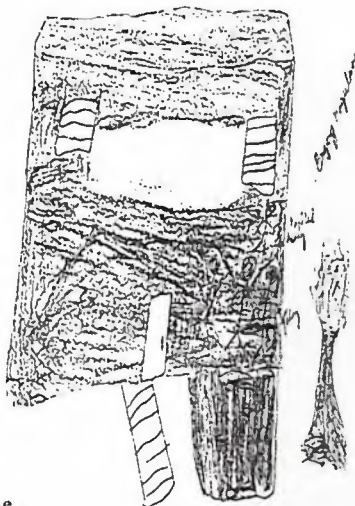


His "feeling of inferiority" regarding his size was discussed. His good physical and personal qualities such as his good looking features, diligence, caring attitude, etc. were pointed out. He was also made to realize that he was not really that small for his age but some boys may indeed be taller. The latter would continue to tease him if he allowed himself to get provoked so it would be better to ignore them until they get tired and stop. He was observed to be listening attentively, with an expression of filial admiration on his face.

When asked what he would talk about for the final session, he suggested that we talk about his new family.

Session 8 (Last session)

Raymond was asked to draw his adoptive family. He drew a house, with himself beside his mother and father inside the house. A sister named Nancy was behind them. He divided the house into layers of five different colors - violet, yellow, green, blue, orange. The stairs were not colored and were drawn simply, compared to his previous drawings of stairs. He described this family as happy. Outside the house was a tree full of leaves and with a trunk, which looked sturdy and firmly planted.



He told the caseworker that he would soon join his adoptive family. He asked if he could see the caseworker before he leaves for abroad; she gave him her telephone number and address so he or the staff can call her before his departure.

Worker discussed how he felt about the session together. He described them to be enjoyable since he liked drawing and felt good talking about the happy and sad events. When asked to express the casework sessions in drawing, he expressed reluctance because he did not know how to draw persons in sitting position. He drew himself and the caseworker standing and colored the dresses brown and red, respectively. The subject they talked about which he would remember most was about his past family and his prayer.



Discussion/Summary

Rapport was established with Raymond during the projective test administration and other informal contacts with him in the cottage and in the playground. Nevertheless, he was not yet secure with the worker in bringing any painful or negative material during the first session. He drew his family with happy facial expressions and agreed to color them when the worker made the suggestion. He spoke minimally but was attentive in following worker's words and behavior. Worker purposely did not ask him to elaborate or give details about his family beyond what he volunteered to give.

In the succeeding sessions, he progressively revealed his ambivalent feelings of resentment and desire to be reunited with his family. He strongly believed that he was sent away by his family because he hurt his younger brother who destroyed his toy car. While he expressed hatred towards his brother in the second session, he spoke of happy events with him and remembered him fondly in the latter sessions. A feeling of guilt was evident in his daily night prayer asking forgiveness from his younger brother, which he said he had been saying since he was separated from his family. In one of the later sessions, he has expressed anger towards his mother whom he described as "*salbahe*" (wicked) as she had subjected him to physical punishment.

The helping relationship allowed Raymond to talk about his happy and painful memories and ambivalent feelings towards his family. He was helped to deal with his feelings of guilt by changing his daily evening prayer of asking for forgiveness to one of good wishes for his family. His positive qualities, particularly his caring attitude, were reaffirmed while his feeling of inferiority over his physical size was diverted during the sessions.

Acceptance of his permanent separation from his family and anticipation of a new family seemed to naturally flow as the helping relationship progressed and painful experiences were unburdened. This development was visible in the difference between his drawing of himself in the first and sixth sessions, as well as his other serial drawings. A symbolic image noted was the "staircase" of his house, which was drawn with ease and simplicity as the relationship progressed.

Likewise his attachment projective posttest result showed improvement in self-esteem and avoidance response but a decline in attachment – self-reliance balance. This meant, Raymond gained a feeling of efficacy and competence as well as acceptance of his real feelings. Accompanying this improvement, however, was a slight regression in his attachment need. The helping relationship may have resulted in Raymond's gaining a sense of adequacy and competence to

face the reality of separation but slightly regressed his ability to maintain attachment – self-reliance balance. According to Hansburg (1980), this balance is a kind of seesaw relationship, alternating, depending upon the degree to which the individual feels separation. Thus, while Raymond learned to feel good about him and is now able to accept his real feelings, he simultaneously has an increased attachment need at the expense of his self-reliance or capacity for individuation, which may be attributed to an intense feeling of separation. This seems understandable with the termination of casework sessions, approaching departure from the institution and adoption placement.

Prior to his departure, the worker visited the agency and showed him a colored pictorial book on the country where he will be going. He also introduced his adoptive family by sharing to the worker the photos they sent.

SYNTHESIS/CONCLUSION


Enabling children to tell their stories and thoughts, allowing them to express their feelings, and designating a regular time and place for worker-child relationship proved beneficial:

First, by giving these children a “voice”, an unusual experience for them who are seldom listened to and who have never thought their point of view were worth considering, enabled them to understand their life situation and reconstruct their experiences of powerlessness. This is a crucial element of empowerment of children. During the helping process, young children can open and share his/her inner world to the social worker through simple means as drawing, so together they can understand and restructure his/her world. As the relationship progress, children often gain and manifest power to control their personal situation.

Second, the partnership between the social worker and the child is a significant aspect of empowerment. Empowerment-based practice requires one to redefine the helping process as one of “shared power” and “power with” and as “participant driven,” with the professional becoming a “facilitator” or resource rather than a director. In this practice, clients and workers act as partners. This partnership does not suggest that the social worker unconditionally accept all attitudes, behaviors, or decisions of clients. Instead, it suggests a relationship of dialogue and critical analysis in which social workers and clients can discuss and analyze the multiple dimensions of a situation. An open and collaborative relationship can facilitate the critical awareness necessary for individuals to make effective decisions and use their power constructively (Gutierrez, 1998).

Third, since financial resources are often beyond the control of child welfare practitioners, it is crucial that social workers should be challenged to offset such setback through the use of their "professional self". Their professional skills should help children sort out their inner conflicts and confusion about their past and current situation and to link them towards their future. These sense of continuity will provide a secure base for them to develop healthy bonding capability and interpersonal relationships. Investment of regular time by social workers handling institutionalized children is crucial in letting young children become actively involved in the helping relationship. Thus, children should take an active role in managing their case and should not get the impression that social work case management is a "magical or mysterious" process that decides their destiny.

Overall, the results of this study were very reassuring and encouraging. It showed that empowerment at the micro level does not necessarily entail specialized interventions. It highlighted that investment of regular time by social workers handling institutionalized children is crucial in letting young children become actively involved in the helping relationship. This is the essence of empowerment.

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