

# Psychomotor Therapy as a Potential Space of Encounter

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I'm going to start with the description of a seemingly insignificant scene which takes place in a preschool playgroup. Laura is three-and-a-half years old. She is sitting on the ground in a corner of the room, playing with building bricks and small wooden and plastic toy figures. She is playing by herself, while the teacher, an experienced practitioner, is engaged with the other children. I ask myself, as I observe the scene: What is going on in the inner world of Laura? What is going on in the head of the playgroup teacher, as she sees Laura playing by herself? I can only speculate. I interpret what I observe based on my theoretical knowledge and my experiences with the child and the playgroup teacher.

My first thought is: The act of playing takes place in a room that is created by the teacher, the other kids and Laura herself. It is far more than a room in the physical sense. It is a socially constructed room – one could call it a relational room.


A second thought: Laura is absorbed in the playing with the building bricks and the figures and at the same time she is at one with herself. The English pediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott (1991) spoke of an intermediate space, because the objects Laura is playing with belong to both her external world of objects as well as to her inner world.

## Abstract / Zusammenfassung

A concept of psychomotor therapy is presented based on a case-example, as seen from the perspective of modern psychoanalytic theory. The main theme is the relationship between the therapist and the child. Both the possible gains and the challenges of therapeutic work in this field are discussed, as well as the limits. The latter are most commonly a result of either a) resistance in the child or in his family environment to change or b) the personality of the therapist or c) the fact that human understanding is in itself limited. Psychomotor therapy is discussed against the background of a school-system in which the therapeutic approach is either basically accepted or rejected, depending on how the aim and meaning of education is viewed by the school.

 **Keywords:** psychomotricity, play, potential space, creativity, recognition, basic acceptance, encompassing education

Basierend auf modernen psychoanalytischen Überlegungen wird ein Konzept psychomotorischer Therapie anhand eines Fallbeispiels behandelt. Im Zentrum steht die Gestaltung der Beziehung zwischen Therapeut und Kind. Möglichkeiten und Herausforderungen in der therapeutischen Arbeit werden diskutiert. Begrenzungen werden sichtbar gemacht – sie liegen in der Begrenztheit menschlichen Verstehens, im Widerstand des Kindes oder des familiären Umfelds gegen Veränderung, unter Umständen auch in der Person des Therapeuten. Diskutiert wird die psychomotorische Arbeit im Rahmen einer Schule, die den therapeutischen Ansatz anerkennt oder zurückweist – je nach ihrem Verständnis dessen, was der Bildungsauftrag ist.

 **Schlüsselbegriffe:** Psychomotorik, Spiel, potenzieller Raum, Kreativität, Anerkennung, fundamentale Akzeptanz, umfassende Erziehung

Laura, this is a third point, is playing all by herself, but she is not really alone. Much rather, to refer to Winnicott (1965) again, it is a being alone in the presence of the teacher and the other kids. Laura is alone and at the same time she feels safe and secure.

My fourth thought is: The teacher is aware of the playing child. She leaves Laura to herself and she is pleased with her independent act of playing. She does not interfere. She does not constantly praise her. She comments on her playing only in a by-the-way manner.

Another thought comes to my mind: Laura's playing is not about winning. It is not about being better than others.

The room Laura is playing in, this is a sixth point, is a potential space. It is open-ended in terms of results. Laura does not have a distinct plan. The playing does not unfold according to externally defined rules.

And, this is a last thought, the scene reflects the aspect of flowing time. There is no clock setting the rhythm. There is no time management that Laura or the teacher have to comply with.

### **Why are moments of play like this important for Laura's experience of her self, her self-esteem, her relations to others?**

In this act of playing Laura is the author of what she does. She creates her life out of her inner reality, from within herself. Such experiences strengthen her sense of self.

Laura, this is a second conclusion, learns to play with different possibilities. She learns that there are different possibilities as to how reality can

develop. She learns that there are different possibilities as to how a task can be approached.

A third conclusion: Laura's playing is not being compared to how other children play. Nothing has to be accomplished, there are no standards to be met. Laura learns that what she is doing and how she is doing it is o.k., even though she receives no explicit validation, praise or otherwise positive reinforcement from the outside.

And last but not least: On the one hand, the scene illustrates the child's autonomy and freedom and, on the other hand, emotional security and dependence on the teacher. Such experiences reinforce a confident sense of attachment, togetherness and community in a child. They enhance a child's basic trust in others.

### **What does this simple scene have to do with psychomotricity?**

Psychomotor-therapists are not very likely to encounter children like Laura. But still, the scene I have presented can be seen as relevant to an everyday professional practice.

Let us assume you are a psychomotor-therapist at an elementary school. Twice a week you work with three children from different classes in your own working space. One of these children is a boy, his name is Jamie. Jamie is a difficult kid. Unlike in Laura's case it is not as easy to create a potential space together with Jamie. It is not as easy to build up a relationship with him. Using his example, I will discuss the possibilities, difficulties and challenges of work in the field of psychomotricity.

The idea of space as potential space and the idea of space as a space of encounter is at the core of my presentation. Such a space is part of a larger context shaped by institutions – the school for example – public authorities and relatives. Not least, such a space is part of a larger social and political space. The wider context I just outlined can be beneficial to the development of the child, but it can also limit and constrain psychomotor approaches.

### **Jamie**

Jamie is eight years old. His parents separated early in his life. Even before and especially after the divorce, his parents carried out a battle for Jamie. The court awarded full custody of both Jamie and his younger sister to the mother. The father, however, fought and continues to fight against his ex-wife and the authorities. He has a strong influence on Jamie who, contrary to the agreement, keeps seeing his father outside the visiting times. Jamie lives in a constant battle with both his mother and his younger sister. He will not listen to anything his mother tells him.

Jamie is in second grade. He is – so it says in the school report – a restless child, unable to concentrate on anything. School does not interest him. There is not one single school subject in which he performs well. He is disruptive in class. Towards his teachers, especially female teachers, he shows arrogant and defiant behavior. The other kids do not seem to like him. Sometimes he tries to buy other kids approval with sweets, mostly though he chooses an aggressive approach, threatening and pressuring others. Jamie is not an easy child. He is not a likeable child.

## Seen from my theoretical perspective, what is Jamie's problem?

For Jamie school is not an intermediate space. It is not a potential space. Despite his high intelligence, Jamie primarily experiences his own failure during class. He feels empty and bored. There is none of the curiosity-evoking intermediate space which we have seen with Laura, where things have their own intrinsic value and become part of a child's inner world.

Laura is a child who can play by herself. Jamie is incapable of doing so. He cannot bear to be alone. Therefore he is constantly on the move. He has to touch other children, even if they feel uncomfortable with it. He has to make himself felt, seen and heard at all times, even if it means disrupting the class and provoking sanctions. Moments of being alone leave a vague but intolerable feeling of unease.

If Laura can play by herself without comparing herself to others, then Jamie's world is defined by dimensions of winning or losing, of being in power or being powerless. Jamie runs the risk of developing what child psychologist Erik Erikson (1994) referred to as a negative identity. Being one amongst many for him is like being a nobody. He therefore seems to keep telling himself and others, that he is through and through a difficult child, a failure in school and an outsider.

Jamie is a child who only submits to someone stronger than himself – the father, a strict teacher, a boy who is bigger and stronger than him. If it is a female teacher, someone he does not accept as naturally superior, he himself tries to be dominant. But essentially he is a child with an insecure sense of attachment. He has no trust

in himself and particularly no trust in other people. What shaped him was the humiliating role of the accomplice of his father, a role that he had to take on at home. His dad would only love him on the condition that he joined forces with him against his mother. That is not unconditional love. Much rather it is love based on a condition that is destructive for Jamie's self-respect. Jamie is not allowed to admit his desire for affection from his mother to himself. He is not allowed to admit his grief over the loss of his mother to himself. He is not allowed to admit his anger towards the abusive father to himself.

Furthermore, Jamie is a child who cannot play with possibilities. If he is unable to find a solution to certain tasks, he gives up entirely. He does not test out other ways to reach a solution. He takes objective criticism personally. He does not ask himself what his part in the problem could be. He does not possess the ability to empathize with the inner world of another human being in order to realize that indeed he can have an opinion, but that someone else might perhaps have a very different one. When another child bumps into him by mistake, Jamie considers it to be an act of deliberate aggression – he does not even consider the possibility that it could be anything else. The ability to play with possibilities is imperative for living in a complex social world. Such an ability is a basic requirement for participating in a democratic society.

### What does Jamie need?

The intermediate space is a relational space, which means it can only emerge when both the child and the therapist engage in a relationship

with each other. But that is the problem. Jamie does not want to engage. He has, as we know from attachment theories, a natural disposition for bonding. But bonding implies intimate closeness and emotional dependency. Jamie has experienced closeness and dependency only in the context of emotional abuse when his parents fought for their children against each other. In such conflicts, he could only be loyal to one parent while being disloyal to the other. Jamie experienced dependency only in the form of submission and hence of power or powerlessness. Jamie is a child full of fears, full of distrust and full of shame. So how can I, as a psychomotor-therapist help Jamie open up, so that he can also open up to his own inner world?

Recognition is one aspect of encounter. Recognition means more than just approval in the sense of positive reinforcement. When I recognize a child, I accept the way he or she is. Of course, such a basic acceptance does not imply that I approve of everything. The therapist should and must deal with him in a critical manner too. At the same time there is something we all need on an existential level – the feeling that we are met with basic acceptance.

### What does basic acceptance look like?

How exactly should the therapist react when Jamie throws his jacket on the ground before entering the room? When he refuses to tidy up after class? When he lets his therapist know that his dad thinks everything that takes place here is entirely unnecessary? Again and again he involves his therapist in struggles for power. Jamie pro-

vokes. The question is always: Who wins? Who loses?

I see three possible options of how to react in such situations.

Which is the first possible option? Here the therapist asserts dominance by reacting with rigor and punishment. She is able to get Jamie to submit to her. As in his relationship with his dad he accepts that there is someone superior, someone he has to submit to. This confirms Jamie's experience of a world divided into winners – those who are worth something – and losers – those who are worth nothing. In this case, Jamie would be a loser – unless he identifies with the person who is on top and represents power.

Or, and there is the second option, the psychomotor-therapist does not assert her dominance but submits to the dictates of Jamie. Perhaps initially she tries to assert herself but eventually becomes discouraged and gives up. Perhaps she is not willing to take part in endless demonstrations of power, they tire her out and frustrate her. She may let Jamie get away with his behavior and she may be just glad when class is over. In these cases, Jamie – superficially speaking – would have won. Again it would confirm his experience that you either are a winner or a loser. Now he is a winner – at least in his own subjective perception. And his father confirms this view. But Jamie's victory proves to be an illusion. What remains is a stale taste of emptiness and, more than anything, of loneliness. He won, yes – but now it is like he is standing on top of a high tower with no one to catch him if he falls.

Both patterns of behavior are questionable. But there is a third option. It rests upon the assumption that the therapist is aware of Jamie's inner world – of his loneliness, his fear,

his misery, his shame. This allows the therapist to remain calm and composed during a conflict or when provoked. It is for her not a question of dominance and superiority. However, she insists that the rules of the class are respected. She insists that Jamie accepts and respects the responsibility of the therapist with regard to what takes place within the therapy-setting. It is, after all, the personal integrity of the therapist which is at stake. So, in order to preserve her own integrity, she cannot submit to Jamie's behavior. And, equally, if she wants to protect Jamie's integrity then repression is out of the question – because repression implies a personal claim of dominance and even rejection.

In the best of cases, Jamie is able to make an essential and novel experience: He manages to stop classifying his therapist according to his familiar patterns of perception, in categories of good and evil, in categories of losers and winners. The therapist revokes herself, so to speak, from Jamie's deadlocked inner images of how the world is and how it is supposed to be. Instead, in these moments, the therapist is a subject and therefore a living, independent, self-confident person. As such, she simultaneously recognizes the subjectivity of the child. This would be the first step towards an encounter and therefore towards the building of a potential space that Jamie can benefit from.

It is a demanding challenge for the therapist that I express here. Not only does she need a wide range of knowledge. More than anything, she must be capable of applying these methods and knowledge in her work with such demanding children like Jamie. She must have the ability to empathize at least to some degree with Jamie's inner world, from which he himself is so reluctant to reveal even a little bit.

»I don't need you, I am completely independent« Jamie seems to be telling her »and who I am is none of your concern at all«. But the therapist's knowledge of modern attachment theories allows her to formulate the hypothesis that indeed a child like Jamie depends on attachment and on a basic recognition more than any other.

### Is our imagined picture of Jamie's inner world correct?

We can never be quite sure. But her theoretical knowledge allows the therapist to play with different possibilities of how Jamie's intentions, thoughts and feelings might be. Moreover this is a fundamental requirement for successful work. Persons want to be perceived as thinking, feeling individuals with their own personal intentions and desires – not just as mere bodies who behave in a certain way. It is therefore not that crucial that the therapist judges Jamie's intentions correctly. What is crucial is that she perceives him, essentially, as a child who thinks, feels and has intentions. It is the attempt of the therapist to understand that is most crucial.

And all this is anything but easy. Time and again Jamie really gets on the therapist's nerves. Sometimes she cannot bear his misogynist behavior, behind which she suspects the influence of his abusive father. Sometimes she physically cannot bear Jamie's restlessness. And when Jamie again and again brings her to her limits and lets her run into the wall that he has built, then she is confronted with inner impulses which are incompatible with her professional identity – the desire for revenge, anger, maybe even hatred and unconditional rejection. Not only Jamie's

inner world is full of mystery. If you allow yourself to enter into Jamie's world, then it can happen that your own inner world becomes a place of insecurity and strangeness as well.

There is no way around this: The therapist can only understand Jamie's inner world – only rudimentary and in the form of hypotheses – if she herself is willing to embark on a kind of ethnological journey into her own sometimes familiar, sometimes unfamiliar inner world.

The work with Jamie takes time and a lot of patience. In the best of cases her work over the course of the whole year will have a positive effect. Jamie becomes calmer. Every now and then he is absorbed in what he is doing – these are the rare and precious moments of being alone in the presence of others. Every now and then an encounter occurs between the therapist and the child or between Jamie and other children which is not characterized by winning or losing, by dominance or submission. Sometimes there are even moments of a playful and purposeless back and forth. Progress is not linear, not permanent. It is not a completely new Jamie who comes to class, and yet something essentially new emerges in the relationship between the child and the therapist, the child and the other children and not least in Jamie's relationship to himself. A part of his resistance towards himself and others has dissolved.

In 1937 Freud published his paper »Analysis Terminable and Interminable«, where he referred to three occupations as »impossible« professions. He meant teaching, governing and analyzing – Freud would have added psychomotor-therapy to his list of impossible professions. Why are these professions »impossible«? According to Freud you can only

be certain of one thing: that success is always »insufficient«. Why should psychomotor-therapy be insufficient? Because it never leads exactly to the aim the therapist has set for herself. Jamie's development depends on his own motivation to be receptive and open up to an encounter. He himself must be ready. He himself has to define the degree of attachment. The therapist is indeed most important with her professional ability, her curiosity, her emotional openness, her empathy and more than anything her security. However, it is the initiative of the child that is crucial.

And naturally the psychomotor-therapist has no guarantee of success. This can be primarily due to Jamie himself. Maybe his fear of change and of an encounter with the therapist is too big. Maybe his loyalty to his both idealized and yet mainly feared father stands in his way. Maybe his negative identity is already too solid, so that he is not able to question his image of the abnormally behaving child. Maybe his role as the outsider at school is already too solidified.

### Maybe part of the failure lies with the therapist?

Recognition – as American psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin (1996) points out – is a mutual process. Children can convey a feeling of recognition towards the therapist – when they are ready to get involved in an encounter with her, when they meet her with openness and friendliness or even when the therapist gets a better understanding of what is going on inside the inner world of another individual.

Jamie however is, what Jessica Benjamin calls a non-recognizing child. He does not meet the therapist

with friendliness. He is defiant and does not follow the rules the school and the therapist have set. He makes it extremely difficult for the therapist to meet Jamie with curiosity or even sympathy. It is difficult for her to understand Jamie's behavior from the perspective of his inner world. When he displays the macho and reacts coolly and in an arrogant way or when he mentions in a condescending way that the work of the psychomotor-therapist is useless, then she may feel that she is denied access to Jamie's inner world. Sometimes she may feel stressed, and when she is stressed she only sees a Jamie who disturbs but not a Jamie with an inner world of thoughts, feelings and intentions – of fear, shame, but although of hidden desire and hope.

It is demanding to work with children who are non-recognizing. Too much non-recognition can lead to a burnout. Therefore, the psychomotor-therapist herself needs a protected space – within a supervision or intervention for instance – that allows her to reflect upon and exchange with others about a child like Jamie and that allows her to play with possibilities of who he could be, why he acts the way he does and how one could behave towards him. She needs a room for exchange and for encounter with others, where she for her part feels recognized. Ideally, within such an exchange she re-discovers her own curiosity and openness towards her young clients.

But it is not just the personality of Jamie that determines whether it comes to a process of gradual opening up and to an increasing encounter with others and with himself. It is not just the personality of the therapist with her specific background and gender, her experience and her theoretical knowledge that matters. To



take things a step further, it is also not just the dominant and abusive father, who plays an unpleasant and perhaps all too influential role. The therapeutic space depends on the larger institutional space of the school too. The more integrated psychomotricity is into school, the more the work of the therapist is influenced by expectations, intentions, the culture of the institution.

It is crucial that Jamie's team of teachers understands and supports the concept of the psychomotor approach. It is important that Jamie is not just sent to psychomotor class in order for him to get to be calmer, better adjusted, better in control of his motoric behavior. If therapy is mainly about those valuable moments of mutual recognition, then mutual recognition needs to be a part of the relationship between the therapist and the teachers as well. This again depends on whether the psychomotor therapist can justify her objectives and methods convincingly. This is not easy, since she often only works part-time at a certain school and it is not easy if she is not involved with other psychomotor therapists on a day-to-day basis.

## The school itself is part of a wider social, political space.

The first mission of school is to prepare children for life as adults. It teaches them basic skills like reading, writing and math so that they can pursue a profession and lead a financially independent life. What kids learn in school has to be useful for later life. But school has an additional mission as well. It helps children develop the ability to reflect upon themselves, others and life in

a democratic society. It nurtures the children's abilities to work together with others in order to find joint solutions. School encourages curiosity and with it the readiness of the children to realign themselves again and again. In English there is only one term for both aspects of the school: education. In German, we distinguish between training and education – »Ausbildung« and »Bildung«. Both are important, both necessary. Which kind of education is being promoted and which kind is being rather neglected depends on prevailing social and political conditions.

Since the beginning of the 90s and even more so in the period after the year 2000, something fundamental has changed with respect to what school is supposed to be. While school back in the 70s and 80s was considered to be all encompassing, today a utilitarian idea prevails. Useful is – broadly speaking – what prepares children and teenagers for life in a globalized, competitive society.

In the eyes of the educational policy-makers following the utilitarian idea in an absolute way skills can be trained and what is trained can precisely be measured. Test scores can become the main benchmark for the student's capability. They can become the main benchmark for the quality of the teachers. And they can become the main benchmark for the quality of a particular school. In the US this concept of education prevails (Ravitch 2014). In Europe we can observe similar developments. In some parts of Switzerland all children are regularly assessed with standardized tests. But besides the testing with standardized instruments, more and more in school is being assessed, evaluated and allocated to seemingly objective categories. These assessments affect all areas and all

subjects. The content of an essay is being assessed in the same way as a drawing or the crafting of a carnival mask for the yearly parade. It affects children of all ages. It begins with Kindergarten. Since what can be assessed, evaluated and graded becomes more relevant and since what cannot be measured tends to appear less relevant, we can observe a shift of values and of priorities.

Let us look at the example of little Laura again. Is the way I presented her playing symptomatic for today's educational philosophy? We see a child playing by herself all alone, while feeling safe and secure. We see a child who is curious about the world and who learns from within. We see a playgroup teacher who is emotionally present, who is aware of Laura but – at least in this situation – does not interfere with the child. She recognizes the child's autonomy.

For me this is an example of what I call an encompassing education – which, next to learning and training should be an important aspect of school. I understand encompassing education as a process where a human being – in our case a young child – acquires knowledge out of curiosity, because he or she has an intrinsic desire to understand the world. Encompassing education is – though – an active process. Encompassing education is based on a vivid relationship between the child and the teacher, who in other situations may instruct the children, may be demanding, helpful or she may set limits. Encompassing education is about the inner world of a person. Encompassing education is not a product one can buy and sell. Encompassing education is something that cannot be captured by quantifying methods like standardized tests. How could I ever measure the being

alone of Laura in the presence of her playgroup teacher? How could I ever measure the ability of the playgroup teacher to stand back and not get actively involved?

When I read a story to my grandchildren, I support their development. I am very aware of that. But if I read to my grandchildren because I want to deliberately push them, so they may one day become more capable as other kids, I destroy the magic that lies beneath the shared act of reading, listening and fantasizing. The term »promoting« implies a »not-there-yet«, a »you can do it even better if you are being supported according to the right methods«. So behind this concept of early intervention hides the concept of a modern competitive society, for which we have to prepare even our youngest children.

What applies to Laura, applies to Jamie as well. Those aspects of being together, very often also in the sense of a being »against each other« – in the encounters with the therapist, in the encounters with the other children – those crucial moments when Jamie is absorbed in playing or when there is a purposeless back and forth – these moments cannot be measured. We cannot measure what happens between him and the therapist.

What is not measurable, becomes less valuable in a modern society which follows an economic ideal and within an educational field organized according to efficiency. The ideal of an encompassing education which includes the potential space I have been talking about is at risk of perishing. But it is exactly this ideal which underlies the work of psychomotricity which can help Jamie – on his way to becoming an autonomous, free human being, receptive of others and receptive of his own inner world.

Children like Jamie have always been dear to me. During my time as a lecturer I worked part-time as an advisor in youth institutions. I met Jamie, whom I portrayed as a child, as a teenager. One day his behavior in school had been deemed intolerable. At some point his behavioral problems had become prevalent. At some point – after a careful psychological evaluation – a juvenile court decided to send him to a home. In the three years of his stay little significant change in his personality occurred. He largely remained an outsider in the group he lived with and in school. He only rarely allowed himself to get emotionally involved with other people. His submission to his father remained. He refused to see his mother and his sister. His performance in school, however, improved a lot. He graduated from school, went on to live with his father and attended higher education.

The psychomotor-therapy with Jamie is fictional. Back then psychomotricity was not integrated into school. I wish it had been – within the setting I have outlined. A precondition for successful work would have been good collaboration between the teachers and the psychomotor-therapist. In order to do justice to Jamie's inner world it would – ideally – have required that all who were involved would have valued the idea of a broad all-compassing education. Psychomotricity as a potential space of encounter would have been an opportunity for Jamie.

This kind of psychomotricity as a potential space of encounter would also have presented an enriching opportunity for the psychomotor-therapist. Work that follows standards of adaptation and performance – this at least is my opinion – is less satisfying. Work is satisfying when it affects the inner world of a child. And equally

work is satisfying, when it affects one's own inner world. Work is satisfying when it engenders intermediate moments, when school or therapy offer spaces of encounter and mutual recognition and when such a space can involve into a potential space.

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