A Creative Drama Prevention Program for Easing Early Adolescents' Adjustment to School Transitions

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Described is a drama prevention program in a rural Grade 6-8 junior high school, designed to facilitate incoming students' transition to their new school environment by developing social skills. Extensive pilot work with a social skills curriculum based on creative drama in small groups suggested that it could be successful in strengthening peer relations. A subsequent intervention demonstrated positive findings according to student and teacher interviews, student and parent satisfaction measures, and comparison data from teacher and parent ratings. School staff implemented the curriculum independently in following years but with some modifications. The results indicate that creative drama groups have some usefulness for individual-centered primary prevention.

KEY WORDS: Adolescents; transitions; drama.

For well over a decade social skills training for children and adolescents has been a popular area of research and intervention (Strein, 1988). Besides cognitive interpersonal problem-solving (Weissberg et al., 1981), social skills training has been based on behavioral (Argyle, 1985; LaGreca & Santogrossi, 1980), affective (Elardo & Cooper, 1977), or combined approaches (Hepler & Rose, 1988; Nelson & Carson, 1988). While the results of this literature are somewhat positive (Bierman & Furman, 1984), a major conclusion is that training in solving peer problems can improve children's *knowledge* but not necessarily their actual performance of socially appropriate behavior nor their level of confidence in peer situations (Kazdin, Matson, & Esveldt-Dawson, 1984; Nelson & Carson, 1988; Strein, 1988). One explanation for these anomalies could be the fact that social skills

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training typically consists of an adult-directed, fixed curriculum with a structured lesson plan. Although the training can entail small group work, the method seems to ignore group processes, and if role-playing is employed, it is didactic in nature, explicitly related to the specific skill being taught.

A different means of strengthening social skills development is the use of creative (improvisational) drama in small groups (Walsh, 1990; Walsh, Kosidoy, & Swanson, 1991a; Walsh, Richardson, & Cardey, 1991b). The creative drama approach, grounded in experiential learning and group dynamics, relies on improvisational role-playing of pretend themes that usually are indirectly related to the students' problems. In "drama clubs," however, students do confront their social skills shortcomings, at least implicitly, because no drama can proceed without group cooperation. Students will experience a successful dramatic production to the extent that they take turns, share, listen to and understand peers' feelings, and solve the disagreements that arise naturally from creative play. Thus, they learn by doing and from peer feedback which have profound influences on children's cognitive and interpersonal development (Piaget, 1932). In addition, the creative drama approach draws upon the reality that the collective creation, enactment, and review of skits hold intrinsic appeal for most children and early adolescents. The adult leaders of drama groups encourage the students to explore the storylines and characters in the skits created, which typically evolve from familiar fairy tales, and they comment on, but not necessarily interpret, the members' behavior to heighten self-awareness. The leaders nurture group development by promoting a sense of belonging to the group, teamwork, and, as much as possible, *group* responsibility for interpersonal problem-solving (cf. Hillman, Penczar, & Barr, 1975).

Theoretically, play-acting permits ample occasions for identification with prosocial models of coping, for exploring issues emergent at particular developmental stages, and for vicarious learning, as the members observe one another's role enactments and their own, processes which can be enhanced by video playbacks (Walsh et al., 1991a; Walsh et al., 1991b). The drama medium also affords experimentation with a more adaptive range of emotional expression and with one's inner resources, such as imagination (Schattner & Courtney, 1981; Singer, 1973). Participation in creative drama demands a balance of concentration and spontaneity, requiring not only the controlled expression of emotions but also concentration and focused attention for quality enactments, because distractibility impedes creativity. Yet, the reward for coping with the natural boundaries of the drama medium is a sense of mastery and competency (Kivnick & Erikson, 1983). As the drama theorist Stanislavski (1948) noted, truthful dramatic acting is an integration of planning, feeling, and conscious and unconscious intending. Interestingly, the Stanislavski theory and method of drama are congruent

with Vygotsky's (1967) orientation to child and adolescent play, namely that imagination, interpretation, and will are interrelated with external action. Inasmuch as children's cognitive development is limited by their concreteness, pretend play can facilitate abstract, representational thinking by challenging children to express themselves metaphorically. Imaginative play enables children to take on the roles of individuals with perspectives different from their own, thereby stimulating movement from egocentric to more mature thinking (Piaget, 1951).

There is, in fact, some evidence from the developmental literature to support these propositions. Researchers have demonstrated the efficacy of fantasy play and drama activities for enhancing cognitive functioning, imagination, impulse-control, social perspective-taking, and peer relations in preschool and latency-age children (Saltz & Brodie, 1982; Schwartzman, 1978; Singer, 1973; Smilansky, 1968) and early adolescent boys (Chandler, 1973). Moreover, there is some modest research support for the therapeutic claims of creative drama for children and adolescents in the clinical literature (e.g., Nahme-Huang, Singer, Singer, & Wheaton, 1977; Walsh et al., 1991b) and from the interdisciplinary field of drama therapy (DeQuine & Pearson-Davis, 1983; Schattner & Courtney, 1981).

The developmental stages of preadolescence and early adolescence are particularly vulnerable times for students, in light of the biological, cognitive, social, and educational-environment changes they experience. One particularly stressful change is the natural progression from elementary to middle school or junior high. Students in transition often experience social-emotional difficulties, which can be reflected in lower grades, decreased satisfaction with school life, diminished psychological adjustment, and peer problems (Elias et al., 1986; Felner & Adan, 1988; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). From a prevention perspective, this period of adaptation can be critical, given that poor peer relations are predictive of mental health problems in later adolescence and adulthood (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981). But pre- and early adolescent students also show increasing desire for peer companionship and close friendships (Berndt & Perry, 1986; Selman, 1980), although boys are less likely to seek emotional intimacy from same-gender friends than girls (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987). Consequently, developing peer support at this age-level can facilitate students' transition to a new school environment (Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987).

One way to generate peer support and to enhance students' coping with scheduled school transitions, aside from restructuring school environments (Felner & Adan, 1988), is to provide individually-focused prevention programs based on a social problem-solving model prior to the transfer. For example, Elias et al. (1986) intervened with Grade 5 students in all four elementary schools of a district, prior to the students' progression to

a composite middle school. The students participating in full training ex-
ceeded their partially trained counterparts who in turn surpassed a com-
parison group on measures of coping with middle-school stressors. A
second example of a social problem-solving intervention is Hellem's (1990)
brief regimen of three sessions of stress reduction administered in the
spring term to Grade 6 students moving on to junior high in the fall. Com-
munity mental health staff encouraged the students in groups of 15 to dis-
cuss problem situations and role-play social skills. The students regarded
the program as helpful. An earlier and comparable program by Snow, Gil-
christ, Schilling, Schinke, and Kelso (1986), featuring stress-reduction train-
ing and some role-playing, was similarly successful according to most of
the student participants.

   Another way to ease pre- and early adolescents' adjustment to sched-
uled school transitions is by strengthening peer support through affiliation
and intimacy (Buhrmester & Furman, 1987; Selman, 1980). Recent studies
on creative drama used as secondary prevention indicate that it has bene-
ficial effects on peer relations for students in elementary and middle
schools (Walsh, 1990; Walsh et al., 1991a). It was in this spirit that I ex-
plored the application of creative drama to the problem of students' tran-
sition to middle school. The objectives of the present paper are: (a) to
describe the context, processes, and results of an intervention incorporating
teacher training; (2) to advance creative drama as a viable approach to
competency-based primary prevention and health promotion.

THE INTERVENTION

Pilot Study

   Background and Setting. Because of the perceived benefits of a sec-
ondary prevention social skills training program based on creative arts ac-
tivities that I coordinated, the school guidance counsellor requested my
assistance in co-designing an intervention to deal with a persistent problem
at her junior high school. Many entering Grade 6 students were distressed
for at least several months by major changes in academic, organizational,
and social demands. In attempting to cope with these pressures some stu-
dents withdrew socially in fear, whereas others tended to act out their dis-
tress, escalating peer problems and disrupting teachers' attempts to foster
a positive classroom climate. This school, located in an agricultural area,
is somewhat unique within its mainly suburban district of southwestern On-
tario in that its students graduate from three elementary schools (K-5) serv-
ing local rural communities. One of these "feeder" schools is quite small,

the other two quite large; all three develop strong cliques within them which tend to persist during the transition year of Grade 6, creating inter-group rivalries. Staff typically attempted to support the transition students by coaching them on organizational skills and minimizing their involvement in a rotary system of subjects with different teachers. More recently, the guidance counsellor initiated visits to the feeder schools and coordinated class trips to the receiving school to better prepare the Grade 5 students for the transition. Nevertheless, staff felt the need for improved supports.

Our primary intention was to provide the children with a supportive experience in small group drama sessions. We also wished to demonstrate to Grade 6 homeroom and core teachers the usefulness of creative drama as prevention. We hoped that in September 1989 the teachers would be-come co-leaders and that in September 1990 they would implement the programe independently. Accordingly, in early September 1988 we engaged the two core teachers for the three Grade 6 classes in organizing the pro-ject, assisted by two itinerant, resource teachers from the school board. We agreed that all students would receive the social-skills creative drama pro-grame as part of the language arts curriculum during 21 weekly 40-minute periods. The counsellor, resource teachers, and I, all experienced in the drama method, would lead the small groups, while the core teachers would observe the sessions and participate in post-session discussions as often as they could; in the spring term the core teachers would experiment with the regimen in their classes with consultation from the leaders; I would conduct a qualitative evaluation to aid staff in planning a similar project with the core teachers as co-leaders for 1989-90.

Procedure. We applied the creative drama method as described by Walsh (1990) and colleagues (Walsh et al., 1991a; Walsh et al., 1991b) with the following significant modifications. We divided each Grade 6 class into groups of eight or nine students, rotating the group membership three times (every five weeks) to enable the students to participate with as many of their classmates as possible and to experience different leadership styles and locations. We conducted the sessions every Tuesday morning in three regularly-scheduled consecutive periods. As space was very limited, one group met in its classroom, two in the library, and one in a hallway.

The basic principles of group leadership we employed were: (1) to engage the students in exploring the creative drama medium itself; (2) to promote positive peer relations by modeling active listening, giving suppor-tive feedback, and facilitating peer communication; (3) to encourage *group-centered* problem-solving and decision-making; (4) to build a sense of cohesiveness from successful cooperative action.

All 103 Grade 6 students participated in the program because it was incorporated into the curriculum. Aside from their rural upbringing, the

students were almost exclusively white and the majority was middle-class. All ranges of academic abilities and family status were represented.

Evaluation. The first two of the 21 group sessions were characterized by considerable caution, as many group members tentatively approached the drama activities based on familiar fairy tales, a few were obviously reluctant to participate, and one was disruptive. By the third session most students were positively involved, but then had to adjust to the termination of their group, a process repeated twice more. In the second rotation, alliances from the first groups persisted for several weeks, expressed in some groups as gender-exclusive subgroups. However, by the halfway point most students had internalized the structured routine of the sessions, which featured working in subgroups of four or five students, and the more dramatically and socially adept students freely assisted their less assertive peers. On the other hand, one of the classes consisted of many uncooperative boys and girls whose social problem-solving skills were relatively weak. Consequently, the leaders increased the degree of structure in sessions with these students. There were also several students, mainly boys, who refused to participate as the sessions proceeded, generating friction with their peers. While the leaders did not coerce the disruptive ones, some members directly confronted them. Overall, the sessions ended with many groups joining their subgroups together and with more realistic themes to their skits, such as classroom conflicts.

From the group leaders' perspectives, the 40-minute sessions were pressure-packed and inhibited the team-building that lengthier sessions permit. We also found that privacy for each group was lacking because of the scarcity of adequate space in the school, and that attempting to videotape skits with one set of equipment was too much hassle. In general, by the program's conclusion we regarded the students as moderately competent and slightly problematic in their peer relations skills, with the boys less skilled than the girls.

In February the students completed the Group Satisfaction Scale (GSS), a measure I devised, based on a similar scale by Pedro-Carroll et al. (1986). The GSS has eight five-step items (range = 0-32), assessing group participants' expressed satisfaction with the social climate of the drama groups. Analysis of the GSS's internal consistency in the pilot study and the intervention showed coefficient α = .81 and .83 respectively. Overall, the members indicated that they were *quite satisfied* with the drama groups (M = 22.73, SD = 5.35).

Shortly after the groups ended I individually interviewed five boys and five girls from each class (N = 29 as one girl declined to participate) who represented the spectrum of interest in the drama program. The 15-minute interview consisted of semi-structured questions designed to elicit

the students' understanding of how participation in the drama groups fa-
cilitated development of social skills. The interviewees were unanimous in
their positive view of the program. They were especially fond of the drama
activities themselves and of being with their peers, but some mentioned
that they disliked members' talking out of turn and disruptions. All iden-
tified cooperation as operative, with several noting how the structure of
drama sessions facilitated working together and nearly half specifying peer
relations skills. One enthusiastic girl, for instance, stated, "I used to want
to take over things, like to lead. But then I learned to let other people do
that too." Nearly all interviewees reported that the sessions improved their
listening to each other; many observed the importance of understanding
their peers' ideas, while others noted the importance of "rules" for good
listening that their groups adopted. The majority indicated that they expe-
rienced a process of negotiated problem-solving in the sessions. For exam-
ple, one girl reported, "The leaders made sure they didn't solve problems
for us. We had to do it ourselves." Relatedly, a boy stated, "We'd take
part of one person's idea and part of the other person's idea and put them
together." However, another girl preferred that two students in conflict
should "solve it themselves, instead of getting the whole group to decide."
The majority also reported that the groups facilitated making friends, al-
though many said they already had friends. While the interviewees unani-
mously expressed confidence in continuing to develop social skills for the
remainder of the school year, less than half provided hypothetical examples
of assertive action and the special education students were least confident.
On the other hand, most interviewees suggested actions their teachers could
take to reinforce social skills, such as increased opportunities for working
in small groups and for conflict mediation.

     Five teachers at the intervention school, including the two core in-
structors, discussed with me individually how they regarded the Grade 6
students' adjustment in 20-minute interviews in March. When comparing
the students to previous cohorts, the teachers reported that the intervention
students developed faster socially in that they appeared less anxious,
blended better with students from different feeder schools, listened to oth-
ers' opinions, supported each other, and looked after potential peer out-
casts. The teachers strongly supported repeating the intervention for
1989-90, but one recommended that the skits be more structured. Several
stated that they would expand the use of small groups in their classes. In
fact, one core teacher with an aide and the counsellor regularly conducted
small-group dramas for her class during the final term.

     The parents contributed to their views in the June follow-up parents'
meeting and completed the *Parent Satisfaction Scale* (PSS), a measure cre-
ated for this study. The PSS is comprised of two quantitative items and

two open-ended questions, designed to elicit parents' perceptions of their children's satisfaction with the drama groups. Of the 46 parents who completed the PSS, most regarded their child as quite pleased with the drama groups (scale = 0-4) (M = 3.25, SD = .69), thought their child had made moderate improvements in social skills since September, and highly recommended the drama program for the next Grade 6 students (M = 3.48, SD = .82). In their open-ended comments many parents proposed that the teachers continue to attend to social development.

Intervention Plan

The results of the 1988-89 pilot study showed that many Grade 6 students felt more comfortable with their peers and their teachers and parents reported fewer social-emotional problems and more skills. For 1989-90 the student-related goals of the intervention were not only to aid the development of peer relations skills in the next cohort of Grade 6 boys and girls, but also to foster an increased sense of responsibility for classroom behavior. The goal for the teachers was to provide them with sufficient supervised training so that they could apply the small-group drama model independently in future terms. My own goal was to conduct a quantitative and qualitative outcome evaluation.

Because the school counsellor had moved on to another school, one of the itinerant, resource teachers and I coordinated this project with six staff, including the same two core teachers. We made several procedural changes. We shortened the program to 15 sessions to finish before the Christmas break, but we actually missed one session due to a school trip. We divided each class into three groups instead of four, assigning two leaders to a group. To permit the school's half-time French teacher to participate we conducted the first and third rotations of five sessions each in the afternoons, running the second rotation in the morning. All other characteristics of the drama method remained the same.

Eighty-four of the 102 Grade 6 students (39 boys and 45 girls) and their parents consented to participate in the evaluation. In an explanatory letter and consent form I identified the purposes of the intervention, the methods employed, and the freedom to withdraw from the evaluation at any time; I also promised feedback to all parties. In addition, school staff and I held parents' information meetings in October 1989 and June 1990. Also in June, I presented the results orally to the classes, mailed a written summary to the parents who requested it, and held a follow-up parents' meeting. Lastly, I met with the participating teachers from the comparison

school, described below, and provided them and the parents of the com-
parison students with the same written summary as the intervention school.

Design and measures. The outcome evaluation design incorporated a
non-equivalent comparison school, as no school with an identical transition
year existed in the region. The comparison students were 20 of 23 trans-
ferring Grade 6 students (11 boys and nine girls) who graduated from
Grade 5 in their home rural community and then transferred to a rural
Grade 4-8 middle school to join students from other rural areas who had
entered at Grade 4.

The *students* completed the Peer Interaction Scale (PIS) (Wheeler &
Ladd, 1982), which has acceptable reliability and validity and has proven
useful in other studies of creative drama (Walsh et al., 1991a; Walsh et
al., 1991b). The PIS contains 10 items pertaining to cooperative situations
with peers and 12 items tapping conflictual situations. The students also
responded to a measure I adapted from Elias et al. (1986) that assesses
transition students' perceived stresses from school tasks, teachers, and
peers. I deleted three items and reworded three others to create a 25-item
measure (Scale = 1-4) called the School Pressures Scale (SPS). Internal
consistency was .89 at pre and .87 at post-testing. In January 1990 the in-
tervention students completed the GSS used in the pilot study, and 23 of
them participated in semi-structured interviews with a female research as-
sistant who, in addition, observed some of the group sessions.

The core *teachers* completed the Teacher-Child Rating Scale (T-CRS)
(Hightower et al., 1986), which has acceptable reliability and validity. The
T-CRS consists of three scales of six items each pertaining to problems
(acting-out, shy-anxious, learning) and four scales of five items each related
to competencies (frustration tolerance, assertiveness, task orientation, and
peer sociability), but at the teachers' request I abbreviated the T-CRS by
removing the learning and task orientation scales. In the results below I
report only summary scores for Problems and for Competencies.

I developed a measure for parents to complete on their children's
social skills, partly based on other scales, called the Parent Rating of Social
Skills (PRSS), which has 15 problem items and 13 strengths' items. The
internal consistency of Problems was .86 and .88 at pre and post-testing,
and .91 and .92 for Strengths. In January 1990 the parents also completed
the PSS used in the pilot study.

RESULTS

Group Development. From the second session peer conflict and domi-
neering members were quite in evidence. Consequently, the co-leaders had

to work hard in many groups to promote cooperation. But by the end of the second rotation, although many students remained domineering, many others were spontaneously commenting on their own growth in cooperating. In fact, some members disclosed in later sessions how they felt "stupid" at times with their peers and discussed personal issues related to self-esteem. The students varied in their responsiveness to the drama medium, and the seventh session, which fell on Halloween, was particularly tumultuous. While many students quickly displayed confidence in their acting ability and organized performances of subgroups for each other, some seemed quite anxious about "performing." Interestingly, in the final sessions several boys and girls discussed how they managed to cope with their performance anxiety. Many students directly expressed their negative feelings about termination, then independently organized skits in which the entire group participated. In fact, all groups ended their participation on a highly cooperative note.

The leaders' impressions of group development were confirmed by the research assistant who observed the members struggling with and succeeding at negotiating conflicting ideas for their skits. However, she also noted that some members appeared to depend on the adult leaders to direct them. The tendency of the teacher-leaders to rely on an overly directive leadership style, as opposed to generating group-centered problem-solving, was apparent in earlier sessions. As a result, the itinerant teacher and I periodically urged the leaders to promote peer feedback about problematic behavior. We also encountered difficulties in administering the program, which reflected to a large extent the absence of an assertive on-site organizer and the presence of new staff who felt uncertain about their roles.

Students. Seventy participants completed the GSS, expressing overall a high degree of satisfaction with the drama groups (M = 24.64, S.D. = 5.31).

The research assistant interviewed 11 boys and 12 girls, employing the same format as in the pilot study. Only two students were unenthusiastic about their group experience, and all reported that the groups helped them to make new friends. Most identified the importance of cooperation, as in this comment, "Everyone had a part in the play and to make the play good we had to work together." In addition, most interviewees identified listening to others as essential to successful skits, and all observed the group environment to be conducive to understanding others' feelings. One student said, "Everybody felt disappointment because no one got all the parts they always wanted. You could understand." However, while many students perceived compromising through group discussion as the main problem-solving approach, the majority identified a group-generated rule as the primary means; for instance, "If two people wanted to be the same

character, then the group would pick a number and the person who guessed correctly got to play the part." On the other hand, all but two interviewees expressed confidence in their capacity to continue to develop peer relations skills, and most could identify assertive courses of action to deal with situations of peer conflict.

However, using a 2 × 2 (gender × school) ANOVA on the difference scores, the intervention students did not differ in the expected manner from the comparison students on the self-report measures (see Table 1). On the SPS there was a significant main effect of reduced school pressures for gender [F (1,100) = 4.20, p = .043], and a significant interaction [F (1,100) = 4.21, p = .043], indicating that the girls from the comparison school showed a marked decrease. On the PIS cooperative and conflict scales there were no significant differences; boys and girls from both schools improved.

Teachers. In the second and third terms the teachers reported continued development of peer relations skills. For example, the students initiated negotiations for conflict situations, practiced giving constructive criticism, and exercised positive leadership in classrooms. Moreover, they performed confidently in the annual Christmas show, they seemed more comfortable taking risks in music classes, and many students chose drama

Table 1. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations on Self-Report (SPS & PIS), Teacher (T-CRS), and Parent (PRSS) Measures for Study 2

Measures	Time	Schools	
		Intervention (n = 84)	Comparison (n = 20)
SPS	1	31.88 (7.49)	36.80 (13.74)
	2	30.86 (5.09)	33.60 (9.30)
PIS			
Cooperation	1	31.45 (5.64)	29.40 (5.82)
	2	34.08 (4.97)	32.00 (6.53)
Conflict	1	34.63 (8.44)	32.65 (7.91)
	2	38.86 (6.43)	37.30 (7.09)
T-CRS			
Problems	1	17.81 (5.07)	14.90 (4.01)
	2	18.13 (5.76)	22.95 (9.01)
Competencies	1	49.30 (9.93)	59.20 (10.65)
	2	47.74 (10.33)	49.80 (13.07)
PRSS			
Problems	1	20.81 (6.43)	20.93 (7.05)
	2	21.06 (6.24)	23.71 (8.51)
Strengths	1	46.59 (10.80)	46.00 (7.88)
	2	50.41 (10.16)	43.07 (7.83)

NOTES: For all scales except SPS and Problems, higher scores indicate improvements. On the PRSS, n = 30 for the intervention school and n = 18 for the comparison.

en français during French activity periods. The teachers in fact regularly conducted small-group drama sessions during the final term, and the staff as a whole introduced ensemble activities, linking grades 6-8 together, to reduce inter-year conflict.

The comparison school teachers stated that their group of transfer students seemed quite strong with respect to positive leadership in contrast to other cohorts. These teachers also reported that their general classroom approach incorporated small-group work, peer partnerships, and cooperative learning.

On T-CRS Problems, there was a significant main effect for gender [F (1,100) = 4.88, p = .029], with the teachers rating the boys as more problematic than the girls, and a significant school effect [F (1,100) = 29.66, p < .001], with the intervention students rated as less problematic than the comparison students. A significant interaction [F (1,100) = 7.70, p = .007] indicated that the comparison students, especially the girls, were more problematic over time.

On T-CRS Competencies, the results were similar to Problems. The teachers rated the boys as less competent than the girls [F (1,100) = 5.17, p = .025] and they rated the intervention students as more competent than the comparison students [F (1,100) = 14.16, p < .001]. A significant interaction [F (1,100) = 5.79, p = .018] showed that the comparison students, particularly the girls, were less competent over time.

Parents. Of the 35 parents who completed the PSS most indicated that their child was quite pleased with the drama groups (M = 3.03, S.D. = .95), and most highly recommended the intervention for the next year (M = 3.03, S.D. = 1.12).

On PRSS Problems the parents rated the girls as more problematic than the boys [F (1,44) = 8.72, p = .005], which a significant interaction effect showed to be attributable to the girls in the comparison school [F (1,44) = 7.86, p = .007]. The difference between the intervention and comparison schools was not significant.

On PRSS strengths the parents rated the girls as more competent than the boys [F (1,44) = 4.67, p = .036]. In addition, the intervention students were more competent than the comparison students [F (1,44) = 11.45, p = .002].

Subsequent Developments

In September 1990 four teachers who contributed to the above intervention served as group leaders of regularly scheduled creative drama sessions, concluding in March 1991. The teacher-leaders found it more

comfortable to rely on teacher-directed drama activities than on a group-process orientation, particularly when cooperation was minimal. For example, the leaders found that requiring group members to use a line of dialogue such as, "I'll never do *that* again!," facilitated successful skits. On the other hand, the leaders observed that, when they did encourage *group* problem-solving, the students learned to confront each other appropriately.

In June 1991 one of the original teacher-leaders and I met to prepare staff to continue the drama program for the 1991-92 Grade 6 students.

DISCUSSION

The multi-dimensional results from the intervention demonstrate that the goals of student adaptation and teachers serving as co-leaders were met. Although intervention and comparison school students similarly improved on self-report measures, the intervention students deteriorated significantly less on teacher ratings and improved significantly more on parent ratings of social strengths than the comparison students. Group observations, student interviews, and other parent data corroborated these findings. The creative drama project served to prevent the intervention students from regressing. These results demonstrate that a social skills program based on creative drama in small groups can facilitate students' adaptation to the stresses of scheduled school transitions (cf. Elias et al., 1986; Hellem, 1990; Snow et al., 1986), which represent critical periods for children and adolescents (Felner & Adan, 1988; Hirsch & Rapkin, 1987). Thus, the creative drama approach can share the stage with the cognitive social problem-solving model (e.g., Hepler & Rose, 1988; Nelson & Carson, 1988) as a viable form of competency-based prevention. Moreover, the results of these interventions are consistent with applications of creative drama to secondary prevention (Walsh, 1990; Walsh et al., 1991a) and clinical work (Walsh et al., 1991b).

In the creative drama approach to social skills training the students develop through experiential learning the basic skills of taking turns, listening to others, understanding their feelings, and negotiating conflicts, because they can not create a successful skit without these interpersonal resources (Walsh et al., 1991a). Furthermore, improvisational drama provides an intrinsically motivating medium, given that each actor can express her or his private world of imagination, will, and planning in her or his character (cf. Singer, 1973; Vygotsky, 1967). Pivotal to drama is the function of social perspective-taking which developmentalists have noted to be crucial in the growth of peer relations skills (e.g., Chandler, 1973; Selman, 1980). Given the relationship between dramatic play and social-emotional

development, it is tempting to assert that creative drama might be superior to other forms of social skills training which are heavily instructional in nature, ignore imagination, and minimize group dynamics. Striking a more dissonant chord, it is possible that creative drama is less appealing for boys than girls, because in mainstream North American culture the former seem less creative in their play and more likely to regard drama as "babyish" than the latter. Moreover, *any* type of group-centered activity in which members have to confront their group process directly might lead to behavior change.

Methodologically, the GSS, T-CRS, and PRSS proved to be useful measures for the students, teachers, and parents respectively, but one could argue that the positive findings for the intervention students are consequences of expectancy effects. Yet the fact that the comparison students, who received extra support to deal with the stresses of their school transfer, did not surpass the intervention students provides some evidence to substantiate the claim for genuine effects. Relatedly, contextual and interview data from various perspectives strengthen the nonetheless tentative conclusion that the creative drama intervention has some impact beyond ordinary school methods for easing students' adjustment to the transition. These studies obviously lacked traditional standards of rigor. However, field experiments employing stringent, laboratory-like controls are virtually impossible (Cowen, 1978). More importantly, truly rigorous community research, rooted in a revised philosophy of science, needs to encompass multiple methods and perspectives that respect the varied interpersonal processes woven through the setting and that give voice to them in a contextualized report-writing style (Walsh, 1987). Furthermore, my intimate involvement with both the intervention and its evaluation enabled me to make more sense of the many sources of data obtained.

Another noteworthy aspect of this work is the consultation model employed whereby classroom teachers eventually led the drama program independently. The training regimen served its function, but the fact that the teachers gravitated toward the more familiar, teacher-centered leadership style in the second and third years, in which the drama program evolved from a group process to a task-oriented approach, suggests that further consultation is necessary (cf. Snow et al., 1986). An occupational hazard for teachers in using creative drama is to rely too much on leader-centered structure; perhaps the drama model is better suited to those teachers who feel comfortable with group processes and creative play. Apart from the issue of striking a balance of teacher leadership and peer-group process, consultation in these studies pertained to ensuring staff's commitment to the prevention program as part of the Grade 6 curriculum and to assisting staff in dealing with any unintended negative side-effects. Finally, the

reader should note that the focus of the project was the students, not the school environment. As Felner and Adan (1988) argue, structural changes might be more beneficial for adolescents undergoing scheduled transitions than any individually-centered program.

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