

A Bag for the Journey: Dramatherapy with Adolescent Girls who are not Engaging with Others

Nicola McMeikan

ABSTRACT

This is a research project that investigated dramatic group processes involving the use of containers (such as bags and suitcases) as dramatic starters to develop stories for therapeutic purposes with a group of adolescents who were identified as not engaging with others in a classroom setting. The purpose of the study was to see whether these processes could help the group to express themselves to others with more confidence in a group situation.

After six drama sessions, the student self-reports indicated an increase in aspects of their confidence in a group setting. It was observed that, amongst the students, aspects of expansion were demonstrated in the roles attempted and in the movements exhibited. Some students showed increasing confidence in the expression of their ideas within the dramatic structures. The preparation and performance of group scenes emerged as the most significant experience in terms of building confidence.

INTRODUCTION

A group of seven adolescent female students participated in six drama sessions that worked through dramatic processes in a progression of embodiment, projection and role (Jennings, 1995). Each week the students selected bags from a selection available and used them to create characters. The variety of bags was intended to encourage experimentation with a range of roles, and thereby facilitate the development of self-awareness and fluency in social roles. These characters then interacted in scenes: first spontaneous scenes on a park bench and, later, prepared group scenes based on a given topic, such as a secret or gift.

The group setting of the sessions offered the students a range of opportunities for paired and group interaction. Phenomenological methods, including questionnaires and participant observation, were used to gather information related to the impact of the dramatic processes on the students.

The aim was to encourage these students to create a forum to express themselves in alternative ways in the multi-dimensional language of drama. Early adolescents have developed the potential cognitive ability to express themselves in metaphor, something which offers them an indirect means of communicating their concerns (Saari, 1986). The concept of using containers, or bags, to facilitate the creation of a dramatic role was intended to be a springboard for the students into this metaphoric language. The bags formed a defined but varied category, and included frivolous and sturdy handbags, rucksacks, suitcases and a grimy old sack. In the potentially frightening context of a drama session, these props could be reintroduced each week as a form of familiar and safe routine, whilst still holding possibilities for novelty, experimentation and reinterpretation. The students could hide within the identities or stories suggested by the bags and thus show

themselves in new ways. From this perspective, the bags formed an overarching metaphor of something to hold that was needed for a journey. This article will focus on the use of the bags as dramatic starters in my research and their therapeutic potential.

THE CLIENT GROUP

The establishment of healthy peer relations ranks among the critical developmental tasks facing early adolescent girls, along with the establishment of emotional independence from parents, and the gaining of a positive self-image and sense of gender role (LeCroy, 2004; Perkins, 2007; Santrock, 1999). Mastering these tasks is essential for the “healthy psychosocial development of early adolescent girls in contemporary society” (LeCroy, 2004, p. 2). Yet these stages each contain their own inbuilt hurdles and, with subtlety in communication becoming more important in the changing psychosocial landscape of adolescence, new resources are called upon and previously

unidentified problems with interaction may emerge (Carr & Schellenbach, 1993).

Amongst their own peer group, adolescents must find a balance between their need for “interconnection” and the development of “independent thinking” (Emunah, 2005, pp. 112-113), since the “finding of their own independent voice” is “critical” in early adolescence (Le Croy, 2004, p. 3). In Erikson’s developmental model, what characterises adolescence is the “working out [of] a stable concept of oneself as a unique individual” (Weiten, 2004, p. 461). The struggle to establish an identity amidst the role confusion of adolescence involves the need for role experimentation (Emunah, 1995; Santrock, 1999). This conflict contains the danger of role foreclosure, that is prematurely settling into a role before enough roles have been explored (Emunah, 1995). Adolescent girls not engaging with others, and without the forum to express their views and find their voice, are prime candidates for role foreclosure. Ways need



The selection of bags used by the students.

to be found to encourage such adolescents to explore other roles safely. At the same time, the concept of identity, for adolescent girls in particular, is based on being able to establish relationships and interconnection with others (Santrock, 1999). An adolescent girl experiences a strong need to experience feedback from others in order to experience a sense of her self (Csikszentmihalyi & Larson, 1984).

In the case where adolescent girls are not interacting with others, such behaviour could stem from a myriad reasons nested in the struggle to negotiate the complex tasks of adolescence; all of these tasks impinge on a sense of self in relation to the other.

DRAMATHERAPY

Dramatherapist Salvo Pitruzella describes dramatherapy as “a form of dramatic art aimed at enhancing the well-being of the person via the guided exploration... of various ways of being in the world and having relationships with other people” (Pitruzella, 2004, p. 1).

A drama group can be seen as the optimum intervention for adolescents not engaging with others, as it constitutes a developmental medium in itself and contains communication at its heart, since the “techniques of theatre are the techniques of communicating” (Spolin, 1999, p.14).

The use of drama as a developmental medium is attested to in the work of J. L. Moreno (Bannister, 2002), Peter Slade (1956, as cited in Pearson, 1996), Sue Jennings (1998), and David Read Johnson (Cattanach, 1994) and what underpins them all is the belief in the developmental function of play. Dramatherapist Jennings (1998) claims that the progression through embodiment,

projection and role (EPR) in play constitutes the “dramatic development” of an individual, which she maintains is the source of all other development, whether “psychological or physical or emotional” (p. 61). Intrinsic to this development at each stage is the “other” and our relationship to it: “I am unable to relate to other people unless I have developed my own ‘self and other’ identity” (ibid). Whitehead (2001) sees embodiment, projection and role as positions from which to turn and look at the self and thus develop a sense of this self (p. 11). He describes this process as central to the development of reflective consciousness (p. 3) and these steps as stages of creating ourselves “through incorporating others” (p. 11).

In her work with adolescents, Emunah (1995) emphasises the healthiness of role experimentation through drama; as something that can prevent premature “role restriction” (p. 159). She likens the dramatherapeutic session to a laboratory in which both familiar and less familiar roles are explored and where roles are also “discard[ed], revise[ed] and transform[ed]” (p. 159).

In this research, bags were to serve both practical and metaphorical functions when enlisted as dramatic props targeted for the use of adolescent girls. It was intended that they help facilitate each stage in the EPR process and, thereby, healthy role experimentation. They offered a catalyst for embodiment; in their diversity it was intended they would invite playful engagement with a particular defined physical form. The bags provided a concrete container for projections; in their range, they offered room for exploration and development, as they and the associated projected aspects of the self, or desired self, could be explored one by one. It is only in

working with an image that “perception is clarified” (NCACCE, 1999, as cited in Karkou & Glasman, 2004, p. 61).

The decision to use bags can be seen to fit within the Container Schema: one of the many ways in which Dramatherapists can structure their work. This schema involves the use of boxes, containers and doors, and is based on the experience of the sense of inside and outside, with a separating boundary, permitting the “interplay of the seen and the unseen, [the] revealed and [the] hidden” (McCauley, 1999, as cited in Rowe, 2000). With their stimulating visual and tactile form the bags provided both a concrete focus for the dramatic task of creating roles, diverting attention from the everyday self and “mak[ing] relationship with others possible” (Spolin, 1999, p. 24). By functioning as the container of an inner space they offered the potential for continued disclosure and, thus, deeper exploration of the created roles. Finally, the bags offered the participant students the means of safely staying within the symbolic framework as they expressed themselves, which it has been noted, is important for young adolescents (Saari, 1986, p. 15).

For Grainger (1999), a dramatherapeutic session can be seen to be “genuinely therapeutic” to the extent that “a group is succeeding in creating its own shared imaginative ‘world’” (p. 116); just such an experience as it was hoped would be offered to these students by providing them with a group context. Whitehead (2001) describes “shared experiential worlds” as crucial for the development of self-awareness (p. 3) and insight into the thoughts of others (p. 5), both vital for the development of social skills.

METHODOLOGY

This was a qualitative study of the process and outcomes of six drama sessions with a group of seven adolescent girls. These students had been identified by staff within an Auckland secondary school as not engaging with others in the classroom. It was intended to describe the effects of the dramatic starters (the bags) and the embodiment and group processes, on the girls, whose names have been changed for the purposes of this article. The three key questions examined here that pertain to the bags are:

1. How are containers useful in the development of therapeutic story for students who have been identified as not engaging with others in the classroom?
2. What stories, characters or themes emerge through the use of these starters through drama in a group of these students?
3. In what ways does the personal storymaking of the therapist contribute to the group storymaking process?

A phenomenological approach was undertaken; as participant observer the researcher made notes after each session and again while observing video records of the process. Information was gathered from the students’ perspectives by pre- and post- questionnaires. As a form of heuristic enquiry the researcher independently worked through her own improvisation process with the bags and starter ideas before each session and then reflected on this process.

The regular session structure with the students involved:

- Physical warm-ups and drama games.
- The use of a starter (a container such as a bag) to encourage the taking on of a role.

- A development of this role/story through interaction with others.
- Reflection and closure.

RESULTS

1. How are containers useful in the development of therapeutic story for students who have been identified as not engaging with others in the classroom?

The choice of bags as projective devices arose from the simplicity and naturalness of their function — compared with many props they do not tend towards a specific action, but, in their slightly personal nature, they are somewhat suggestive of character. They constituted a variety: some were whimsical, some practical, some frivolous and some conservative, and as such they offered the students the strengthening experience of decision-making (Oaklander, 1988, p. 230); something that grew in scope each week, as more bags were gradually provided. The bags appeared to provide a fairly open template for choosing a character, as seen in the range of characters created, and in particular when the same bag was used to create contrasting characters by different students, or even, in one case, by the same student.

What became immediately obvious was that the process of selecting the bags energised the students. Each week the curtains were pulled, and the students were asked to observe the range of bags while seated, wait for a cue, and then select a bag. Somewhat surprisingly, rather than the novelty wearing off as the weeks went by, the sense of anticipation intensified, with students becoming more physically taut while waiting, rising into a position of readiness, jockeying for position, and dashing at the signal to choose.

Some bags seemed to enable expression of the preoccupations of teenage girls. One particular pink handbag had two students vying for it each week and became the catalyst for contrasting characters, including Paris Hilton, who appeared first as a character on the red carpet, posing for photographs, thus playing out a desire for and enjoyment of attention. A bag with a “hidden compartment” and a mirror in its lid became a make-up bag and a “make-up artist” appeared who repeatedly asked others, “Do you like yourself now?”, representing a concern for image and appearance. A small box-like bag became the central focus for a sustained proposal scene, wherein a student knelt in supplication to people passing by, demonstrating poignantly the issue of acceptance versus rejection.

The bags appeared to help facilitate the embodiment process, enabling students to explore and manifest the physicality of their characters’ movement styles; there was a large amount of swinging, twirling and clutching of bags. A very wide range of styles was seen in the solo exploratory phase, from purposeful pacing to dreamy wanderings to erratic scampering. The bags could provide purpose or destination for a character; there were shopping expeditions and journeys on buses. They helped define and represent the character; the character could clutch the bag and let it represent them or speak for them, as in the case where shopping bags were clutched on knees to help hide the character. They could be seen to provide safety for the performers, offering them a form of private space or a means for characters to retreat into their own worlds — imaginary objects such as books, iPods, make-up and mobile phones were found in bags in moments when a character was left alone or didn’t know what to say to another.

Bags containing imaginary objects, such as Paris Hilton's dog, helped develop the drama. They appeared to offer the ongoing theatrical support to a character of potential disclosure or non-disclosure of hidden items.

It was noticed that, as the tasks moved from paired interactions to prepared group performances, there was a movement beyond the personal handbags to larger items such as an old brown bowling bag, a briefcase or a suitcase. The personal items served to develop character, whereas these larger, less personal items, such as suitcases, became the focus for plot development as a result of group choices. Here they facilitated the creation of "shared imaginative 'world'[s]" (Grainger, 1999, p. 116). With this employment of the props, the 'plots' moved away from self-conscious topics, such as image, to other forms of dramatic conflict and adventure. The bags were used as instruments that enabled students to build their own metaphors (Saari, 1986), and formed an anchor for them to hold their chosen image for a while.

2. What stories, characters or themes emerge through the use of these starters through drama in a group of these students?

The dramas saw the students exploring their own concerns and voicing themes common to teenagers: image, including make-up, jewellery and clothes, and also friends and boyfriends, acceptance, rejection and eccentricity. The vast majority of the characters portrayed were teenagers, a feature which shows them as most interested in exploring their own experience (Emunah, 2005).

The portrayal of conformist or safe behaviours, roles in which characters read books and spoke of shopping or needing to meet their mother,

versus eccentric and/or risk behaviours, in which characters developed outlandish or stylised voices and movements, produced observable contrasts in the dramatic work of the students. A pattern seen was that of copying particular characters from television or real life. For example, one student portrayed a friend twice, one repeatedly portrayed Paris Hilton. These behaviours could be seen as a form of safe exploration, through trying out the known. The exploration of risk behaviours was largely seen to emerge once the students could prepare their dramas in groups; seemingly so that the group could share responsibility for the risk. Gangsters emerged (the next largest category after teenagers) as well as prostitutes, both gay and straight, as well as thieves and a serial killer mother.

The nature of these characters and stories became more stylised, the characters tending to be more exaggerated and/or comic. Such aspects included the use of accents, exaggerated walks and plots involving sexual propositions and police chases. According to Landy, "stylized performances can offer a group more safety of dramatic distance with which to explore" (1996, p.58). These students showed evidence of other means of protecting themselves during these risk-taking ventures. Distancing was shown in the dramatic control they exercised in framing their stories, including in the framing of stories as punch-lined jokes: a tomato was found in a stolen bag instead of the expected "loot" at the end of a chase; the slapstick pratfall of one character into the spotlight of a second character's epilogue ended the play. In the prepared stories, each story reached some form of resolution; the thieves were always caught, and the gangster escaped the sexual propositions of the people of the night. This ordering of the moral

universe in the stories, as built into their plot structures, can be seen as an additional form of dramatic distancing from the risk-behaviours portrayed.

The range of characters attempted by the students showed evidence of exploration of role and counter role (Emunah, 1995; Landy, 1996), whereby opposite qualities are enacted. Some girls portrayed contrasting characters in the same day – one day Melinda’s first character, an old lady, disapproved of make-up and was bitter and unsociable, but her next character enthusiastically accepted having her make-up done and was outgoing and upbeat, asking another character, “Do you want to come shopping with us?”. One day Rebecca played an open, eccentric character, with zany movements, who invaded the space of another character; the next she played a quiet character, with slightly hunched body language, who found other open characters alarming. Jess showed striking realness as a despondent school girl but also played Paris Hilton with a cheery and slightly affected style and accent. Other contrasts appeared over time. Madison played an elegant young woman one week, but appeared the next week in a group presentation as a “gangsta”. When a contrasting character appeared in this way they were often conveyed by a sense of palpable authenticity; as if the students had struck a fresh vein of energy. Kayla, who played quiet schoolgirl characters, became the escapee daughter of a murdering mother. Rebecca, usually a very young, frothy character, played a gangster boss with calm, collected authority.

The students described their favourite roles as being specific characters to whom they could relate or with whom they could identify, or found exciting. Rebecca commented that she enjoyed her young character most because she

could “relate to being a little girl” and Melinda enjoyed playing her Scottish character because she could “use experience from life to create the character... I learnt how strongly I identify myself as a Scottish”. Jess described her favourite experience as “being a crook” because “me and the girls really got into it” and “had a blast”, an indication of the enjoyment of the temporary experience of shared identity.

3. In what ways does the personal storymaking of the therapist contribute to the group storymaking process?

In my own improvisations I experienced an unfolding of ideas that was triggered by the embodied nature of the process; as soon as I handled the chosen bag, I had ideas for a scene, which developed naturally as I moved. I therefore developed confidence that the process of establishing character through use of the bags would be achievable by the students.

Over the course of my six improvisations I developed confidence in them as an expression of my present preoccupations through symbol. The most obvious example was the first improvisation, in which I was lugging an old sack through the rain, finally aware that this was a metaphor of my experience of drudgery earlier that evening: of carrying many arm loads of props, costumes and lights through the theatre. I could be more open to the idea that the students’ plays and improvisations could be metaphorical. I learnt about the effects of dramatic distancing — as I externalised these inner impulses into drama, shifts in perspective within the improvisations were gained. For example, partway through the improvisation with the sack, I became aware that I had chosen this burden. This caused a shift in my attitude to it; I was able to open the sack that I had been previously unwilling to look into.

I observed that boundaries between inside and outside could be explored through the metaphor of the bag; that my attitude to the content of the bag was the defining indicator of the feeling in the improvisation as a whole, sometimes felt in my stomach, and expressed in terms of the stomach (hunger or nervousness) in written exercises afterwards, that spoke in the voice of the bag. Another recurring theme for me was the need for the bag to be claimed in some way, perhaps indicating that it represented a hidden aspect of the self. This idea supported the concept of the use of the bags as projective devices that could help express the current circumstances or inner selves of the students.

In all of these examples the cognitive connections were made afterwards and exemplify McNiff's (1998) belief that "the images and process of artistic creation are always at least one step ahead of the reflecting mind" (p. 27). The images were accepted as they were presented to my conscious mind, and constituted calming, refreshing and centring experiences that invited contemplation. This was important knowledge for me, if I was to have faith in the process for the students. As such, my own improvisations affirmed for me the richness of a dramatic image and that it can "never be given a definitive meaning" (p. 124). What the (empty) sack symbolises remains partially obscure and thus more fulfilling for me as an image.

My improvisations, being solo, showed me the importance of being in relation to another to gain a sense of character, and the importance of a witness. As I did not interact with another, whether performer or audience, I found that, although the stories that emerged through physical improvisation were intriguing to me, my exploration of role was partial and the

characters felt mostly undifferentiated from myself. Without a witness I was given less opportunity to define myself than the students who entered into the group process. "We need to be mirrored and defined by others" (Pitruzella, 2004, p. 43).

CONCLUSION

There is some evidence that the dramatic processes used in this study contributed to enabling some students to express themselves with more confidence. The bags as props offered a focus for the imagination of the students, seeming to enable some solo and group exploration of role and offering the means to express some issues pertaining to these adolescent girls. Within the parameters of this study the key to drawing students into greater expressivity and more successful experiences of interaction appeared to be in the generation of group energy; this was facilitated first through embodiment, and developed through finding a shared intention and focussing on an artistic product. This also enabled the students to express themselves in alternative ways through the shared language of metaphor, a process assisted by the bags. In this sense the materials (the containers) served at least some of the needs of this particular group.

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