

**Drama Discovery:
Setting the Stage for Students with Emotional/Behavioral Needs to Learn about Self**

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Abstract

The Drama Discovery Curriculum (Hipsky, 2006a) was piloted in a middle school classroom for eleven students with emotional/ behavioral disabilities and one student with delinquent behaviors at a small private alternative education school in Western Pennsylvania. Students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities often have low self-efficacy when it comes to explaining their own disabilities, coping with the label of having a disability, and the general issues that come from having a disability. The article begins by delving into what categorizes a student as having an emotional/behavioral disability. It then explores the compounding factors that often accompany the exceptionality, which include: social, academic, self-abusive, and family issues. The disorder's impact on the students' academic growth and self-esteem is positively affected by the use of The Drama Discovery Curriculum because it gives a foundation for emotional disclosure breakthroughs. The current literature and this study support that dramatic games and improvisation in the classroom can provide a safe space for the students to express their feelings and learn social skills.

Struggle of the Emotionally Disabled Student

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2000) currently there are more than 460,000 students in the United States who are identified as emotionally disabled. Well over a million students have been identified as having emotional disabilities since the predecessor of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) became law in 1975 (Cullinan, Evans, Epstein, & Ryser, 2003). IDEA explains that consultations among parents, teachers, psychologists, and physicians are required to set up an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) for each child which, taking into consideration the child's needs, potential, and disabilities, includes a statement of goals and the services to be provided to help reach those goals (Snyder, 1999).

It has been written that only a fraction of those who need intervention for their emotional or behavioral disorders are actually identified and served (Kauffman, 2001; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). There are multiple disabilities that fall under the heading of emotional and behavior disabilities. These include but are not limited to diagnoses of Bipolar Disorder, ADHD, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Separation Anxiety Disorder, Social Phobia, Generalized Anxiety Disorder, Conduct Disorder.

Jolivette, Stichter, Nelson, Scott, & Liaupsin, (2000) asserted that students with behavioral and emotional disabilities,

... may not be able to maintain appropriate social relationships with others; they may have academic difficulties in multiple content areas; and they may display chronic behavior problems, including noncompliance aggression, and disrespect toward authority figures (p.2).

Research has shown that students with E/BD generally earn lower grades, fail more courses, are retained in grade more often, pass minimum competency tests at lower rates, and have more difficulty in their adult lives than do students with other disabilities (Landrum, Tankersley, & Kauffman, 2003). Students who have emotional and behavioral disorders typically exhibit noncompliance to teacher requests along with numerous additional disruptive behaviors (DeMartini-Scully, Bray, & Kehle, 2000). The extreme behaviors that are far removed from the norm are often not well tolerated by teachers (Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002). The teachers often seek new techniques and materials to help them work with the negative effect that students from this population can have on their classrooms.

Self-Injurious Behaviors

Some emotionally disabled students exhibit what it is referred to in the schools as SIBs (Self Injurious Behaviors). SIBs are characterized as any sort of self-harm that involves inflicting injury or pain on one's own body. Other than self-mutilation, examples of self-injury include hair pulling, picking the skin, excessive or dangerous use of mind-altering substances such as alcohol, and eating disorders. (Simpson, 2001, p. 2). Favazza and Rosenthal (1993) identify pathological self-mutilation as the deliberate alteration or destruction of body tissue without conscious suicidal intent. Disconnected self-mutilation leads to a sense of "mental disintegration." The behavior serves to center the person (Levenkron, 1998, p. 48). Although the person exhibiting this behavior is often accused of seeking attention, according to Simpson (2001),

...cutting and other self-harming behavior tends to be committed in privacy. In addition, self-harming individuals will often conceal their wounds. Revealing self-inflicted injuries will often encourage other individuals to attempt to stop the behavior. Since cutting serves to dissociate the individual from feelings, drawing attention to wounds is not typically desired (p.4).

Stanley, Gameroff, Michalsen, & Mann (2001) reported that approximately 55%-85% of self-mutilators have made at least one attempt at suicide.

Everyday in the United States, 6 students under the age of 20 commit suicide (Children's Defense Fund, 2001). It is estimated that youth with learning or behavior problems tend to have higher rates of suicide than those for the general population (Forness, 1988).

Damage Doubled

Students with emotional and behavioral disorders often face a range of compounding factors that may include poor socioeconomic status, limited education, single-parent households, dysfunctional family relationships, incest, sexual abuse, teen pregnancy, violence in the home, and unemployment (Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education, 1993).

Wallach (1994) looked into reactions from students who came from abusive home environments and stated that,

To control their fears, children who live with violence may repress feelings. This defensive maneuver takes its toll in their immediate lives and can lead to further pathological development. It can interfere with their ability to relate to others in meaningful ways and to feel empathy. Individuals who cannot empathize with others' feelings are less likely to curb their own aggression, and more likely to become insensitive to brutality in general (p. 4).

School Setting Placement

Due to the severity of the need, some students are unable to be mainstreamed into the regular school setting. Currently, approximately 77,000 students with E/BD, ages 6 to 21, are educated in exclusionary settings, such as day treatment and residential schools, which offer greater behavioral and therapeutic support than the regular public school (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a). Of the students who range in age from 6 to 21 who are served under IDEA, those with E/BD are more likely to be placed in restrictive settings than youth in any other disability classification (U.S. Department of Education, 2002b).

Schelly (1995) explained how the student who has an emotional disability views himself or herself by stating that,

A low sense of self-worth may contribute to an inability to deal with criticism and accept constructive feedback. In addition, many youths with emotional disorders have trouble managing their anger in a confrontational situation (p.2).

When a child's sense of self is drained because they are defending themselves against outside dangers or warding off their own fears, they have difficulty learning in school (Craig, 1992). Students with emotional and behavioral disabilities (E/BD) typically experience peer relation difficulties and negative social experiences (Farmer, Farmer, & Gut, 1999). Peer rejection is associated with aggressive behavior, and students who are rejected or engage in early disruptive behavior are more likely to experience delinquency and antisocial behavior later in life (e.g., Dishion, Patterson, Stoolmiller, & Skinner, 1991).

Finding Self through the Stage

Creative drama is essentially a form of imaginative play that can be used as a tool for instructional learning (Kelner, 1993; Schneider & Jackson, 2000). Gallagher (1998) explained how students could take risks safely through drama. Gallagher noted that, "Because of the great security of role, students and teacher can take greater risks. Because you are in safety, you can go into danger" (p.150). Drama encourages children to take on roles and work through their own defenses. Personal and social issues can often be difficult to discuss in the classroom. An effective way to explore these issues is through drama (Hery, 1996).

Anderson (1992) discussed that, "Adolescents labeled Behavior Disordered need to become the source of their own authentic process of making meaning. They also need to socially validate their co-created social meanings and choose behavior that is self-satisfying and self-controlled" (p. 138-139). Due to the fact that this type of child's ability to reflect on their anger is somewhat limited, children need guidance from teachers and parents in understanding and managing their feelings of anger. Bundy (2000) in the journal *Research in Drama Education*, examined theories of aggression and suggests that drama-based programs intended to reduce violent response be implemented in the school classroom. Because the ability to regulate the expression of anger is linked to an understanding of the emotion (Zeman & Shipman, 1996), having the students act out their emotional needs in the safe space of a classroom through implementation of improvisation of scenes and theater games can benefit the student greatly.

Meath-Lang (1997) paints a vivid picture of how everyday life and search for self becomes drama by stating,

The quest for identity is drama played against the backdrop of community. Contradictory scenes from real life are acted and reenacted as people assert their individuality while searching for sources of connection. There are many versions of the script... (p. 99).

By using drama in the classroom, teachers can make learning both productive and enjoyable, and oral communication skills can become the touchstone for enhancing self-esteem (Kaplan, 1997).

The Drama Discovery Curriculum

In Gantos' (2000) book, *Joey Pigza Loses Control*, the main character described a day without the medications that balance his emotional stability.

"The next morning I woke up feeling like half me and half not, like when you mix baking soda and vinegar together and come up with a totally weird third thing. Well, that's what I felt like, something not yet named"(p.153).

The Drama Discovery Curriculum (Hipsky, 2006a) provides an opportunity for students to explore Gantos' characters through reading, dramatic games, and writing exercises. While engaging the students in the text, this curriculum creates a positive outlet for

openly discussing the issues that come from dealing with an emotional or behavioral disability.

This curriculum utilizes bibliotherapy in combination with theater games as the students act out stories with characters that have emotional and/or behavioral disabilities to which the middle school students can relate. Bibliotherapy can be defined as the use of books to help people problem solve. Sridhar (2000) provided insight into this use of literature by writing, "Bibliotherapy can be used more extensively for students with significant learning and behavior problems to enhance self-understanding, and as a tool for enhancing reading comprehension" (p. 75). The theater activities (i.e. role-playing being the principal in a scenario in which the character has to deal with a disciplinary situation) help to open the child's eyes. The same activities that help actors learn to trust, improvise, understand characters, and generally improve their communication skills can be used to engage even the most typically disinterested reader in literature.

The teacher who implemented *The Drama Discovery Curriculum* in her classroom for students with emotional and behavioral needs drew her own conclusions to the impact on her classroom. The following was her impression of how her students were affected:

I feel the program was a definite success. It turned non-readers into readers. Students wanted their parents to purchase the books so they could read them at home. Others went home and relayed the day's reading session to their parents. Through this program, the students also seem to learn to trust one another because they had to work with each other so closely and act together. This level of trust led them to opening up and sharing dark, deep secrets to one another for four days after the program was completed. Because of the comfort level they had developed, they said things they might never share with their therapists. They now understand disabilities better and many saw themselves through the reading of *Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key* by Jack Gantos. They recognized that many people have disabilities of varying degrees of severity; that there are ways to work through disabilities and having a disability is not something to be ashamed of. They learned that people can cope with a disability and lead a normal life. They learned that the person with the disability has to take care and be responsible for his own actions and responses. They saw, through reading this book, that it wasn't so "bad" to be labeled ADHD. After participating in the activity of imitating different disabilities, they now show a respect for those that are truly handicapped. What a blessing to be a part of this program. It needs to be used to reach other students who have ADHD, learning and other disabilities; so they can understand and grow (personal communication, November 4, 2004).

In order to have a deeper understanding of the drama activities that are used in the classroom that can help the students learn how to dialogue in front of a group, the following is a specific activity from the *Drama Discovery Curriculum* that was highlighted in the *Curriculum Review: What's Working in Education* section:

Partner Improv

Objective: TSWBAT demonstrate the ability to perform improvisational scenes by engaging in a dialogue.

Procedures:

- Teacher will make one copy of the Improv Scene Pages
- The teacher will cut the pages on the dotted line
- Discuss as a whole group improvisation, character development, and objectives of a scene
- The scenes will be distributed to the students in pairs
- The students will perform dialogue scenes based on the scenarios
- Discuss the way that the characters reacted to the various situations

Extension: The scene can be used as a prompt for creative writing.

Materials: Partner Improv pages (copy and cut the paper)

Assessment: Student Performance/Acting Rubric from *The Drama Discovery Curriculum* or create one to meet your needs on <http://rubistar.4teachers.org/>. (Hipsky, 2006b, p. 10).

An example of one of the improvisational scenes from the book:

The Scene: Two pre-teen friends meet on the neighborhood street.

First Character's Objective: You don't want your best friend to move because you will feel lonely. Convince her that she should feel bad about moving.

Second Character's Objective: You are looking forward to moving into a big beautiful house but you don't want to hurt your friend's feelings. Convince your best friend that you can still be friends. (Hipsky, 2006a, p. 90)

This simple theatrical exercise in combination with host of other activities that can be found in the *Drama Discovery* book leads the students to communicate in front of their peers within the classroom setting. The students can garner an appreciation for "becoming" a character as they explore the character's objective that internally pushes them towards their motivation in a scene. Communication with and in front of peers can be a stumbling block for the E/BD population. The act of becoming a character as if they are putting on a mask, can shield them from the concerns that they may have of judgment and can free them to express themselves.

One of the students who participated in *The Drama Discovery Curriculum* activities such as improvisation poignantly stated,

I would say that Drama Discovery is a drama class that will help people to understand who they are and what they can be. You don't have to be the hard a*s or the preppy kid. You can be you. Drama Discovery is a great program for kids that have low self-images. Especially if they need help with therapy and depression. You get out all your emotions in drama. (personal communication, October, 21, 2005).

Methodology

Population and Participants

The study was conducted at a small alternative education private school in Western PA. This campus for 1st through 12th grade serves students with emotional and behavioral disabilities from forty-two school districts in Pennsylvania. The population sample included twelve students from a middle school classroom. The students who participated in the pilot study were all in an alternative school for students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities. Some of the students have multiple special education labels such as learning disabilities and attention deficit with hyperactivity disorder. The genders and ethnic groups were based strictly on the composition of the class, which were established prior to the study and the parents gave prior consent (Jacobs, 2005).

Design/Strategies and Activities

Students with emotional/behavioral disabilities often have low self-efficacy when it comes to explaining their own disabilities, coping with the label of having a disability, and the general issues that come from having a disability. There are new collections of children's literature that explain to children through the characters what their disability is and how to cope with it. By exploring these characters through dramatic games and exercises, *The Drama Discovery Curriculum* provided a positive outlet for openly discussing the issues that come from an emotional or behavioral disability.

Instrumentation

This qualitative study evolved through the collection of the students' responses to the five month inclusion of the Drama Discovery program by examining the students' writing samples, author created pre- and post-interviews, listening to the audio tapes and reading the logs from the observations.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the qualitative data involves multiple tasks throughout including data collection (e.g. observation logs, audiotapes of lessons, student journals, and notes from the teacher/student interviews), analysis, and writing the findings (Creswell, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Following the collection, the analysis of the data was written based on categorized themes. The sorting was based upon those findings that did not match the initial assumptions. These assumptions were based on what the author believed the results of the study would be after the literature review and yet prior to the data collection.

General Assumptions Regarding *The Drama Discovery Curriculum*

1. Initially, the students will pull away from learning about their own disabilities because they will not want to face the issues. This may resurface throughout the program for some students. It will be a particular issue for students that function relatively well academically and do not feel that they have a "disability."
2. Some of the class days will be extremely emotionally charged due to the disability and the nature of the program. The author will witness dramatic highs and lows, acting out, and refusal from some of the students.

3. Due to the transient nature of the school and placements into the program, there will be some changes in the classroom's makeup during the period of time in which the study takes place.
4. Students will enjoy the dramatic games and exercises included in the curriculum, but some will experience shyness, anger, and frustration with the exposure to seeing themselves in this new light.
5. The students will see elements of themselves in the characters in the book and with time they will be able to tell stories from their personal life that will parallel the characters' lives and issues.

The main concept and assumption was that there would be a positive effect on the students' self-efficacy regarding their own exceptionality due to *The Drama Discovery Curriculum*.

Results of the Study

Organization of Results

The assumptions that were recognized initially were realized through the study. The parents and the students signed consent forms to allow their stories to be published and the names were changed to protect their identities due to the sensitive subject matter. The findings of the author were correlated with the special education classroom teacher's view of what transpired. It is the day that was not imagined during the original listing of assumptions that is explained in this article. The findings were written in first person narrative from the author's perspective.

Emotional Disclosure

As the students were participating in and learning from *The Drama Discovery Curriculum*, they were expressing their growth in communication. Daniel stated, "Sometimes I just got in front of people and I froze. Other times I was into it and I enjoyed it and I had fun with it. After a while I didn't even pay attention to the other people there." Christopher expressed that through the Drama Discovery program he learned to "open up more. I wasn't embarrassed about acting. I used to feel embarrassed. I thought everyone was laughing at me, not what I was doing. It made me feel better about acting."

When asked the question, "Have you learned new ways to cope with feeling sad or angry?" Matthew enthusiastically exclaimed, "Yes. Act it out!"

These positive expressions of beginning to open up in front of the classroom through dramatic expression, led to the proverbial "flood gates opening" on the Thursday after the Drama Discovery pilot was completed. The students opened up to their peers and shared their issues in an unabashed way. Both the teacher and I attributed these disclosures to the Drama Discovery program's communication techniques, bibliotherapy, and learning about their emotional and behavioral needs.

The evening after the discussion, phone calls were made to each parent, and letters explaining what had transpired were sent. The students' parents were encouraged

to have their children share what was said in class in their next therapy session with a professional.

The on-campus therapist was also consulted to assure the administration that the situation was handled appropriately. If issues were to resurface, the therapist would be able to discuss the topics with the students. The therapist agreed with the teacher that the students had aired their pasts and that it was safe to move forward with the class without rehashing the situation multiple times. The teacher did discuss with the class the need for confidentiality regarding what their peers had said and stressed that there were resources that they could utilize if they needed further counseling on the subjects that arose during the conversation. This section details the highlights of what the students felt comfortable sharing that day with their classroom, which had blossomed into a community.

After a meeting with Christopher's caseworker, Christopher asked if he could talk with the class about "laying off" so that he could try to "straighten up." He stated that he would appreciate their help in not picking on him, which was his intended topic of conversation. He started speaking, stood up and got a Kleenex, and then broke down about his friend's death in a sledding accident that happened in front of him. Christopher had recently received word that another friend from the public school had cancer. He said that it was not fair that these young people have to die. He sat in the back of the class sobbing and the teacher put her arms around him and hugged him. The teacher later said, "The rest of the class was sitting still like frozen statues. I never saw a class so quiet." The teacher apologized to him for what he had been through and said that she understood because she had been there when her grandmother passed away during a seizure. Christopher was still left with the question, "But why did he have to die?"

At the end of the class Sarah passed Christopher the following note:
Christopher,

I'm sorry that you lost your friend but now he is where he can always see you. I mite (might) not ack (act) nice to you but you are ok. I understand how I feel being taken out of your home. I lost people too. But I have to deal with it. I'm sorry. (personal communication, November 4, 2004).

Tyler turned around in his seat and said, "Man, I know your pain because I watched my uncle get beat up. He crawled into the house and died on the couch." He repeated the statement, "He died on the couch" four times. His uncle was twenty-four when he died.

Jessica explained that she managed a household for twelve people in one of her multiple foster care families. She was expected to do all of the cooking and cleaning including all of the laundry. Jessica said that she had never told this to anybody but that she was raped by her cousins and step-dad daily. When she told her birth mother, she was so addicted to drugs that she didn't do anything. While Jessica was crying about this, the rest of the class sat still in their seats.

Ashley went over and put her arm around Jessica. These two girls had many conflicts throughout the nine weeks. She sat next to her with her head down. When she got the courage to lift her head up she looked right at the class and said, "I was raped in the bathroom by my boyfriend at school." Later Ashley wrote in her journal:

1. My boyfriend that raped me in the bathroom.
2. My uncle got shot in my living room.
3. My dad had costed (accosted) and raped me.
4. My dad hitting me over the head with a poul [pole]
5. [Named a girl's name] hitting me and sexauly adusing [sexually abusing] me
6. My mom prostruding [prostituting] me out (personal journal, November 4, 2004).

Emily, Ashley's older sister, told the boys that that's why the girls get so upset when they joke about rape and sexual things. Josh left the room.

Christopher started to talk about how he didn't want to be pulled out of his home and that he wanted to go back. The adoptive and foster kids all talked about what it is like to be removed from their families. They all wanted to talk at once.

Michael started talking about foster homes. He explained that he had been tortured. He was covered in bugs and spiders and that is now a phobia. They made him stand in scalding hot water in a tub. His foster father made him take a shower with him and put his penis against his. He explained that he could have taken the man to court but he decided not to. Now he wishes that he had. The students were understanding about this and did not engage in their typical teasing.

During the phone call the night of the disclosures, Michael's mother continued her positive way of listening and comprehending what we were doing for the students through the Drama Discovery program. She had not heard about the hot water and was glad that he was finding the classroom to be a safe place to share such information. She was pleased with what was going on in the classroom and stated that she felt that more classrooms for these types of students should have this curriculum.

Emily began to write about her own experiences at this point:

When I was young. I was about one-years old to three or four. I was physically abused and basically ignored and laid in a crib. When my mother gave me a bottle of chocolate milk and put me in a crib. That's how I was when I was adopted at five years old. I had a whole mouth full of black cavities. Also when I was still in my mother, she was an alcoholic. That affected me and I was born with Fetal Alcohol Effect (FAE). To this day I hate talking about my past youth life. (personal communication, November 4, 2004).

Sarah started to cry and asked why her parents can't get along. The students talked about how all parents fight. Sarah said that her real mom and real dad get along better now that they are not married. The teacher explained that the pressures of marriage

can be hard. Sarah talked about being pulled out of her home over her brother's incident. She said, "It is not fun. It is scary to be pulled out and go to a new place to live with strangers."

Sarah elaborated on her personal situation in writing:

Iv [I've] lost so much I don't know where to start. The pain Iv [I've] been through is still kicking my a*s. Iv [I've] never had good times without something bad going to happen. Iv [I've] been taken from my mom. Iv [I've] been raped by my step-brother. It can go on for about four years before the girl gets to tell. I didn't want them to leave my step-mom. Iv [I've] been abused by my step dad. He throw me and my sister through a wooden and metal door. I was raped by hem [him] He attacked my real mom and I tryed [tried] to stop him but he put a gun to my head. I was so scared. And now my step-mom and real dad are fighting with my real mom and step-dad. I don't know what to do. Hearing other ppl [people] talk about their past scares me. (personal communication, November 4, 2004).

Because it was difficult for Sarah to talk about her complex family situation, her opening up in writing was a breakthrough.

The teacher elaborated,

It was unreal. They were all just sitting there. Andrew had his head down. He said he was sleeping but I knew he was taking it all in. When he came over and said something about how his black cat died in a fire. I asked if he had something to do with the fire. He paused for minute and looked at me uncomfortably. He said that he didn't screw the light bulb in right. (personal communication, November 4, 2004).

On the phone Andrew's mother expressed relief that he had opened up in class about the fire incident. She was glad that he had finally said something about his feelings of guilt. She explained that although the fire was started by a light bulb, it was not her son's fault and she would address this with him.

In the classroom, Charlie had said nothing. After Andrew's story about the fire, Charlie stood up and walked to the hallway. The teacher said that he could cry. He said, "Not yet." He accepted a hug from the teacher. He was able to pat her back once or twice, which is a step for him towards physically showing caring.

The teacher handed me the following paper and said that Andrew had told her that I could read it:

You can read this out loud if you want. Now I know most of the things that went on in your lives. I know that I don't normally cry or show emotions but that is because I held in everything for the past eight years. Now that I have heard all that I will try to be a little more emotional and help out and not argue as much

with everyone but I cannot deal with this much pain (personal communication, November 4, 2004).

Josh was acting silly, his usual reaction to an uncomfortable situation. He was concerned about his classmates but not as concerned as he was about seeing his teacher crying. He did admit that he was affected by the day's sharing of information:

First of all when my mom was a little girl she had gotten abused by Pop her dad. Well every time I think about that I want to go to church. But when we just talked about our lives I almost cried [cried] Finally I don't like to cry." (personal communication, November 4, 2004).

The teacher mentioned to me that everyone shared something whether it was verbal or written.

Matthew wrote about the experience of hearing the tragedies that his classmates lived through. "It made me feel good. I have had nothing happen to me. I have never been abused" (personal journal, November 4, 2004). Christopher said, "Not to be rude to you, Matthew, but I can't believe that you talk to your mother that way and she doesn't hurt you." He acknowledged that his life at home is bad but after hearing everybody else's confessions he knew that it could certainly be worse.

When Matthew's mom received a phone call from the teacher that night and heard that her son's class was involved in telling stories from their lives, some of them disturbing, the mother sounded concerned. She said that she assumed that he had said something bad about her because he often sees her in a negative light. When she heard what he had written, she cried tears of relief.

During a discussion, the teacher stated her frustration at knowing what these students have been through:

It makes me sick to think that there are people out there that do this crap. It is absolutely a good thing that they got this off their chests. I can't imagine carrying these painful memories, some of them since they were three years old. Daniel hasn't cried or shown emotion in eight years. If he doesn't release it, those are the kind of kids that crack and do the Columbine stuff. It's a family now. The trust is so deep. They had been so rude and crude up until that point. They all found common ground. They all thought that it was that they were big and bad and tough. They didn't realize that they all came from similar situations (personal communication, November 4, 2004).

The teacher pondered the following questions aloud as we talked after school the day of the disclosures. "It all fit. It's so hard to hear what they have inside them, but it's good that they got it out. I don't know how they did that. It blows my mind. How do you not trust a therapist? Why did they trust you and I?" The teacher further explained, "You know how every few days as a teacher you see a light bulb go off about a math

concept or a ‘so that’s what my other teacher meant?’ That day everyone’s light bulbs were shining like they had on their high power generators. The drama activities and curriculum opened them up to this. The whole breakthrough happened in an hour. It is more powerful than we ever realized. It’s incredible.”

Drama Discovery Discussion

By relating to the character in the story that had a similar disability, the students were able to discuss the situations that the character found himself in and the feeling that he experienced. They analyzed characters and in the process they honed their communication skills in reading, writing, and acting out scenarios. By evaluating what they were able to portray through these various techniques, it became very apparent that there was a positive growth in their self-efficacy regarding their special needs as students with emotional and behavioral disabilities. This combination brought forth by *The Drama Discovery Curriculum* provided them a safe venue for personal expression.

Generalizations

The findings in this study provide insights into how teachers can help students who are E/BD to find an understanding of their own challenges and open the lines of communication for students who struggle with this skill. Bibliotherapy can be used in combination with dramatic activities and games in the classroom to provide a positive outlet for expression of emotion and thought. If the emotional expression that results is of a nature that discloses information that could be construed as uncomfortable, it must be tempered by discussion and often this population needs to revisit the issues during a more therapeutic environment.

Jessica, a student with an emotional/behavioral disability who participated in the pilot study said the following about the Drama Discovery Curriculum:

It’s a fun cool experience with reading and acting class. If I were somebody that could make it stay and go to all the schools I would do it. It’s the best program on earth. All kids are kind of like that [the character in the book] sometimes. Teachers will love it too. They can look at their class and say, “Some of you act like that but you are all right!”

The Drama Discovery Curriculum employs techniques that include theater games (such as the Mirror Game in which the student need to work together in partners to mimic each other’s movements), improvisational activities, and acting out scenes based on the characters and situations that they relate to in the bibliotherapy books. In a systematic way the curriculum establishes a program for teachers to follow and can be utilized in a school setting for students with emotional and behavioral needs.

Limitations

The circumstances of the scenario for the study limit some of the direct translation of findings into another setting. For instance, the teacher who taught the classes had thirty years of teaching experience and a newer teacher may not be able to provide the same insight to add to the program. All of the students in the study were at a day school

for students with emotional and behavioral needs. The sample that was used from the student body included eleven students who were classified as having E/BD with Individualized Education Plans and one student who was a regular education student with delinquent tendencies. Almost all of the students in the class had dealt with extremely traumatic episodes in their young lives. During the day of the emotional disclosures, the students all opened up and began to share very personal details. Due to the emotional instability of the students, there is a possibility that some of the admissions of sexual abuse and other traumatic events could have been false in an attempt to fit in with the class. Separating the truth is a difficulty with research in this type of group setting with middle school students who have emotional needs and who struggle with social issues.

Implications for Future Research

This study can be considered the initial step towards researching the impact of this original Drama Discovery program. It examines the self-efficacy of students with emotional and/or behavioral disabilities regarding their own exceptionality. The following statements suggest other avenues for research:

- Having a therapist or counselor in the classroom to evaluate the study as it progressed could provide further insight.
- A therapist could join the teacher training Drama Discovery workshop to help teachers identify when they need professional therapeutic help with the emotional disclosures.
- In a future study of the Drama Discovery program it would help to garner more information if the researcher interviewed or provided a questionnaire to the parent and/or therapists that work with the students.
- Future research studies could include a longer study of *The Drama Discovery Curriculum* with a larger sample size.
- Research that included a control group of regular education students would further serve to inform the researcher.
- A quantitative study of the Drama Discovery program would provide a different way of looking at the information that could be garnered through assessment instruments that measure self-efficacy.

Conclusions

Four main strategies are used in *The Drama Discovery Curriculum*: reading about situations that the students relate to, discussions, acting out situations, and writing based on prompts. Students saw elements of themselves in the characters in the book and they were able to tell stories from their personal lives that parallel the characters' lives and issues. Their discussions led to positive coping mechanisms. Through the use of dramatic games and activities, the students seemed to develop strengths in communication and to learn more about themselves and their peers.

Improvisational scenes with specific character motivations encourage collaboration with peers. Writing in journals based on prompts can enable students to express their feelings. Bibliotherapy allows the students to relate to the characters in the story and therefore helps with problem solving and ultimately leads to classroom discussion.

“Self-efficacy beliefs exercise a powerful influence on the level of accomplishment that individuals ultimately realize” (Pajares, 2001, p. 242). The students “ultimately realized” that they could acquire an awareness of and come to terms with their needs. Students in this population experience daily the negative effects of their denial or misunderstanding of their exceptionalities. By increasing understanding of their own disabilities, and disclosing information in a safe setting, the students increased their chances of finding tools to triumph over these burdens. Once the realization of need occurred, the healing process began. Now the students can focus on developing their strengths and abilities for the future.

A parent of two of the students that were involved in the pilot study of *The Drama Discovery Curriculum* made the following claim about the impact of the program:

We have three special needs children, two of whom attended the school in 8th grade where *The Drama Discovery Curriculum* was pioneered. Both of our daughters have various learning challenges. At the time, our older daughter could read at grade level but lagged in comprehension. Our younger daughter was severely learning disabled and could only read at a third grade level with much support and struggle. Needless to say, reading was not one of their favorite school subjects. It was very difficult to get them to read for schoolwork and they NEVER read for pleasure.

These girls rarely ever spoke of any academic activities that they experienced during the school day so we were pleasantly surprised when they started discussing the book they were reading in class, one from the Joey Pigza series. That's when we discovered that not only were they reading the book, they were also role playing much of its content through Dr. Shellie Jacobs Hipsky's Drama Discovery program. It seems that the act of dramatizing the material made the book come alive in a way that they, as poor readers, could not accomplish on their own. As a person who would rather read than eat, I was thrilled to see them finally understanding just how wonderful a book can be! Today our oldest is reading and enjoying books such as the Harry Potter series. Although our younger daughter still struggles, she at least is no longer so resistant to reading.

It would be wonderful to see the Drama Discovery program instituted in every school, not just for the identified struggling readers, but for all students so that even the quietly marginal readers could experience the written word with the same wonder and excitement that our girls did. (personal communication, January, 21, 2006)

Through reading about characters that they related to, and engaging in drama strategies and other activities combined with personal verbal and written reflection, the students began to comprehend their exceptionalities and formulate coping strategies. They also supported each other in these self-discoveries and found comfort in the classroom as a safe place to share what they were experiencing as students who deal with having an emotional, behavioral, and/or learning disability. One can see through this study that *The Drama Discovery Curriculum* that utilizes the combination of bibliotherapy and dramatic activities works to help emotionally and behaviorally disabled students gain self-efficacy regarding their exceptionalities.

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