

MOTHER GRIN'S VILLAGE:
A CREATIVE DRAMA PROGRAM

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors Committee of

Texas State University-San Marcos

In Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements

For Graduation in the University Honors Program

By

Julie H. Raty

San Marcos, Texas

May 2008

Thesis introduction

This paper was written to illustrate how creative drama programs can encourage effective communication skills in children. The person responsible for conducting the study in this paper will be referred to as the facilitator. Effective communication becomes ever more important as the population grows and diversifies. As they mature, today's children must process and address complex social issues within their private and public lives. Because creative drama's purpose is "for the growth and development of the players rather than for the entertainment of an audience" (Beall Heinig and Stillwell 5), it is an appropriate source to develop programs that address interpersonal communication.

Creative drama has been an informal way of communicating information through the ages. One theory on theatre's development is that it started as storytelling. Whether to relay a current event such as a hunting expedition or recount great ancestral achievements, the purpose was to share something of significance with others in an entertaining way (Brockett & Hildy 5).

It wasn't until the efforts of early founders such as Winifred Ward that creative drama emerged as a viable means of educating children in the areas of communication and social interaction. Ward opened "a new field of education: the teaching of drama with and for children (creative drama and children's theatre) to prospective teachers" (Winifred Ward Papers). Her extensive studies and work in the fields of speech and drama made Ward understand the significance of combining verbal and nonverbal communication skills with dramatization (Brain Siks and Brain Dunnington 121). Describing its objectives, Ms. Ward listed creative drama's value as follows:

1. Experience in thinking creatively and independently
2. Practice in strongly motivated social cooperation

3. Opportunities to grow in understanding people who have different viewpoints from themselves
4. Controlled emotional release
5. Experience in thinking on one's feet (Ward 2)

Contemporary theorists expounded on these ideas when describing the usefulness of creative drama in developing and refining both verbal and nonverbal communication skills. In her textbook, *Theatre Arts in the Elementary Classroom*, the late Barbara T. Salisbury wrote how “the teacher helps the children to think, to imagine ...using their own words and movement to express what they want to communicate” (Salisbury 6). Author and creative drama teacher, Ruth Beall Heinig, writes that creative drama helps children “to form their self-concepts, expand their self-confidence, and increase their ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings both verbally and physically” (Beall Heinig 2). She astutely notes that creative drama programs have the positive component of utilizing communication skills continually as the participants are encouraged to “discuss ideas, share personal observations, and organize and plan their drama activities” (Beall Heinig 3).

Many interesting relevant creative drama programs have been developed and implemented covering a variety of subjects. One such program, the *Bully Proof Project* (Michell) has been successfully implemented at Texas State University. Created and developed by Professor Monica Michell, this program has successfully addressed the social problem of bullying. Working in this program over two semesters as both a teaching assistant and performer inspired the facilitator to use its format as a spring board for an original creative drama program. While the *Bully Proof Project* examines alternative choices in relation to the problem of bullying

and encourages bystander awareness (Michell), the *Mother Grin Village* creative drama program will explore the challenges of interpersonal communication.

Program Development

Mother Grin's Village is a program where participants use fairy tales and rhymes to explore different choices for resolving miscommunication through creative drama strategies. The facilitator's initial concept was an original participation play in which elementary age students re-invent the ending of the Mother Goose rhyme, *The Old Woman in the Shoe*. Eventually, this idea evolved into the *Mother Grin's Village Creative Drama Program*. Several characters from familiar fairy tales and rhymes inhabit Mother Grin's Village. The facilitator chose *The Old Woman in the Shoe*, *the Three Little Pigs*, and *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* because of the likelihood that participants would know their conflicts. She determined this would be an enjoyable way for children to explore the idea of alternative communication.

In developing this program, several questions were considered:

- How is the playing organized?
- How much space does the creative dramatics require?
- Should all children be strongly encouraged to participate?
- Does the leader actively participate in the creative drama?
- How long is the drama period? (Beall Heinig and Stillwell 11-15)

After much deliberation, she decided the focus group should be primarily first through fourth grade students as this is a stage of develop that is especially appropriate for the strategies used in creative drama. She drafted a proposal outlining the purpose and goals of the program and submitted to several private and public schools in the area of Bastrop, Texas. Eventually, the facilitator was able to obtain permission from a local home school cooperative to perform a two-

part program during their English classes for grades first through fourth. They provided a large study hall room on consecutive Fridays in April from 12:45pm to 2:00pm. The teachers committed twenty-five participants, ranging from five to nine years of age.

The proposal outlined two ways in which storytelling and creative drama would be used to actively pursue different endings to conflicts. All the children and adults present would be encouraged to join in the activities to generate a sense of creativity and take focus off any one person. The initial part would center on the group as a whole, because it introduces the program and its stories. The second part would combine both large and small group activities. As the leader of the program, the facilitator would actively participate when necessary.

Initial Meeting

The first part of the program consisted of a storytelling component in which the facilitator introduced the student to the program's theme. The students were asked to raise their hands if they knew the stories of *the Old Woman in the Shoe*, *the Three Little Pigs*, and *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Many children raised their hands, although a few either didn't remember or hadn't heard the tales.

Stories from a children's book (Maclean, Maclean, and Barker) were summarized and the book was used to illustrate the action. Afterwards, it was explained that these characters were members of the Mother Grin Village and that they were having problems getting along with each other. The facilitator told the students she would be interviewing some of the characters to find out what these problems were. This was done to start students thinking about communication issues. Using an original script (Raty and Raty), the facilitator conducted an interview with an assistant who portrayed the various characters.

After the interview session, the children were invited to a town meeting the next Friday to help the villagers solve their problems by acting out the stories. The facilitator concluded this section of the program by introducing the group to the first version of the *Mother Grin's Happy Little Village* song (Raty and Raty). Everyone was invited to join in and sing the song after which the session was finished by telling the students how exciting it would be to have them come to the town meeting the following Friday. The groups were separated and sent back to their classrooms.

One of the more memorable observations made that day was the excitement of students at the prospect of acting out the fairy tales. Many of the children immediately said who they would like to be and what they would say to other characters. It was interesting to note which personalities the children related to and created. Several of the boys expressed a desire to portray Goldilocks and a girl showed interest in playing Papa Bear. Another boy planned how he would solve the problem of the wolf by bringing in the wolf's mother. Several students who seemed very introverted at the beginning of the storytelling session became more extroverted as it progressed.

A challenge to this section of the program was the teachers' insistence that the students sit in a line rather than gather in a semi circle as the summarized version of the stories and interview were carried out. This was an unexpected occurrence that did not help evoke a friendly environment and the facilitator found this to inhibit her own creative processes. Also, the teachers chose to sit away from the group, which caused a less inclusive atmosphere. This was later addressed during a brief discussion with the lead teacher in which the facilitator asked if the teachers could be invited to join in on the playing at the next session.

Program Assistant Training

The program's original premise revolved around one story and a small focus group of approximately ten participants. When this plan was reformatted and more participants expressed interest, it was determined that a larger group would be needed to help with the project. Having seen this strategy used quite successfully in *The Bully Proof Project* (Michell), the facilitator decided to use the configuration of one assistant per five to eight participants.

Five motivated and responsible teens and pre-teens were recruited to fill the roles of assistants. Two of the volunteers had theatre backgrounds. This was considered a plus, because they would be familiar with drama conventions such as the need for rehearsals. The importance of impromptu play for the program's young participants was a prominent concern for the facilitator. Of equal concern was the need for the assistants to be comfortable enough and knowledgeable to offer the children support when needed.

To achieve this goal, five rehearsals were planned before the scheduled event. It was felt this would allow ensemble building for the group and give ample time for the assistants to get comfortable with the material. At the initial meeting, the following items were addressed:

- Strengthening Concentration and Involvement
 - Side-coaching
 - Leader's participation
- Evaluation
- Replaying
- Group process
 - Acceptance of self, ideas, feelings, mistakes, imitation
 - Rejection

- Group Involvement
 - Avoidance
 - Cliques

The difference between process and performance theatre was thoroughly examined. Examples were given of pivotal critical questions the assistants could use to help the children think critically. The importance and value of using the strategy of giving suggestions or comments from the sidelines to heighten and advance as well as control the playing was discussed. This method, known as side-coaching, has been shown to help participants with attention and involvement in the creative playing. Leader participation was stressed as important because it would help assist in “setting the scene, creating the mood, and highlighting the dramatic tension” (Beall Heinig 21 – 22). The value of evaluating with phrases that help participants to understand program goals and plan further in their creative process was dealt with as well. The facilitator gave examples of appropriate evaluative statements such as “Your animals looks so real” to assist the helpers in understanding the concept (Beall Heinig 23).

The creative drama approach of replaying is also important because “seldom does the best creative thinking and the deepest understanding reveal itself in a first playing (Beall Heinig 23). It was the hope of the facilitator that several opportunities would be available for replaying so as to allow participants to develop familiarity with the program as well as new ideas (Beall Heinig 23). Additionally, the group process of acceptance of self, ideas, feelings, mistakes and imitation was thoroughly examined (Beall Heinig 24 – 27).

Rejection of inappropriate behavior was addressed with attention given to the principle of “rejecting the behavior but not the person” (Beall Heinig 28). Ignoring attention seekers behavior or privately talking to individuals was determined to be appropriate means of dealing with these

situations (Beall Heinig 28). The assistants were also assured that both the teachers and the facilitator would be a presence they could depend on. Lastly, plans were made on how group involvement would be encouraged so as to allow both extroverted and introverted children an equal opportunity to play and create. The group practiced different scenarios where they might encounter a precocious or shy child. All and all, rehearsals produced a reasonable level of comfort with the program parts.

Some challenges that were encountered during this process included limited time during individual rehearsals and nervousness on the part of some assistants. The rehearsals also dwindled down to three due to schedule conflicts. In hindsight, the rehearsal process should have been started earlier to address both these concerns. In retrospect, the group might also have benefited had more of the assistants been present during the first meeting with the children.

During the *Bully Proof Project* (Michell), the facilitator had the opportunity to assist in development of a literacy component as part of an Honor's class and had earlier decided to use the "meet and greet" style in the Mother Grin program. This portion of the project was seen as an appropriate educational choice because it addressed the very real need of literacy. But the additional bonus of allowing the beginnings of a relationship to develop was also seen as beneficial to the program. Thus the level of nervousness and unfamiliarity with the project lessened for everyone involved.

Unfortunately, because of scheduling problems, some assistants could not be present at the program's initial meeting so it was decided that only one assistant would attend. A better choice might have been to take as many as could come, as this would have still allowed several assistants to experience the beginnings of the event.

Part II – Creative Drama Program Day

In the next session, the students were welcomed to the “town meeting.” A moment was taken to introduce the additional assistants and remind the students as to why they were all there. Three of the assistants had been assigned to work with the children on the different stories while two assistants would serve as camera personnel. The assistants’ roles were explained to the participants during the introduction phase. The first version of the *Mother Grin’s Happy Little Village* song was sung by the facilitator and assistants and then the students were asked to join in as a vocal warm-up.

The next warm up used was to encourage the participants to start thinking about communication problems. It involved the entire group forming a circle, with the first person whispering a sentence to the next person to their right and so on, ending with the last person finally saying the sentence out loud. This game became an interesting example of both good and bad communication practices. The facilitator started the game with, “There was an old woman who knew some pigs and a bear family and a girl with golden hair.”

This proved too difficult for some children to remember so the warm-up was stopped about one quarter the way around the circle, and the last person was asked what he thought the facilitator had first said. The answer proved the sentence had changed completely. It was decided that this might be an example of communication that was not very effective because it was not direct enough. Another person was asked to start the circle again but this time to make the sentence more clear and understandable. This sentence was successful until another third of the way around when some girls couldn’t repeat what he said. Another child in the circle repeated the sentence and the girls were encouraged to start a new one. The game ended with only a

somewhat fractured sentence but the warm-up still succeeded in stressing the importance of listening and communicating clearly when interacting with others.

After the warm-up everyone assembled again in the front of the room to hold a brief group discussion. This was done to stimulate the children's thoughts using questions that stressed "who, what, when, where, and how" about the characters they would acted out. Some of the issues the participants were asked to think about were:

- Who is the *Old Woman in the Shoe* rhyme about? (A mother; children; the baker-man)
- What did the pigs want? (A nice home)
- What happens? (In the *Old Women in the Shoe* the baker-man comes and is scared away by the children; in *The Three Little Pigs* the wolf destroys the pigs homes; in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, Goldilocks comes in uninvited and breaks things)
- Why? (The reasons are endless. For instance, in *The Three Little Pigs* the wolf could have had a bad experience with a pig so he developed a prejudice; in the *Old Woman in the Shoe* the baker-man could have been rude first)
- How? (This question may not be needed, but can sometimes be helpful later in creating an alternative version)

This discussion session was interesting because it gave the children a brief opportunity to show their familiarity with the stories and ask questions about things they didn't remember. It also encouraged the children to think of alternative ways the villagers could deal with their problems. The only real challenge noted in this section was some impatience by the participants to move on to the playtime. Because of this, the discussion was kept as brief as possible.

The next part of the session involved the participants breaking up into three different groups to begin re-inventing the ending to the stories. The main theme of the program was stressed by encouraging group members to think about the questions that had been discussed and how they might help to find solutions that used positive communication to solve the problems. Each group was presented with a small box of simple props and given directions as follows:

1. Use anything in the prop box or the room for costume and scenery.
2. Be any character you want to be.
3. Use any movements and dialogue necessary for your story.
4. Remember our discussion on “who, what, when, where, why, and how.”
5. Whatever ending you decide to use must be safe and nonviolent. (Michell)
6. Most importantly, remember to communicate in a positive way

The groups were given approximately 6 to 10 minutes of planning time to develop a simple scene using effective communication. As the groups played, the facilitator came round to observe briefly, asking how everyone was doing. After all the groups had had a reasonable time to prepare, they were asked to meet in the front of the room. The groups were told that everyone would be going on a visit to see the characters that were having problems in the town. Assistants had been instructed during previous rehearsals that this would be their cue to gather the first group to play out their stories to avoid any confusion. The rest of the groups' members were asked to follow Mother Grin to the area of the room where *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* was to be performed. After they had all gathered, a brief narrative of the story up to the climactic moment that Goldilocks is caught in the little Bear's bed was relayed by the facilitator. The children of the first group enacted a brief skit in which the Mother Bear fainted in distress at

finding her house in such disarray which prompted Goldilocks to apologize and ask if she could help clean up. The story ended with all of them deciding to be friends.

The next group had been assigned the story of the *Old Woman in the Shoe*. This group was a mixture of very shy children and one child who had expressed dislike of the story during their planning. This proved to be a distraction to this group's ability to play productively. The assistant was so occupied with the difficult child that the other less extroverted group members were left without the direction they needed. The group still managed to come up with a reasonable ending in which the story's children decided to make bread for their mother. However, the portrayal of their solution was very short and disjointed. Both the facilitator and assistants agreed later that too much time was spent trying to coax the petulant child to play, taking valuable playtime away from the other group members.

This was unfortunate because it is likely the group would have benefited greatly from the side coaching the assistant could have provided (Beall Heinig 21). It would also have been useful to have some rules of participation that were addressed at the beginning of this small group playtime (Beall Heinig, 28). Emphasis was placed in the planning phase of the program on the idea of being creative, non-violent, and safe during the creative play (Michell). However, no ground rules to maintain order had been built in and that would have helped both the students and the assistants.

The final story presented was that of the *Three Little Pigs* which turned out to be a very well planned and beautifully presented piece. This group had some very inventive children who all seemed to be naturally outgoing. One little girl in particular took on the role of leader and played a "wise bird" that helps the wolf and pigs discuss their problems and learn to live in peace. The children all had a part and worked energetically to tell their story. It was interesting to

note that this group's assistant was the least familiar with drama and theatre conventions.

Unfortunately, time constraints did not allow for another round of playing so everyone returned to the meeting area to discuss what they had all seen.

The participants were asked what kinds of communication were used to help the characters resolve their problems. They were offered a chance to add any ideas they had not seen, thus giving them a chance to voice alternative choices that the group may not have decided to use. Several members of the discussion suggested other outcomes that were good choices as well. The program was brought to a close with an invitation to all to sing a revised version of the *Mother Grin's Happy Little Village* song in which Mother Grin says she now *has* a happy little village thanks to her villagers. The group members of the program thanked the children and teachers for helping out and exited.

Conclusion

Developing a relevant creative drama program is no easy task. There are obstacles in every area that must be carefully anticipated. The original vision and actual result were very different. The biggest challenges were having an adequate location, securing appropriately aged participants and assistants, and communicating the facilitator expectations.

This program was originally planned using one story that would be presented to a small group of children. It was envisioned as a small classroom activity that would involve a group of approximately ten participants of first or second grade age. This was seen as an ideal way to allow for much team building and to rotate stories. The facilitator had visualized using one camera operator at most. As the program matured, however, interest was expressed in having more children attend. This necessitated broadening the project's scope and rethinking its facilitation.

It was decided that more assistants would benefit the outcome thus four more teenagers were asked to help. While they were hard working and mature for their respective ages, this required more rehearsal time for training. The more people in the group, the more schedule conflicts arose, and meeting times did not come together as easily as hoped.

Despite these challenges and others, the program was a very nice first attempt. Teachers expressed enjoyment watching students attempt to solve problems and work in groups. Some registered excitement at seeing many introverted students blossom in this environment of creative play and other more extroverted students take on mentoring and leadership roles. Everyone was pleased by the participants' enthusiasm. Many children recognized the facilitator and her assistant from the initial visit and greeted them eagerly. All participants remembered the *Mother Grin's Happy Little Village* song and the theme of positive communication and were excited to start dramatizing the stories.

Also, the program was recognized as having growth potential in other directions. One teacher asked if the program could be brought back the next term to assist in dramatizing some sections she was planning to address in her Language Arts class. Others expressed interest in seeing this program used across the curriculum to discuss such subjects as history, government, Spanish, and math. Finally, it was agreed that this program had succeeded in its purpose to encourage participants to focus on the means of positive communication to resolve conflict. These positive results clearly illustrate how creative drama programs can encourage effective communication skills in children and its potential as a learning tool in other fields of study.

Works Cited

- Beall Heinig, Ruth. Creative Drama Resource Book. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice- Hall Inc., 1987.
- Beall Heinig, Ruth, and Stillwell, Lydia. Creative Dramatics for the Classroom. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice- Hall Inc., 1974.
- Brain Siks, Geraldine, and Brain Dunnington, Hazel. Children's Theatre and Creative Dramatics. Washington: University of Washington Press, 1961.
- Brockett, Oscar G., and Hildy, Franklin J. History of the Theatre. Boston: Pearson Education Group, 2003.
- Maclean, C., Maclean, M., and Barker, C., My First Book Stories, Songs, Games, & Rhymes. Italy: Grisewood & Dempsey Ltd., 1992.
- Michell, Monica. Personal interview. 28 Feb. 2008.
- Salisbury, Barbara T. Theatre Arts in the Elementary Classroom. New Orleans: Anchorage Press, Inc., 1986.
- Ward, Winifred. Stories to Dramatize. Anchorage; The Children's Theatre Press, 1952.
- "Winifred Ward (1884-1975) Papers, 1917-1978." Northwestern University Archives. 31 July 1981. Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. 19 Apr. 2008
<http://www.library.northwestern.edu/archives/findingaids/ward_winifred.pdf>.