

Innovations in Practice: a pilot project of school-based intervention integrating drama and language awareness

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Background: To help immigrant and refugee adolescents experiencing a severe academic delay cope with adversity, a school-based intervention combining drama workshops and language awareness activities was piloted in two classrooms. **Method:** A qualitative analysis of participant observations was performed and the Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire and its Impairment Supplement was administered before and after the intervention. The observations were carried out in two Montreal high schools serving an underprivileged neighbourhood of immigrants, involving two classrooms of underschooled adolescents ($n = 27$) and two classes of similarly underschooled adolescents chosen among other teachers interested in the intervention, who accepted to participate as a comparison group ($n = 28$). **Results:** The adolescents shared their experiences of adversity and felt empowered by the workshops. Self-reported impairment decreased in the intervention groups. **Conclusion:** The protective effect of creative language activities for immigrant and refugee youth should be further investigated.

Key Practitioner Message:

- Immigrant and refugee adolescents with learning difficulties may be at risk of feeling doubly rejected
- School-based programmes are usually well-accepted by immigrant families
- Language awareness activities paired with drama expression workshops may empower these youth
- The acknowledgement of diverse languages and identities can help restore feelings of belonging

Keywords: Drama therapy; language; school; refugees; adolescence

Introduction

Many immigrant and refugee youth have experienced organized violence in their homelands and many suffer from poverty, often living in unstable environments (Derluyn et al., 2008; Ehntholt & Yule, 2006). In spite of their high exposure to adversity, immigrant and refugee families persistently underutilize mental health services and often fear stigmatization by targeted interventions offered through the schools (Peltonen & Punamäki, 2010; Persson & Rousseau, 2009; Rousseau & Guzder, 2008). Given the meanings that their families and communities associate with being assigned to a special class, and given the social position attached to minority cultural status in economically socio-disadvantaged neighbourhoods, immigrant and refugee youth with learning difficulties often experience a double exclusion (Moneta & Rousseau, 2008).

A programme of drama workshops was developed to support immigrant and refugee youth going through the multiple transitional and sometimes adverse experiences associated with adolescence and migration (Rousseau et al., 2005). The evaluation revealed a

significant reduction in the perception of distress and impairment experienced by adolescents and a significant improvement in academic performance (Rousseau et al., 2007). In the wake of this first project, small scale projects in special classes for immigrant and refugee youth with learning and behaviour difficulties highlighted that the drama workshops transformed the teachers' perception of the adolescents by revealing not only the students' experiences of adversity (trauma, grievance, discrimination) but also their resources and strengths, which were often underestimated by the schools (Moneta & Rousseau, 2008).

In parallel, different education teams in Europe and in Canada developed and evaluated a school programme of Language Awareness Activities in diverse classroom settings. Their main objective is to facilitate the development of positive representations of language diversity, to strengthen identity affirmation and decrease classroom implicit and explicit discriminatory attitudes and behaviours (Candelier, 2003). In Canada, the evaluation of Language Awareness activities (Projet ELODIL, in French immersion classrooms in Vancouver and in schools serving multiethnic neighbourhood in

Montreal (Armand & Dagenais, 2005) showed that the impact of these programmes is largely linked to the creation of a community of practice (Donato, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991) which promotes a plurilingual repertoire in second language learners of immigrant origin. The programmes favour openness to linguistic diversity and allow some children, marginalized because of their limited language proficiency, to reposition themselves and be acknowledged by others as competent peers (Dagenais, Walsch, Armand, & Maraillet, 2008; Maraillet & Armand, 2006).

Immigrant and refugee children with limited prior schooling who have 'severe academic delay', defined in Quebec as a 3-year delay, are placed in special classes called 'underschooled classes' to address their specific needs. The Creative Expression Workshop team and the ELODIL team decided to merge their two programmes. This article presents the results of a pilot study evaluating a school-based intervention of drama workshops integrating activities in multiple languages.

Method

Setting and participants

The programme was piloted in the academic year 2009–2010 in two Montreal high schools serving an underprivileged neighbourhood of immigrants. Two classrooms of underschooled adolescents ($n = 27$) participated in the programme, and two classes of similarly underschooled adolescents chosen among other teachers interested in the intervention, accepted to participate as a comparison group ($n = 28$). The comparison group did not receive a specific intervention. Informed consent was obtained from participants and their parents.

Teachers emphasized that the academic delay can be associated to social turmoil and war (one of the youth in

our sample had never been to school) or caused by undiagnosed constitutional conditions like possible mental retardation or learning difficulties, among others. Some youth presented both probable constitutional problems and a high exposure to adversity. A large number of the overall sample, 52.7% ($n = 29$), have endured at least one form of exposure to premigratory organized violence (being witness or enduring persecution). The same number of youth (52.7%; $n = 29$) have been separated from their parents because of migration, with (30.9%; $n = 17$) families still not reunified. (Table 1). Overall 30.9% remembered their past academic experience in their country of origin as difficult, when asked to qualify it on a likert scale.

The plurilingual drama workshop programme

The overall purpose of the workshops is to facilitate the sharing of stories and the creation of links among immigrant and refugee youth with severe academic delay. The goal is to alleviate problems associated with distress, behaviours stemming from the losses of migration and the tensions of belonging to a minority in the host society; as well as to improve social adjustment, academic performance, and to provide schools and teachers with tools for adapting their teaching methods to suit the emotional and social needs of these youth. The workshops run for 12 weeks, with one 90-min session per week. They are delivered within the classroom and are always led by two members of the intervention team (a drama therapist and an educator) and by the teacher, whose level of direct involvement increases gradually as he or she becomes familiar with the workshops. Each session includes a warm-up period composed of theatrical exercises and of a language awareness activity which also uses dramatization. Examples of language awareness activities include exchanges about different languages spoken (sharing

Table 1. The socio-demographics and the migratory experiences of the two groups of participants in the pilot project

	Experimental group				Control group			
	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Age	12	18	14.85	1.75	12	17	14.71	1.41
Numbers of years in Canada	0	6	1.22	1.3	0	1	0.57	0.5
	<i>N</i>		<i>%</i>		<i>N</i>		<i>%</i>	
Boys	13		48.1		12		42.9	
Girls	14		51.9		16		57.1	
Continent of birth								
Africa	4		14.8		1		3.6	
Latin America and Caribbean	3		11.1		8		28.6	
Asia	18		66.7		15		53.6	
Other	2		7.4		4		14.3	
Status								
Permanent Resident	14		51.9		16		57.1	
Refugee and asylum seekers	8		29.6		5		17.9	
Don't know	5		18.5		7		25	
Exposure to premigratory violence								
Witness	7		25.9		13		46.4	
Persecuted	5		18.5		9		32.1	
Witness and/or persecuted	10		37		19		67.9	
Separated from their parents at migration	10		37		19		67.9	
Family still separated	9		33.3		8		28.6	
School difficulty in country of origin	6		22.2		11		39.3	

greetings, names, emotions) and playing with a wide array of sounds pertaining to specific languages. For example, in the 'echo' activity, the students imagine being on a mountain's summit and shouting a word in the language of their choice. The other students are invited to reproduce this word to create an echo. The chosen words are often meaningful. Throughout the course of the workshops, the students may express themselves in the language of their choice, with a translation in French provided to the others.

In the second half of the sessions, stories contributed by the youth are explored and played out in small groups, using either nonverbal expression or the spoken language of their choice. Over the course of the 12 weeks, a variety of themes are proposed (family, friendship, departure, overcoming a difficulty and so on). They may inspire the stories but the youth may also contribute stories which are not theme related.

Two types of data were collected. First, through participant observations, detailed notes describing the activities (stories produced, acting) and the interactions among students and with the teacher and team were taken during all the workshop sessions. Teachers and students were asked for feedback about the form and content of the intervention during the last session. Second, the youth were interviewed in their maternal tongue by research assistants of various cultural origins before and after the intervention (T_0 and T_1) and the classroom teachers filled a questionnaire about each of their students (T_0 and T_1). The youth interviews documented (a) socio-demographic profile, (b) the premigratory experience (school, exposure to trauma, family separation), (c) perceptions around language diversity and mastery of language, (d) the emotional and behavioural difficulties as appraised by the Strength and Difficulty Questionnaire (SDQ) in French, English or in their native tongue. The SDQ, translated into more than 20 languages, is widely used in culturally diverse settings (Goodman, Patel, & Leon, 2008). It includes a measure of symptoms and an Impairment Supplement documenting the burden associated with the symptoms.

A qualitative analysis of the participant observation and of the subjective evaluation of the teachers and students was performed based on a coding grid elaborated in previous research and adapted to include the language dimension of the present research (Rousseau et al., 2005). Bivariate (chi-square, t -test and paired t -test) were performed.

Results

The analysis of the participant observation notes confirmed the results of previous qualitative evaluations of the drama workshops: theatrical play is a means to transform the experience of adversity. It consolidates social bonds by building solidarity through shared experiences and generates feelings of empowerment (Moneta & Rousseau, 2008). The youth took advantage of the workshops to disclose stories of losses and trauma. Stories of physical abuse by teachers in the countries of origin were numerous, but also stories of grief: the death of a mother, helplessness in the face of the drowning of a friend, permission to cry for an unaccompanied minor, and stories of collective trauma (for example, witnessing a fatal riot). Although the

teachers were initially concerned about possible disclosure, the group reacted in a mature and supportive way to these narratives, likely because of the protective ritual space created by the workshops (Rousseau et al., 2005).

Beyond the impact of theatrical play, the introduction of language awareness and of multiple languages had specific effects. The youth were proud of demonstrating their mastery in their (or other) languages. They felt that this represented a recognition and legitimation of the richness of their background and facilitated the expression of their experiences and feelings. Beyond this, however, the detailed observation of linguistic interactions revealed a complex picture.

A third of the youth became shy or withdrew when peers or teachers asked them directly to use their maternal tongue or to discuss their country. In diverse ways, they avoided being attributed a single identity. They responded positively, however, when allowed to freely choose the language in which they would express themselves, generally opting for their maternal tongue.

Ambivalence around the use of multiple languages also emerged in one of the classes after an incident during which a couple of students used profanity in their maternal tongue to 'make jokes' but also to tease others. This evoked distrust and helplessness and it took some time to re-establish a feeling of safety in the class.

Interestingly, it is when the teachers participated in the improvisation, enacting the stories of the students and trying to learn a few words of their maternal tongue, that the students displayed the most positive emotional response. They highlighted this experience in their final evaluation stating that these were key moments in the workshops. A detailed analysis of the stories involving such role playing shows that the youth often proposed significant feminine roles to their teachers: they had to embody mothers, aunts, (and in two occasions abusive teachers!). The fact that the teachers struggled with these roles, often checking back and asking to have their pronunciation corrected, seemed to validate the minority identity and to legitimize the students' struggles with language, codes and values in the host country.

The quantitative analysis of the impact of the workshops through paired t -tests indicates that although the total SDQ symptom score did not change, impairment as reported by the students significantly decreased in the experimental group after the intervention ($t = 2.44$, $df = 33$, $p = .021$) but not in the comparison group.

Subanalysis indicated that youth who had been exposed to premigratory violence may have benefited more from the workshops than their peers who were not exposed, although this trend did not reach significance ($t = 1.86$, $df = 9$, $p = .096$). The symptom score of the subgroup of youth who did not report difficulties in school in the countries of origin also decreased following the intervention ($t = 2.05$, $df = 22$, $p = .053$), while not reaching statistical significance.

Discussion

Overall these very preliminary results suggest that introducing a diversity of languages at school in the context of creative activities elicits a significant

emotional response from newly arrived immigrant and refugee youth who experience severe academic difficulties.

The qualitative results underline that the introduction of a diversity of languages to express their experiences may have an impact which goes beyond the facilitation of the communication. The empowerment effect appears to be associated with the fact that diverse identities are collectively valued, taken on and played with, in the classroom setting. Preserving the right for each participant to step in or out of each of these identities avoids enclosing subjects in a stereotyped identity attributed to them by external persons, which has been denounced as a subtle form of exclusion in multicultural societies (Bissondath, 1995). The powerful effect of the teacher playing with minority languages seems to be associated with investing her (in this study, they were only female teachers) with valued images associated with attachment and security in the country of origin, establishing a form of symbolic continuity between the parental figures in the different worlds of the youth.

The quantitative results should be interpreted very cautiously because of the very small sample size, the nonrandomized design, the fact that the teachers were not blinded to the experimental status, and the differences between the experimental and comparison group. The results of the Paired *t*-test converge with previous studies in which the main outcome of the theatre workshops is a decrease in youth self-reported impairment (Rousseau et al., 2007).

The statistical trends in the subanalysis raise the hypothesis that the youth who have been delayed academically because of environmental hardship may benefit more from these types of workshops than those who have constitutional difficulties. Further research is needed to test this hypothesis.

Conclusion

In spite of its multiple limitations, this pilot project suggests that language awareness activities paired with drama expression modalities may be an interesting tool for schools welcoming refugee or immigrant youth with an academic delay. Beyond its relevance for this vulnerable population, the value of language awareness activities for mental health promotion of children in multicultural societies needs to be the object of further research. These activities maybe empowering because they represent and value diversity, while simultaneously acknowledging the negotiation between multiple identities and exclusions that are at stake for most migrant and refugee youth.

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