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The Therapeutic Power of Theater: Combating the Rise in Childhood Anxiety and Empowering Students with Dramatic Storytelling

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**THE THERAPEUTIC POWER OF THEATER:**

**Combating the Rise in Childhood Anxiety and Empowering Students with**

**Dramatic Storytelling**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

In

THEATER ARTS

By

**Madeline DeKraker Lang-Ree**

June 2023

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Definitions.....	3
Literature Exploration.....	4
Frameworks.....	14
Introduction to Methodology.....	20
Workshop Descriptions & Analyses.....	25
Outcome & Conclusion.....	47
Bibliography.....	50

**Abstract:**

**The Therapeutic Power of Theater: Combating the Rise in Childhood Anxiety  
and Empowering Students with Dramatic Storytelling**

**By**

**Madeline DeKraker Lang-Ree**

As factors such as a global pandemic, school shootings, and climate change continue to affect the rapid rise in childhood anxiety, there is an ever-pressing need for the therapeutic power of dramatic storytelling in our classrooms. Though art has been recognized as therapeutic both in the psychological and cultural realms for generations, it is now essential to infuse dramatic storytelling practices into the pedagogies and curricula of our grade school classrooms.

The isolation created by pandemic shutdowns & social distancing, sociocultural & political warfare in the U.S., and social media addictions, leaves us with less and less time to connect on a basic human emotional level. Dramatic storytelling provides an opportunity to build community, self-reflect, and find growth and healing.

During an eight-week period, I executed a dramatic storytelling workshop through the ArtsBridge America fellowship program at UC Santa Cruz, which connected me with a local, underfunded public school. Through documentation of the lesson plans, reflections on the classes, and analysis of the students' experiences, I argue for implementing dramatic storytelling as a necessary and invaluable power.

## **Acknowledgments/Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my past, present, and future students, who continue to gift me curiosity and joy, a love of learning, and ever-growing patience.

I want to thank my parents, Laura and Arne, for their undying support, round-the-clock advice, and late-night snacks, my encouraging and wonderful sisters, Ellie and Cecilia, and my partner Justin for always keeping me grounded and uplifted.

To all my professors and advisors at UC Santa Cruz, Marianne Weems, Dr. Michael Chemers, Ted Warburton, Dr. Rebecca Wear, Cynthia Ling Lee, Sarah Sanford, and Noah Lucé: every moment of inspiration, encouragement, and kindness has been the fuel beneath my artistic and research fires. I'd also like to thank my undergraduate advisor Dr. Jocelyn Buckner at Chapman University, for initially teaching me what a thesis is and how to write one.

Finally, I am so grateful to my cohort Asta, Dylan, Justin, Princess, and Scottie for always bringing honesty, laughter, empathy, and collaboration.

## Introduction

Unless students are involved in the arts, there are fewer and fewer opportunities for them to share their stories in the educational setting as they age. In preschool and younger elementary years, there is often show-and-tell where children can bring in a special object and share its story, along with plenty of open play time for imaginations to run wild. In older elementary years, personal essays for English courses may allow students to recount and analyze important moments in their lives. However, in my experience as a theater educator, less importance is placed on these storytelling rituals in middle and high school. I argue that dramatic storytelling is a vital therapeutic tool for children and teenagers at an age where anxiety rates are rapidly climbing.

In October 2022, the US Preventive Services Task Force published an unprecedented recommendation for anxiety screenings in children eight years and older, likely changing pediatrician's practices across the country forever (The Washington Post & CNN, 2022). In a study from *JAMA Pediatrics* on children's health trends from 2016-2020, an increase in anxiety from 7.1% to 9.2% was found in a test group of almost 175,000 children (JAMA Network, 2022). Though the COVID-19 pandemic caused a drastic 25% increase in worldwide anxiety and depression in its first year, affecting young people the hardest (WHO, 2022), JAMA's study mainly demonstrates a rise in children's anxiety even *before* COVID hit. As a theater educator for the past nine years, I have directly witnessed this rising anxiety in my students, whose typical pre-teen fears have been exacerbated by the terrifying

increase in school shootings, social media-fueled toxicity, and, of course, the pandemic. Within all of this fear and stress, dramatic storytelling has emerged as an immensely powerful tool. For almost a century, art has been recognized institutionally and psychologically as a useful form of therapy (Adelphi Psych Clinic, 2017). However, the value of art and storytelling in human society is tens of thousands of years old. Before the written word, oral storytelling was the primary vehicle of knowledge sharing for the earliest humans, and we have found expressions of artistic representation like the famous *Löwenmensch* (*lion-man*) figure from as far as thirty-five to forty-thousand years ago. All to say that forms of storytelling have been around since the earliest inklings of society. With the rise in childhood anxiety, I argue it is time to structurally implement the therapeutic powers of dramatic storytelling in our educational systems.

The project I am exegizing for this research is a dramatic storytelling workshop I conducted through ArtsBridge America at UC Santa Cruz. This program connected me with a local public school where I was paired with a host teacher and classroom. Over the span of eight weeks, I conducted a two-hour dramatic storytelling course per week for a group of roughly<sup>1</sup> 21 middle-school students. Though the students signed up for this class as an elective and performed in a small production together the previous quarter, their knowledge and experience in theater were limited by their age (ranging from 10-14) and resources. My goal for this

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<sup>1</sup> Class size varied week by week due to the devastating effects of the 2023 winter storms on the Santa Cruz Mountains community.

workshop series was not to push students to feel or relive any kind of trauma or pain from their lives but rather to use dramatic storytelling as a way to process and give voice to stories, whether they were joyful or hard.

### **Definitions**

To discuss anxiety, it is important to define it within the distinct context of children's mental health. The *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* (CDC) describe a few different types of anxiety that children typically face, including separation anxiety (fear of leaving parents/family/home), social anxiety (fear of school or large gatherings), general anxiety (worries about the future and bad things happening), and panic disorder (episodes of intense fear accompanied with physical symptoms such as pounding heart, tight chest, short breathing, etc.). In my observations as a theater educator, I have seen all four anxiety categories in my students (sometimes combined or all rolled into one), especially prevalent in the last few years since COVID. A significant point from the CDC article is that "some anxious children keep their worries to themselves and, thus, the symptoms can be missed" (CDC, 2022). If children don't understand their feelings, think their feelings are abnormal or wrong, or don't have the opportunity to voice their feelings, they may not be able to work through their anxiety and get control of it. Dramatic storytelling provides that much-needed outlet for children to explore their feelings, express themselves, and ultimately heal. A large motivation for providing the specific

storytelling prompts I did in my ArtsBridge workshop was to give my students that space to voice their feelings.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of my praxis and research, I am generally defining dramatic storytelling as the use of theater arts to explore, process, and communicate one's own life stories, whether that be in the setting of a traditional play's rehearsal process, self-reflective work in a theater classroom, or a devised theater piece based on that material. In theater class and rehearsal settings, students often explore dramatic storytelling through scene study and monologue work. Though students typically use pre-written text within the context of a full play or musical, the commonly taught and practiced Stanislavski method<sup>3</sup> encourages naturalistic character work that often draws upon personal life experiences and emotions to enrich and develop a role (see "living truthfully under imaginary circumstances"). During my workshop exegesis, the students did not use pre-written scripts. Their dramatic storytelling explorations were sparked by prompts I provided to encourage self-reflection.

### **Literature Exploration**

One of the first sparks that inspired my interest in therapeutic dramatic storytelling was Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), particularly Chapter 8: "Filling in the Holes: Creating Structures." He entirely supports the notion

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<sup>2</sup> Please see the Workshop Descriptions & Analyses section for more information.

<sup>3</sup> I highly encourage readers to explore my friend and cohort member Princess Kannah's research: *Joy Infused Theatre* on dismantling the theater classroom hierarchy through healthy, joy-based theater practices.

that dramatic storytelling can be used as a healing tool, as it is directly used in a clinical context. In this chapter, van der Kolk discusses Pessó Boyden System Psychomotor (PBSP) therapy, defined as “the most advanced therapeutic system available for emotional re-education or reprogramming” (Pessó PBSP International LLC, 2011). Throughout the PBSP therapy session that van der Kolk observed, theater terminologies were prevalent and drove the entire narrative of the work. The therapist, deemed “director,” guided each participant, deemed “protagonist,” through difficult moments in their life by having fellow participants (I’d like to think of them as an ensemble or cast members) embody real-life mothers, fathers, partners, etc. and help the protagonist re-imagine and process the traumatic event and/or relationship. Van der Kolk describes this in his book: “The job of the director/therapist and other group members is to provide protagonists with the support they need to delve into whatever they have been too afraid to explore on their own.” (van der Kolk, 2014). Though I am focused on therapeutic storytelling, I am approaching this topic from a theater and education background versus a psychological background. However, this scientifically-based book largely supports the concept that using general theater structures (including terminologies, format, etc.) can be innately healing. Van der Kolk’s work places storytelling in the large framework of therapy and trauma studies and how we carry these pains deep in our bodies. PBSP therapy is unique in that it does not categorize itself as attached to the arts but rather just one of many methods that a psychologist or psychiatrist might use to help their patients.

In psychologist Jacqueline Ward's 2019 article "Is Storytelling Therapy?" she questions the difference between a literary narrative and a psychological narrative and how those both land within the context of stories (Ward, 2019). Her distinction between the narrative that drives our everyday perception of reality versus the narrative that creates a fantasy world is significant to my own questioning of the boundaries of therapeutic storytelling versus escapism. One notable example she uses is an advertisement about the effects of climate change that shows a child reading a fairytale with symbolic references to our dying world. The negative parental reaction to this advert was due to the boundary between narratives being blurred. So often, we hear of parents afraid their child will be "exposed" to topics too early in life, but these parents may be underestimating their child's intellectual and emotional processing capabilities. This is a topic I am extremely passionate about, sparked by classes<sup>4</sup> taken for my Integrated Educational Studies minor at Chapman University. Though Ward's discussion on narrative is relevant, her focus on storytelling in the literary sense is not relevant to my exploration of theatrical storytelling. As Ward is also an author, she approaches the topic of storytelling from the page-turning context of literary analysis. However, it is important to recognize and acknowledge the myriad ways we absorb stories, whether through books, plays, games, music, art, or otherwise. Ward describes this blending and extending of literary and psychological narratives in her article:

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically the courses taken from 2017-2018: "Exploring Theories of Learning," "Schools in Society," and "Aesthetic Education: Philosophy and Practice."

So, be it entertainment or therapy or a mixture of both, storytelling involves narratives and this is why the two often become confused. Ultimately, storytelling is storytelling, yet the difference between psychological and literary narratives, from meaning to mediation, stretches the boundaries of truths just that little bit further as we realise that both are ultimately works of fiction filtered through experience. (Ward, 2019)

This can also be translated into my praxis in the classroom, as dramatic storytelling inherently bends and extends the distinction between psychological and literary narratives. Many prompts and activities I offered the students stemmed from personal (psychological) exploration through written prompts (literary) that were expanded into dramatic storytelling performances. For example, the students wrote an “I Am” poem which was transformed into an “I Am Poem... EXPLOSION!”<sup>5</sup> The students used an idea from their poems to create a theatrical monologue they performed for the class, thus blurring the distinction between their self-reflective, psychological narrative and their performative, literary narrative. To justify this “explosion” of psychological narrative into literary narrative into dramatic storytelling, we can refer to Narrative Therapy’s emphasis on children’s use of imagination and fantasy in effective problem-solving.<sup>6</sup> The distinction Ward makes in defining psychological and literary narratives is highly valuable in the way I am approaching my praxis, as I have not seen them defined in such a specific manner.

Bryan Doerries’ 2015 book *The Theater of War* (and his theater company of the same name) is significant in its use of classic theater to demonstrate that our

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<sup>5</sup> Please see the Workshop Descriptions & Analyses section for a more in-depth explanation.

<sup>6</sup> Please see the Frameworks section for more on Narrative Therapy.

human suffering is as old as the texts themselves. Doerries focuses specifically on theater as a mode of storytelling, using tales such as *Ajax*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus* to catalyze discussions of social issues and encourage spectators to connect personally to the characters and themes. My own exploration of therapeutic theater has been influenced by his dedication to using plays for healing, though his works are mostly only accessible to adults. The book heavily discusses Doerries' workshops with soldiers and combat veterans worldwide, using texts like *Ajax* to help these often deeply traumatized people see themselves through storytelling. Doerries describes the purpose of his work as being "about the power of tragedies to transcend time, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. At its core, it is about how stories can help us heal and possibly even change before it's too late" (Doerries 2015). He takes theater to people who may have never seen a play before but can suddenly find solace in words from ages before. I question how we can make these classic texts relevant and accessible for children, as many of their characters and themes are not intended for a pre-pubescent audience. Though much of mass media, and even education, do not touch works as old as Sophocles', it is unique and significant that Doerries is bringing these ancient tragedies to light with such notable performers as Oscar Isaac and James Earl Jones, thereby exposing a wider population to the therapeutic potential of theater.

Another excitingly relevant book for this praxis is *Dramatherapy with Children, Young People and Schools: Enabling Creativity, Sociability, Communication and Learning* by Lauraine Leigh, Irvine Gersch, Ann Dix, and

Deborah Haythorne (2012). The first chapter compares the relationship between drama classes and drama therapy on an educational level. Clive Hornwood (a dramatherapist) and Dr. Carla Stavrou (an educational psychologist) penned this chapter. First, they narrowed down their definition of educational theater to process-based teachings that center around educational value versus preparation-based teachings that center around a professional career in theater. I will firstly say that I hope to be an educator that can combine these two types of education or at least sprinkle a little professionalism on top of the process-based work in the classroom. I don't believe they need to be separated quite so distinctly. However, I do acknowledge that process-based drama education is more conducive to the kind of therapeutic storytelling I am exploring, for example Leigh et al. write:

...modern writers such as Gallagher state that students in dramatic performances in the classroom 'made explicit the dialogical relationship between the material subject (and her/his histories) and the imagined one' (2007: 8). This suggests that students are making connections between personal history within their community, and the imagined created drama. Thus drama has the potential to be a personal journey for each individual, allowing them to connect with their own stories and narratives. This, it could be argued, is closer to a more therapeutic or dramatherapy approach. (Leigh, Gersch, Dix, & Haythorne 2012)

Though it is not often explicitly called therapeutic in the classroom, this character-building method is often encouraged and commonly found in acting classes and rehearsal settings, whether at a high school or in a professional company. Bringing oneself and one's experiences into a character is certainly not a new notion. However, it is important in the context of using dramatic storytelling to empower emotional agency, versus just to become a better actor. I question the authors' nonchalant

discussion and comparison of these topics in a school setting, as if drama therapy is accessible on a large scale and readily available to most school children. Let alone the fact that theater itself is scarcely funded and often left out of curriculums! It does, however, help visualize my praxis within the context of drama therapy and psychology.

Author Jonathan Gotschall's 2013 article "The Science Of Storytelling: How Narrative Cuts Through Distraction Like Nothing Else" brings up a new and important question in my research: can dramatic storytelling be therapeutic for not only the active participants but also the active spectators? Whether we escape into a daydream instead of listening to a calculus lecture or crave coming home and binge-watching our favorite series, we constantly seek stories. Gotschall's piece discusses the scientific reasoning behind our tendency to consciously or unconsciously drift into immersive stories. Gotschall points out that when we are entirely engaged in a story as a spectator, our brains look more like we are participating, not observing:

If you slide a person into an FMRI machine that watches the brain while the brain watches a story, you'll find something interesting—the brain doesn't look like a spectator, it looks more like a participant in the action. When Clint Eastwood is angry on screen, the viewers' brains look angry too; when the scene is sad, the viewers' brains also look sad. (Gotschall, 2013)

While I am focused more intently on active participation in dramatic storytelling, I'm interested in questioning whether active spectatorship is helpful or just distracting. Through reading some of the students' responses to our ritualized Story Circle<sup>7</sup>, I

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<sup>7</sup> Please see the Workshop Descriptions & Analyses sections for more information.

have found that there is a community-building power in the active spectatorship of dramatic storytelling, allowing students to relate to their peers and feel less alone.

I'd also like to acknowledge the existence of escapism, healthy and unhealthy, within storytelling. For example, Neuro-Linguistic Master Practitioner E.B. Johnson's piece "How to effectively use escapism in the age of social distancing" (2020) is a practical and accessible layman's guide to psychologically healthy escapism. The articles I've read range from accredited trauma specialists like Johnson to various bloggers who often comment on the difference between a healthy escape like gardening or meditating versus an unhealthy escape like alcoholism or over-sleeping. I was eager to keep exploring research in this area to find relevancies to escapism in theatrical or participatory storytelling, such as live-action role-player games instead of the aforementioned escapes. Speaking of live-action role-player games, I chose to direct a production of *She Kills Monsters (SKM)* by Qui Nguyen through the student-run theater company Barnstorm at UC Santa Cruz as a layered exploration of therapeutic storytelling. Though this is not the main project I am studying for this research, my focus in the MA Theater Arts program was directing so I can continue to lead enriching, educational rehearsal rooms in my teaching career. I wanted to use the opportunity to direct a full production as a supplementary exploration of therapeutic storytelling. As the plot of *SKM* deals with escapism, specifically, the live-action role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, as a means of processing trauma, I used my individual directorial work and our shared table work in rehearsals to poke at the idea

of immersive storytelling - see an excerpt from my director's note in the program below:

As Agnes ventures into the world of D&D, seeking connection with and knowledge of her sister Tilly, she walks the tightrope between therapeutic storytelling and unhealthy escapism. When do we start to find ourselves again through immersive storytelling, and when do we start to lose ourselves? And is it really escapism, or is it giving your mind an opportunity to make sense of the world through imagination? These are questions that fueled this vision of *She Kills Monsters*, with both feet always grounded in the painful reality of the story. (Lang-Ree, 2023)

An incredibly in-depth and well-researched piece on the therapeutic value of D&D is “Let Your Clients Fight Dragons: A Rapid Evidence Assessment regarding the Therapeutic Utility of ‘Dungeons & Dragons’” by Sören Henrich and Rachel Worthington in the *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*. Henrich and Worthington reviewed numerous studies on the therapeutic potential of role-playing, showing positive research as early as 1988 on individuals with depression. Role-playing has proven to be a “useful technique for adolescents whose personality and identity formation is developing (Carnes & Minds on Fire, 2014), increasing self-awareness and empathy (Meriläinen, 2012), as well as critical and ethical reasoning (Simkins, 2010).” Some studies did show that people struggled to benefit from roleplaying, noting that “believing in the efficacy of roleplay as a technique was crucial for improving skills development and participation” (Henrich & Worthington, 2021). Additionally, some literature on role-playing suggests that players have the potential to become too immersed and lose their sense of identity (Meyer et al. 2019). This is in line with similar studies on acting in general, where people “experience long-term negative effects from taking on the role of certain characters due to immersion,

referred to as ‘post-dramatic stress’” (Henrich & Worthington, 2021). It could be argued that some role-playing could get to this dangerous level if it becomes too similar to method acting. To reach their conclusion, Henrich and Worthington reviewed 24 articles specifically on D&D and analyzed similarities and differences. Ultimately, the “potential psychological benefits of D&D” section yielded the results that many professionals hesitate to use D&D as a therapeutic tool due to their own unfamiliarity with the game in comparison to other role-playing iterations. However, the “potential benefits of D&D” yielded increased empathy, creativity, self-awareness, and problem-solving (Henrich & Worthington, 2021). *She Kills Monsters* is a play that shows the positive impact D&D can have on youth, as well as the potential for dangerous escapism into fantasy and make-believe of the world. Escaping into a fantasy world of laughter, magic, and healing is something people want to experience. Though my dramatic storytelling workshop did not include any role-playing in the scope of Dungeons & Dragons, I was interested in providing students with creative outlets to role-play in their own personal storied worlds. Additionally, the aforementioned benefits of an escapist role-playing game such as D&D (empathy, creativity, self-awareness, and problem-solving) are incredibly similar to the Social-Emotional Learning goals I will discuss in the next section: “develop healthy identities,” “manage emotions,” “feel and show empathy for others,” and “make responsible and caring decisions.” Thus, something is innately and significantly tied between role-playing escapism and dramatic storytelling in the classroom.

## Frameworks

Art therapy has been recognized formally in European and English-speaking cultures for nearly a century, a rather new approach within the broader history of psychology. Adrian Hill, a British artist confined to a hospital bed while recovering from tuberculosis, “coined the phrase ‘art therapy’ in 1942” after seeing the benefits of creatively expressing himself during a period of mental and physical turmoil (Schouten et al., 2015). Art therapy has broadened across the world over the past eight decades, becoming institutionalized as a profession in Britain and the U.S. and connecting art therapists across the globe through organizations such as the International Expressive Arts Therapy Association (IEATA) and the International Networking Group of Art Therapists (ING/AT). The benefits of art therapy, specifically for children, have also been long studied. One of the American art therapy pioneers, Margaret Naumburg, wrote about the positive effects of artistic expression on children with behavioral problems in the late 1940s (Naumburg, 1947). Many studies have been conducted since then on the effectiveness of art therapy in helping children manage emotions, especially in group settings. I myself benefited from group art therapy from the ages of two to four during my older sister’s ultimately successful battle with leukemia. Though art therapy has been rightfully celebrated for decades, its definition is inherently not inclusive of theater and drama. Additionally, more recent publications such as *Art Therapy, Race, and Culture* (Campbell et al., 1999), *Increasing Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Field of Art Therapy* (Awais, 2012), and *Asian Art Therapists: Navigating Art, Diversity, and*

*Culture* (Kitazawa, 2021) have pointed out the limitations of a white-dominated field in discussing culture and identity and the lack of emphasis on diversity both in collegiate recruiting as well as in the classroom.

Another significant psychological framework here is narrative therapy. A newer form of therapy, it was developed in the 1970s and 1980s by Michael White, who “did not coin the term narrative therapy until 1990, when he published the seminal book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends* (White & Epston, 1990)” (Madigan, 2019). Narrative therapy is centered on the post-structuralist and social justice thought that we should separate ourselves objectively from the oppressive, dominating social constructs that often try to define who we are or should be. Especially relevant to my exploration of dramatic storytelling is the key conceptual component of narrative therapy that “we, as persons, [are] "multistoried" and "multisited." (J. S. Bruner, 1990, 1991; Butler, 1988; Geertz, 1973, 1983, 1988)” (Madigan, 2019). The word multistoried is vital to my research into dramatic storytelling as it highlights the never-ending narratives that make up our lives, impossible to be categorized or evaluated completely. Narrative therapy has also proven effective for children specifically. In the 2008 article “Narrative Methods and Children: Theoretical Explanations and Practice Issues,” author Lorna Bennett writes that children “feel comfortable with discussions of magic, fantasy, and their hopes and dreams, very much in keeping with the naming and externalizing of problems” (Bennett, 2008). This point is also quite relevant to my praxis, as dramatic storytelling often includes these positive fantastical elements Bennett discusses, and children find

comfort in imaginative narratives. For example, in a *Journal of Mental Health Counseling* case study, a young boy used a puppet provided by his narrative therapist to externalize his feelings and deduce how to control his story (Butler et al, 2009). Puppets are an excellent way for children to process feelings, understand societal issues, and practice storytelling. I believe in this so strongly that two activities in my dramatic storytelling workshop were centered around puppetry play and creation. In addition, several students expressed that the puppetry work we did was their favorite mode of storytelling from the workshop.<sup>8</sup> In the 2022 article “In one first-grade classroom, puppets teach children to ‘shake out the yuck’” from *NPR*, author Cory Turner interviewed one first-grade classroom teacher using the YouTube channel “Feel Your Best Self” (FYBS) to teach emotional awareness and management. FYBS is a psychology-backed program using puppets to teach kids how to manage their emotions. Emily Iovino, a school psychologist with the FYBS team, described their program’s intention in the article as “cognitive restructuring, which is teaching someone how to recognize an emotion, name that emotion, and then be able to work to shift thoughts – to feel something different” (Turner, 2022). This externalizing of emotions is directly in line with the externalizing of narrative therapy, both of which use the tool of puppetry to reach their audience. Overall, narrative therapy’s effectiveness in helping people take the helm of their own story is an essential lens when addressing dramatic storytelling as healing.

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<sup>8</sup> Please see the Workshop Descriptions & Analyses sections for more on puppets.

I must, of course, also bring up drama therapy which has been touched on a few times in the literature I discussed previously, notably regarding the book *Dramatherapy with Children, Young People and Schools: Enabling Creativity, Sociability, Communication and Learning* by Lauraine Leigh, Irvine Gersch, Ann Dix, and Deborah Haythorne (2012). Drama therapy is inherently multifaceted and varied in practice and technique, but for the purpose of this research, I will focus on a key aspect:

The two most essential [concepts] are role and story. In all forms of Drama Therapy, clients take on roles, and while in the role they tell and/or enact a story. The role is the indivisible piece, as the dramatic moment begins as an actor slips into the skin of another. (Landy & Montgomery, 2012)

As authors Landy and Montgomery wrote in their book *Theatre for Change: Education, Social Action and Therapy*, a vital part of drama therapy is role and story. This fits my aforementioned definition of dramatic storytelling, as the more traditional theatrical embodiment of a role within a narrative plot can be immensely therapeutic in combating anxiety. My praxis in dramatic storytelling, however, is focused on non-role-based theater as students created original pieces from their own lives. Also, similarly to art and narrative therapy, drama therapy requires a specified degree, and thus it is limited in its reach within an everyday educational setting. While exercises and beliefs from drama therapy can be implemented in the classroom, it is intended as a clinical practice.

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge the existence of educational/learning theories as this research will be most applicable in the classroom. Of the educational theories, I am most interested in social-emotional learning (SEL) and constructivism.

SEL is defined by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions” (CASEL). Though each key goal of SEL can be indirectly tied to theater education and its extrinsic benefits, I believe the goals of “develop healthy identities,” “manage emotions,” “feel and show empathy for others,” and “make responsible and caring decisions” are most tangibly attainable through theater. Many participants in elementary, middle, and high school theater go on to use theater SEL skills in leadership positions across many industries. Succinctly put in the article “The Director’s Chair: Leadership Lessons From The Theater” from *Forbes* magazine, “Actors’ formation and craft involves character building, showing empathy to others, and learning how to improvise under pressure all valuable in leadership” (Moore, 2016). In my own theater education, I was surrounded by peers who mostly chose career paths in STEM. However, many still credit theater as a large contributing factor to their success, one alumnus (now a doctor) donated millions to build a brand-new theater at my high school. In a study published in the *Arts Education Policy Review*, researchers noted, “The language that SEL advocates and researchers employ often resembles the rhetoric used to discuss arts education advocacy. Indeed, some posit that the development of social emotional skills is intrinsic to many arts education practices” (Omasta et al., 2020). This study explored how and if the

National Core Arts standards are directly aligned with SEL standards, ultimately advising that, though there are indirect alignments, arts educators who wish to instill SEL into their curriculum should make conscious pedagogical choices.

Constructivism was founded by Jean Piaget and emphasizes that a student's learning is not linearly nor passively absorbed but is constructed through experience, prior knowledge, and social engagement. Storytelling is built upon our interactions with the world and how we perceive them. For the purpose of my praxis, I view constructivism merely as an educational framework in which to propose dramatic storytelling in the classroom, and it "may well be a crucial element in moulding the world outlook of the coming generation" (Meyer, 2007). The theory of constructivism is a massive topic that will not be fully explored in this research. However, it is interesting to acknowledge as an intersecting and paralleling concept to therapeutic storytelling work. Especially relevant are Barbara Rogoff's ideas presented in the book *Apprenticeship in Thinking*. The apprentices that Rogoff references are children themselves, who actively learn from adults and peers through participation and observation and build their own solutions from subsequently developed social skill sets (Rogoff, 1990). Most influential on my praxis is Rogoff's idea of guided participation:

I develop the concept of guided participation to suggest that both guidance and participation in culturally valued activities are essential to children's apprenticeship in thinking. Guidance may be tacit or explicit, and participation may vary in the extent to which children or caregivers are responsible for its arrangement. (Rogoff, 1990)

Through collaborating, sharing knowledge, and gently encouraging, I aim to be a part of this co-participatory process with the students, both tacitly and explicitly directing them towards their own discoveries and inviting them to participate often.

### **Introduction to Methodology**

So, we have known for almost a century that arts are therapeutic. However, that knowledge is just the scientifically proven version, as the arts and their healing powers have been around for thousands of years. Stories and storytellers have been highly valued amongst communities, families, and cultures for as long as humans have existed. As just one of many examples, Caroline Terese Rodriguez's Master's thesis research on the local Amah Mutsun tribe of the south-San Francisco and North-Monterey Bay area demonstrates the significance of storytelling in preserving and uplifting culture and tradition:

...by emphasizing Native American literature, oral history, and storytelling to uplift California Native voices, especially the voices of Amah Mutsun elders... They are writing whole stories and correct representations into the existence of mass media while building a future that utilizes the past as a foundation for ensuring the lasting legacies of cultural traditions. Thus, for the Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, oral history and storytelling uphold Amah Mutsun's sovereignty, resurgence, and self-determination. (Rodriguez, 2020)

In institutionalized learning systems, the value of the storyteller is not regarded as highly. Through praxis in the classroom, I try to empower each student to find the benefits and utility of dramatic storytelling. In my twenty years of participating in theater classes, camps, and rehearsals and my nine years of leading theater classes, camps, and rehearsals, I have witnessed countless examples of people having deep

emotional realizations while storytelling, which is certainly not an uncommon thing for any artist to witness. Dramatic storytelling is a critical method for children to confront, process, cope, and move through life.

In designing the curriculum for my eight-week storytelling workshop, I first created the vision for the students' final projects and collected an arsenal of games, references, activities, and prompts, while then remaining open and flexible each week to adapt the lesson plan to best fit the classroom dynamics and students' needs. Through providing varying prompts and sharing different forms of storytelling, I hoped that the students would naturally discover their storytelling power while exploring their personal history of experiences and narratives. Building upon prompts and activities each week, I acted as a gentle guide<sup>9</sup> helping students discover the story they wanted to express within a dramatic storytelling structure. As the school I worked with has limited funds, ArtsBridge America provided a small budget to supplement our workshops. Thus, I aimed to make the workshop as simple and accessible as possible to be implemented in any educational setting. The materials I ordered through ArtsBridge were: colorful pipe cleaners, 100 ft of brown butcher paper, and masking tape. This is testimony to the fact that significant work can be done even with greatly limited resources.

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs, the class size was roughly 21 students. I say "roughly" as the size varied from 16 to 24 students depending on absences. The students ranged from 6th to 8th grade, or about 10 to 14 years of age.

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<sup>9</sup> See Barbara Rogoff's concept of guided participation.

These students live in an area of the Santa Cruz Mountains that has been greatly affected by the evacuations and loss of the CZU complex fires of 2020, the flooding and water damage from the 2023 winter storms, constant power outages, and fallen trees. This area is nestled in a valley of the north-Monterey redwood forests, tucked about 15 minutes away from a major freeway and about 25 minutes from the Pacific Ocean. According to the latest U.S. Census Bureau data, the population of this small town is 3,467, with 86.9% being of only white racial background. The town has a total area of 4.6 square miles. The per capita income is \$57,793, with only about 5% of persons living under the poverty line. However, the school district serves a much wider population of 24,046 people and an average student/teacher ratio of 22.71. The middle school itself is categorized as rural, with 111 of 399 total students qualifying for free lunch.<sup>10</sup> Not only are these students' daily lives affected by climate change and environmental catastrophe, but some come from broken families, foster homes, and un-housed parents. Creating a flexible curriculum along with these students' lives became immediately important so a child could easily jump back into the workshop if they missed class.

The classroom set-up was two large spaces connected in the middle with curtains. One half of the classroom was a traditional school space with desks, chairs, a large whiteboard and TV for projecting, and various books, papers, and other school supplies around the room (henceforth called the classroom). The other half of the

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<sup>10</sup> Information sourced from the National Center for Education Statistics website and the Common Core of Data (CCD).

classroom was a converted black box-style theatre, with simple black curtains framing three sides to create backstage areas and a large playing space in the middle (henceforth called the black box). Each class period took place from 8 am to 10 am and was the students' first class of the day.

Before delving into each class's specific dramatic storytelling activity, I want to address the weekly rituals we created as a way to begin the day. As a warm-up, we started each class by forming a large circle in the black box. I would let the students pick a song, and we would stretch our entire bodies. Then, students would volunteer to lead vocal warm-ups, many of which they had learned the previous quarter. To conclude our warm-up ritual, we would play one or two theater games that encouraged improvisation, communication, and, often, storytelling skills. In the first two classes, I tried games that have been very successful in my previous classroom experience. These games included Party Quirks (in which students embody a celebrity or character as "guests" at a party to try and have a "host" student guess who they are), Jello (a game known by many names in which students stand in a circle and have various commands given to create specific tableaux, think on their feet, or answer prompts as fast as possible), and Where the Wind Blows (in which one student stands in the middle of the circle and states "the wind blows for people who..." adding in a fact or trait about themselves that others in the circle may also share. Those who share that fact or trait run as fast as possible to switch spots with somebody else, avoiding being left in the center). I quickly realized that these games were, though popular and fun among students, not effective. The similarity with these

games is that only a handful of students participate simultaneously, leaving the rest of the class to active observation. When students were not participating, they became rowdy, could not sit still, and were constantly talking over one another. Even with the many quiet-down techniques I've learned after nine years in the classroom, there were times when neither my host teacher nor I could get the students to sit still for long periods of time. In discussing the ineffectiveness of these games, my host teacher and I shared stories on what we've observed of COVID-19's effect on students' attention span and classroom behavior. Across the country, especially in low-income areas, math and reading scores have dropped significantly since the pandemic (Kuhfeld et al., 2022). Succinctly put in this article from The Brookings Institution, "Students and educators continue to struggle with mental health challenges, higher rates of violence and misbehavior, and concerns about lost instructional time" (Kufeld et al., 2022). So, I had to adapt. From then on, our warm-up games included the whole class so that everyone could get their proverbial "willies" out simultaneously. These new games included Tableaus (where students work in teams to create three frozen stage pictures telling the story of a classic fairytale) and Silent Organization (where students have to organize themselves in a line by order of birthdays without talking). Listening to the students' unspoken needs proved effective.

Initially, I expected that the students would not have signed up voluntarily for this class and would have a wider range of interests and skill levels. It was to my surprise and joy that the class I joined was an elective, and the students already had

the opportunity to bond and learn together through the previous quarter's class and performance. In implementing a constructivist and SEL approach, I focused on showing and sharing knowledge versus implementing and enforcing knowledge so that the students had ownership over their work. The SEL goals that I focused on in my pedagogy for this course were "develop healthy identities" and "feel and show empathy for others" (CASEL).

### **Workshop Descriptions and Analysis**

Much of the first class was spent encouraging open dialogue about different forms of dramatic storytelling. The students were asked to provide examples of their favorite types of storytelling (ie. comic books, movies, music, etc.), which they were eager to do. I then showed videos of various forms of storytelling (dance, musical theater, etc.) to encourage the students to think broadly about the potential of storytelling. The first project was to write an "I Am" poem to get creative juices flowing for identity exploration. The prompt was as follows, with a description to think creatively, not literally:

Name, pronouns, personhood

I am from...

I often think about...

I hope...

Something you can't tell just by looking at me is...

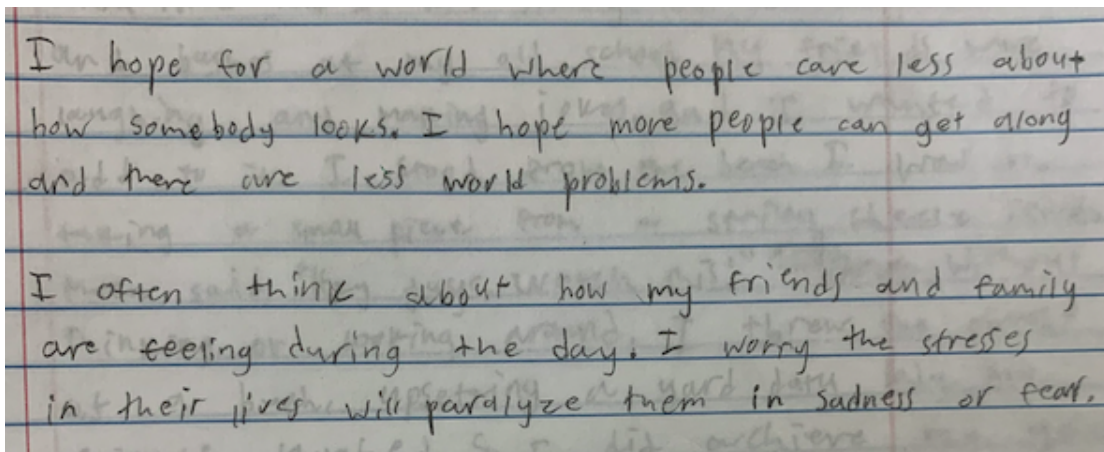
It is important for you to know this because...

It was immediately evident that these students were eager and hungry to share their stories. The students asked for increasingly more time to expand their poems, and over half the class immediately volunteered to read their poems aloud without any coaxing from me. This was my first spark of encouragement that there was a need for dramatic storytelling in this classroom.

#### I AM POEM EXAMPLES:

“I hope for a day were [sic] we all can become one happy group on our Earth.”

“I often think about my family mainly my baby sister especially since she has Down Syndrome and CF and because she is in the hospital. One thing you probably can’t tell by looking at me is well I miss my sister a lot. It’s important to know this because well so you can get to know me better.”<sup>11</sup>



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<sup>11</sup> Translated from illegible handwriting.

I often think about the safety of this world, and how its going to change over time. But I always know my friends/family love me very much. I hope for more love, happiness, and inclusivity. I hope that we as humans can change this world to become more inclusive and respectfull towards others. Something you cant tell by just looking at me is that I am the older sister of a hard brother. My mom and dad split up when I was 3 but I still see my dad and brother and love seeing them. (I spend most of my time with my mom) It is important for you to know this because I love and respect them very much but is not scared to share my opinion.

I hope that I could make more people happy/laugh. Seeing other people happy makes me happy, and jokes are my stress reliver.

Something that you cant tell just by looking at me is that I really like legos.

It is important for you to know this because why not?!

I often think about my future, animals, friends, family, and school.

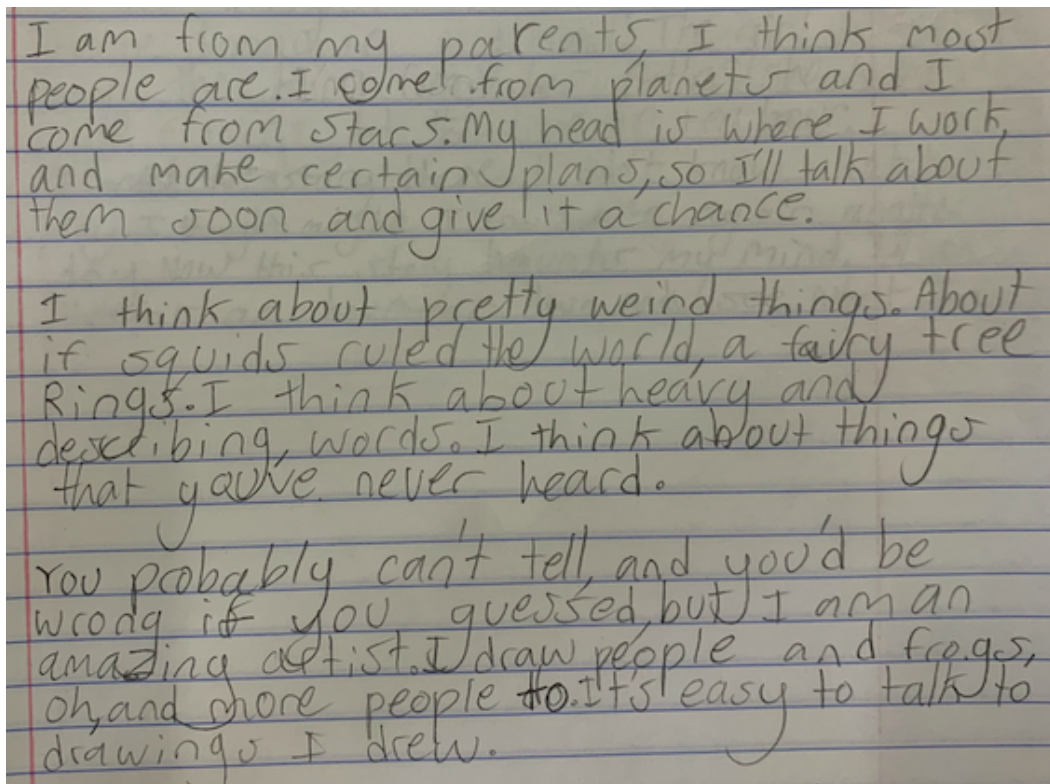
I hope for a great future full of adventure, happiness, and friendship.

Something you can't tell just by looking at me is that I love adventures and sports. This is important because they are part of who I am and help to shape my decisions.

I hope for health, safety, laughter, fun, games, love, and kindness. I hope that

Something you can't tell by just looking at me is that my parents got divorced when I was 4 but they knew they wanted to get divorced when I was 2 months old. My mom lives in New Mexico, and I love making people laugh, and I'm an only child.

This is important to know about me because I might not look like it but I'm actually a pretty cool person. :)



In the second class, we developed the I Am Poems with the prompt: “Pick one moment, memory, or feeling from your poem. Expand on it - why did you choose this to include in your poem? What does it mean to you?” In the third class, students took this previous prompt and turned it into a monologue. When students were seated at desks in the classroom writing, I played calm jazz music to help them relax and focus and would check in on any students needing guidance. After the active games we played, students could work individually and quietly on their pieces, with little interruption or distraction.

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<sup>12</sup> Notice the rhyming structure here!

Contradictory to the above assertion that these students could not sit still was the big “a-ha!” moment I had in the third class. After our vocal warm-ups, one student spontaneously asked, “Can I tell a story?”<sup>13</sup> How could I answer anything but yes, of course! The students were quite literally *asking* to be storytellers. Student after student kept raising their hands, eager to jump up in the middle of the circle and keep their audience engaged with exciting physical, vocal, and narrative storytelling. What followed became a new addition to our morning ritual - Story Circle. Each week, the students never failed to be full of tales of adventure like ghosts, snowball fights, and wild sleepovers, but also tales of pain like having surgery, losing pets, and moving across the country. This open forum for storytelling turned into the backbone of my praxis.

The fourth class was our first venture into prepared dramatic storytelling, using a pipe-cleaner puppet project and their newly-written I Am Poem monologues. Pipe-cleaner puppets are an amazing storytelling tool I learned from the legendary puppeteer Lee Armstrong as a Teaching Assistant for her course Muppet Magic at UC Santa Cruz. All you need is one standard pipe cleaner cut at about 75% of its length, two white paper circles the size of quarters, and two colored paper circles the size of pennies with black circles drawn in the corners. By folding the pipe cleaner in half, attaching the colored paper (the iris and pupil) onto the white paper eye, and taping them onto the ends of the pipe cleaner, you have a puppet! Students were given the following prompt for their puppet performance:

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<sup>13</sup> Demonstrating Constructivist properties.

On your own:

- Create your character! Name, Age, Gender/Pronouns
- Pick a voice! High? Low? Slow? Old? Young? British?

In pairs or trios:

- Create a scene with your characters!
  - CROW: Character, Relationship, Objective, Where
- Scene must include:
  - Beginning, Middle, and End
  - A problem that gets solved
  - A joke!

This exercise was intended to expose students to a new form of storytelling and encourage them to focus specifically on their voices as a storytelling tool. I understood that, at this age and with these fun, colorful puppets, this exercise would not be as self-reflectively educational as other prompts. Which is okay! The groups of students created some very funny, diverse, and rich characters and stories. My intention with bringing in exercises like this was to balance out the perhaps more serious work they would be writing and creating with the prompts and show them varied sides of storytelling. The other part of this class was dedicated to the students' I Am Poem monologue performances. For this exercise, I did not require all the students to participate, as some of their pieces were more intimate and sensitive.

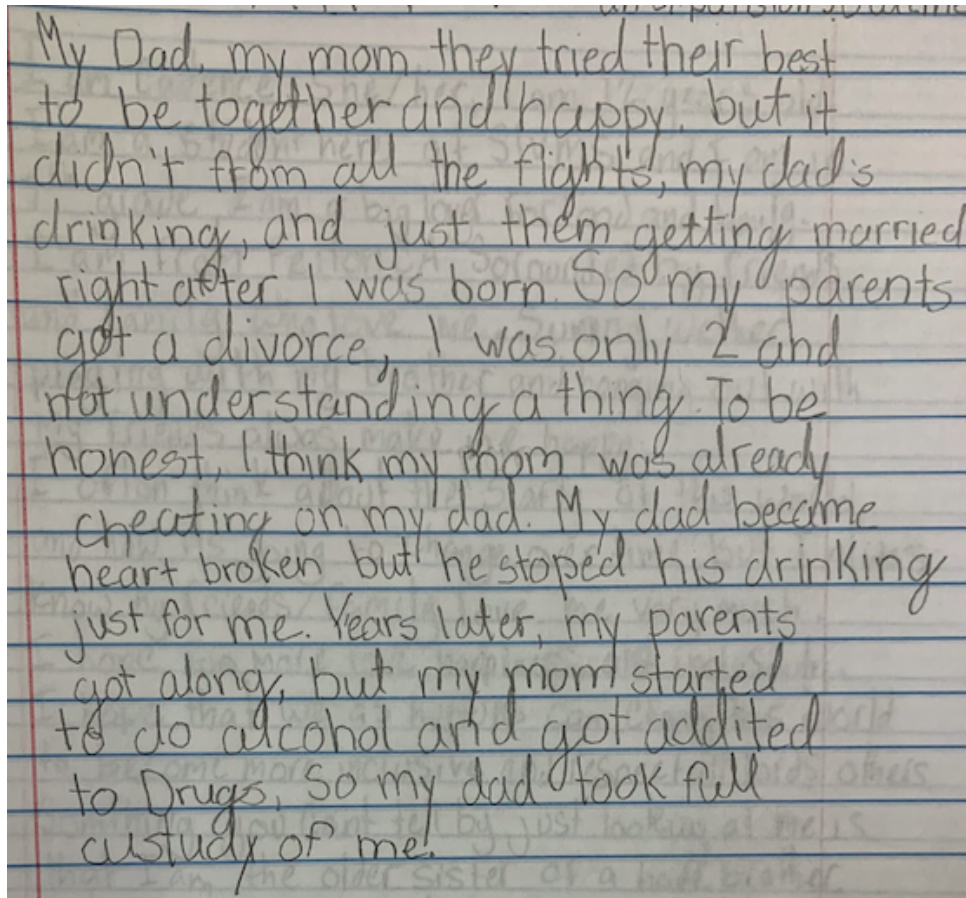
## I AM POEM MONOLOGUE EXAMPLES

Some students took a more joyful approach:

“Roblox. Why is Roblox such a good game?! I wish I could play Roblox forever but my parents don’t want me to...”

“Basketball is the best sport in my opinion. I remember when I was in 1st grade my P.E. teacher said to me that I NEED to join basketball...”

Whereas others chose to be more self-reflective:



My Dad, my mom they tried their best to be together and happy, but it didn't from all the fights, my dad's drinking, and just them getting married right after I was born. So my parents got a divorce, I was only 2 and not understanding a thing. To be honest, I think my mom was already cheating on my dad. My dad became heart broken but he stoped his drinking just for me. Years later, my parents got along, but my mom started to do alcohol and got addited to Drugs, so my dad took full custody of me.

Do you know what I do when I have nothing else to do  
Sometimes I dream of things so serious,  
so silly, or scary. Sometimes I think all day,  
of what will all sorts of things, people I  
see, what my future may be and old,  
stuff from long long times ago, and things no  
one may ever know. Everyday I sit for  
a minute or two to think just a thought one,  
~~so~~ <sup>maybe</sup> of two. Next time I might even think  
of you.

Just kidding, the last 7 years sucked in  
the end of 2019 my dog died the day after x-mas  
my hamster died. Just a month later in ~~the~~  
Jan 2020 me and my friend get in a  
street fight and get mugged, my other  
hamster dies. So sad.

Oh no here comes covid. My aunt who  
is in the hospital with a liver disease gets  
covid. then just 3 months later my  
house burns down. I go on trip to argen  
climb a mountain on the way down I fall.  
yaaay... then my new hamster dies.

So I move into a hotel then I move  
out of it. So then I go to ~~my old house~~

next to my old house, asian hamster  
dies. so I go to my uncles house hurt  
my hip in shower from a dead bird that  
a cat brought in. so I come back  
to ~~my old house~~ three days from moving  
a tree falls on my house / basement floors.

The South. When I think about the south I think multiple things, Crispy, juicy, fried chicken from Zaxby's, Square tender patties from Whataburger, and country music with Southern accents. I think beautiful, big, admiring magnolia trees. I think of the graceful wind, and hardly any traffic, and quiet small towns. When I think of the south I feel joy, and full of some sort of peace. When I think of the south, my body feels warm, and tender. And then there's the winter snow, the soft, moldable, fluffy snow. I remember the laughs I shared when me and my brothers would sled down the snowy hills... and the summers, the hot, fresh, summers. I remember the cool water of a pool, touching my face as I dived in, a nice sensation of being in the perfect cool water mixed with hot sunny days. When I think of the south I think of memories. Memories with my family. When I think of the south, I think of my home.

Our fifth class was centered around another form of puppet made from 7-foot-long strips of brown butcher paper. The reference video for this brown paper puppet construction was from Gyre & Gimble on the National Theatre YouTube page. These puppets are created from three 7-foot-long strips crumpled and taped together to form a human body and end up at about 3 feet tall. The students were divided into groups of five or six, with four controlling each puppet appendage and one or two acting in a

scene with the puppet. Their instructions were to create a scene with their puppet with the following guidelines:

- Groups of 5 or 6 (1-2 actors & 4 puppeteers)
- NO GRAPHIC VIOLENCE<sup>14</sup>
- Beginning, Middle, and End
- Pantomimed (small noises are okay!)
- Props are okay!

How will you use your puppet to tell the story? What do you want the audience to feel from this story?

Additionally, as I went around to each group to check on their scene work, I challenged all the students not to break character during their performance. Though some students shared difficult stories in previous classes, they had the tendency to laugh to break the tension and disassociate from the hard subject they were addressing. However, they took my note very well in these brown paper puppet scenes. One group's puppet became a young girl who was mistreated by her boyfriend, found comfort in a close friend, and discovered her sexuality. Another group's puppet lost their mom in a car crash, and another found a lifetime of love and loss within the span of 3 minutes. Using these human-like puppet figures elevated the students' storytelling skills within the SEL objective of "feel and show empathy for others" (CASEL). When I initially showed the example video of these brown paper

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<sup>14</sup> I included this guideline as middle schoolers generally resort to big explosions and violence to elicit laughs and reactions from their peers.

puppets, one student commented, “That made me tear up!” Their empathy and compassion were evident in this exercise as students asked to take the puppets home and held them in their laps as they quietly watched the other groups perform.

Brown Paper Puppet examples from Gyre & Gimble’s instructional video<sup>15</sup>:



<sup>15</sup> Pictures from YouTube used according to fair usage.

<sup>16</sup> Due to privacy and safety concerns for the students, photos of their puppet work will not be shared publicly.

As we approached the end of the workshop, the sixth class was the students' first opportunity to work on their final storytelling project. In recognizing that not all students were interested in performance and some were more interested in design, I offered three options for the final project presentation. Additionally, I offered three different prompts to encourage a wide range of stories and worked with a few students individually who were feeling uninspired. The prompts and project guidelines were as follows:

Prompts -

- If you were your own best friend, what constructive or encouraging things would you tell yourself that you need to hear?
  - These could be private things you don't share with anyone or things you wish someone would tell you.
- What do family and culture mean in your life?
- What is the hardest thing you've had to overcome, and how has it made you stronger?

Guidelines -

1. MONOLOGUE

- Turn your written prompt into an engaging monologue!
- 1-2 minutes
- Beginning, Middle, and End
- Blocking
- Costume? Props?

## 2. HAND-MADE ART

- Create a visual representation of your written prompt!
- Drawing, origami, comic book, word art, etc.
- Write a description of your art piece to share with the class

## 3. COMPUTER-MADE ART

- Create a visual representation of your written prompt!
- Poster, animation, PowerPoint, Canva art, etc.
- Write a description of your art piece to share with the class

For both of the visual storytelling options, I included the requirement of writing a description so that every student was still required to present their project, regardless of if they performed it or not. Students worked individually on their prompt of choice and began to think about the mode of storytelling they wanted to use. Two significant changes were made to the original guidelines as students had creative ideas for their projects. First, several students wanted to create an art piece and a monologue as accompanying storytelling forms. Second, several students asked to write scenes instead of monologues and cast their friends. As we had been practicing storytelling through the previous prompts and story circles, the students easily understood the assignment. Many expressed immediate excitement about their ideas, inviting me over to look at their initial plans or sketches.

Due to winter storm road closures and subsequent spring breaks, the 7th and 8th classes were postponed for a month. Additionally, roughly eight students were missing from the 6th class due to various effects of the winter storms. Thus, after our

typical ritual of warm-ups, story circle, and a game, the 7th class was a repeat instructional lesson on the final project and abundant time for the students to complete their projects. Many students also felt disconnected from their original project choice, as their middle school lives changed quickly in a month, and wanted to start over or take a different approach. Our 8th and final class was mostly dedicated to the final performances. Due to privacy and safety concerns, I could not record or take pictures of the students' work. Here are a few examples of their creativity:

1. Student A created a diorama with drawings, string lights, and 3D cutouts inside of a cardboard box. A toilet paper roll was used as a lens to peek inside, and the diorama showed an airplane and various key landmarks from cities the student was eager to visit with their family.
2. Student B wrote a poem using "Family" as an acronym (e.g. "L is for lots of loooooove!") and turned it into a choreographed rap and dance with their friends.
3. Student C created a tiny picture book about 2" by 2" that featured miniature drawings of Southwestern landscapes and monuments, where their family is from.
4. Students D and E wrote scenes about being bullied about their fashion choices and heart surgery, respectively, and acted the scenes out with friends. They encouraged the audience to stop bullying and emphasized the mental health consequences and dangers of bullying.

5. Students F and G both lost their mothers at a young age but had very different relationships with them. They performed their monologues back to back as a contrasting look at how grief affects us, from losing a kind, caring mother to losing an abusive, alcoholic mother.

After their final presentations, I took the opportunity to directly ask the students about the workshop and how they felt about storytelling. As most of my analysis of the students' work is observational and deduced from my years of working with children, I wanted to hear directly from the students. And their words speak for themselves. Here are the prompt questions I provided for reflection and responses below.<sup>17</sup>

1. We've done a lot of different storytelling activities! (I Am Poems, I Am Monologues, Brown Paper Puppets, Final Storytelling Projects, etc.) What was your favorite one and why?
  - a. "Brown paper puppets because we were able to study how your body should act according to feeling. I also am excited for our final storytelling projects because I am going to express something very personal to me."
  - b. "The monologue and tiny hand puppets. These are my favorite because we're able to be very creative."
  - c. "The finger puppets because I liked creating a new personality for the puppet and being able to be creative with the personality"

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<sup>17</sup> All unique responses are included. Any responses left out are very similar in language and tone to the ones listed.

- d. “The paper puppets. I like this one because we got to work together to make the puppets come to life.”
  - e. “Paper puppets because I’m an introvert and I don’t like telling storys [sic] out loud by myself unless it’s for theater.”
  - f. “The puppets were my faviort [sic] part because it was something that I’ve never done and we got to make up our own storys [sic].”
  - g. “My favorete [sic] assignment is the final storytelling assignment. Or the brown paper puppets because I get to express my creativity.”
  - h. “My favorite storytelling activity was the paper puppets. I liked it because we got to make our own stories and act them however we wanted.”
  - i. “I love the final storytelling assignment because it gives me a lot of freedom. I can make a story/scene about anything in my life.”
2. What does writing and storytelling your own stories mean to you? How does it make you feel?
- a. “I like sharing my more serious stories and making them fun and being able to have a way to let go of the serious part of it.”
  - b. “Writing and storytelling means [sic] explaining your imagenation [sic] in many different ways. Storytelling is very important for other people but I thought it was very fun. I would like to do it again someday.”

- c. “Writing and telling stories means a lot to me including around family and friends because it feels like people want to hear me and make sure that I am heard by others around me.”
  - d. “I just prefer to listen to other people.”
  - e. “Writing and storytelling means time to be free and creative for me. It makes me feel excited and happy to have this type of way to express myself.”
  - f. “Writing and storytelling made me feel heard because people listened and watched them happily.”
  - g. “It makes me feel good, because we get to pick what we write about. It means that we can invent our storys [sic] in the way we want to.”
  - h. “Writing my own stories is a way for me to show my creativity and doing that makes me feel really good.”
  - i. “It makes me feel open. It means to me that I get to share experiences.”
  - j. “Writing and telling my own stories means a lot to me because I enjoy telling about my own personal experiences and activities.”
  - k. “It make [sic] me feel I accomplished something.”
3. We started the tradition of ‘Story Circle’ every morning, what did you think about this opportunity for storytelling?
- a. “I think story circle was nice because it feels good when people want to know what I’ve been up to.”

- b. "I think that the story circle is a great way of expressing feelings."
  - c. "Story circle was exciting because it allowed everyone to share important moments in their lifes [sic], but also to hear and see a little bit of other's lifes [sic]."
  - d. "I like the story circle because most of the stories are funny and I like funny stuff."
  - e. "Story circle is an amazing way of letting people know about your lives. I think the opportunity of doing story circle is a blessing."
  - f. "The opportunity of telling storys [sic] in the morning I love. It brings us all closer together by understanding what people are going through and help share it and get it off their chest."
  - g. "I love the idea of having a storytelling circle. It lets us all connect."
  - h. "I think the story circle is a good part of storytelling because it gives us a chance to practice our storytelling skills."
  - i. "The storytelling circle was really fun. It gave me a chance to learn about other people's ideas and it usually was very funny."
  - j. "If storys [sic] are not funny you can use body movement to make it funny."
  - k. "The storie [sic] circle helped me understand some of my classmates and myself."
4. Lots of us shared stories about hard times, struggles, or big moments in our lives. Did writing and telling these stories help you make any new discoveries

about yourself, feel any new emotions, or think differently about yourself/the story?

- a. “Writing stories really brought me back through time, it brought back bad memories and made them good, because I realized that it made me stronger. It made me more confident to tell people about my life.”
- b. “Writing and sharing my struggles helped me gather my thoughts about what has happened to me by making me feel good about my struggles.”
- c. “When we shared stories with each other I made the discover [sic] that I feel really really good sharing stories with my theatre family.”
- d. “Writing and telling stories helped me to recognize and think differently about parts of the story.”
- e. “Writing and telling stories about myself made me realise [sic] that I’m not that different but very different from my classmates at the same time.”
- f. “Hearing people’s struggles through storys [sic] makes me feel closer to that person. I did not find anything new about myself from that.”
- g. “Hearing what others have gone through makes me feel like I know more about them and that (sometimes) I can connect with them.”
- h. “Writing and storytelling has made me happy, but not really [sic] any new emotions. No new emotions because I haven’t felt like sharing the hard stuff or the bad stuff.”

- i. “I got to learn I’m not alone with somethings.”
- j. “Yes, telling stories and writing about them helped me see a new side about my life and who I am as a person.”
- k. “I didn’t really write about a big thing in my life. I wrote about a very small thing. Still, it made me feel like I wanted to reflect on that time.”
- l. “I found that a lot of people have similar situations that I have.”

It is also significant to acknowledge two distinctly negative responses from two different students. A discovery found through my praxis was the one main limitation of this study, which influenced both of these students’ responses. As I was a guest teacher in this space, I was not embedded in the practices, culture, or dynamics of this school and classroom. Without full knowledge or control of the class set-up and institutional structure, I was unable to adjust the workshop to fully accommodate the following students’ needs and concerns. This is addressed for both students’ situations below.

The first student struggled with participation and expressed to the host teacher that they did not want to present their final project out loud as it was too personal: “It made it more worse because it makes me feel like I’m being forced [sic] to tell storys [sic].” This final project, along with a few other activities I led, was being graded by the host teacher for their actual class and thus, it needed to be presented for fair and equal grading purposes. In hindsight, I am curious about asking students, especially any who expressed discomfort with having to share stories, if they would’ve felt differently not being graded for their work. As my experience as a

classroom teacher has been in summer conservatory spaces, I have not been responsible for grading students on a letter basis for their creative work yet. Thus, the grading element of a dramatic storytelling curriculum like this complicates the process. In the future, I would propose that, if elements of this workshop are to be implemented in a full-time school setting, these activities are separate from the graded portions of the class, or they are graded simply on participation to the student's comfort level.

The second student shared stories of unusually difficult trauma, loss, and grief that had occurred just over the past few years and expressed that they felt: "Decent, I just feel lost. Like nothing ever happened. I just kinda put it all aside." This is an exact instance where the therapeutic capabilities of dramatic storytelling are simply not enough, and psychological help should be implemented. The choice of words used by this student clearly implies to me that they are not quite sure how to process or handle the traumatic events and subsequent emotions. As a guest teacher in this space, it was not in my power or capabilities to reach out to the student's family. However, in my own classrooms, it is a highly important part of my job to monitor students' well-being both emotionally and physically and ensure that I contact the family or other protective services as needed. Though I never required or pushed students to tell traumatic stories, this student's choice to tell these stories from their life indicated to me as a teacher that they wanted to discuss them, but maybe they weren't sure how to yet.

## Outcome and Conclusion

Reflecting on the two SEL goals for this course of “develop healthy identities” and “feel and show empathy for others,” the students' own words showcase the success of these goals (CASEL). Other specific activities also worked towards these goals, such as brown paper puppets for “feel and show empathy for others” or the I Am poems for “develop healthy identities.” However, the feedback for the entire dramatic storytelling workshop evidently showed overarching positive growth and reactions. Responses indicate that dramatic storytelling, whether in Story Circle or a prompt, brought students feelings such as: “really really good,” “open,” “free,” “creative,” “stronger,” “fun,” and “happy.” Responses also revealed that students experienced these positive feelings because: “[I] feel heard [that] people listened,” “it feels like people want to hear me,” “it makes me feel I accomplished something,” or “[it] helped me see a new side about my life and who I am as a person.” Amongst the many positive responses, these pulled quotes demonstrate that dramatic storytelling can be a key tool in helping develop healthy identities and providing a space to be heard and reflect. Students’ responses also demonstrated that dramatic storytelling can directly affect processing and coping with trauma and anxiety:

“I like sharing my more serious stories and making them fun and being able to have a way to let go of the serious part of it.”

“It brought back bad memories and made them good, because I realized that it made me stronger. It made me more confident to tell people about my life.”

“[It] helped me gather my thoughts about what has happened to me by making me feel good about my struggles.”

Dramatic storytelling provided these students the opportunity to mentally heal from past trauma, whether through finding humor, gaining confidence, or self-reflecting. Additionally, students overwhelmingly shared that dramatic storytelling helped them connect and find empathy for their peers: “it allowed everyone to share important moments in their lives [sic], but also to hear and see a little bit of other’s lives [sic],” “[it] brings us all closer together by understanding what people are going through and help share it and get it off their chest,” “[it] helped me understand some of my classmates and myself,” and “[it] makes me feel like I know more about them and that (sometimes) I can connect with them.” Even those who wrote that they did not personally find any new discoveries or emotions by sharing different stories still expressed that storytelling amongst peers “makes me feel closer to [those people].” Lastly, students expressed that dramatic storytelling was “fun” and “funny.” Providing a space for laughter and joy, and for students to fall in love with the magic-making of theatre, is something I always aim to accomplish for my students, past and future.

As a teacher, I am always looking to learn from my students. These students’ incredible responses and projects have taught me that dramatic storytelling is a vital and effective therapeutic tool for children. Though there are clinical ways of processing trauma and finding healing through theatre-influenced practices such as drama, PBSP, or narrative therapy, dramatic storytelling is a practical, accessible, and

tangible tool that can be implemented in classrooms, workshops, and summer camps across the globe. In a world increasingly affected by conflict and tragedy and a consequential rise in anxiety, dramatic storytelling provides a space for community and empathy, an opportunity to self-reflect and grow, and a chance to heal.

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