

TITLE PAGE

Drama For At-Risk Students: A Strategy For Improving Academic and Social Skills Among  
Public Middle School Students

Juliet Schiller

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science in Education

School of Education  
Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

August 2008

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. Madalienne Peters, Sarah Zykanov, and Jeff Bausch for their guidance and support throughout my research. Dr. Peters, you have inspired and supported me throughout this process, and I can't imagine a better learning experience than what I had here with you as my mentor at Dominican University. Another big thank you goes to Professor Suresh Appavoo, to whom I owe so much. You have taught me to "walk the walk" and refuse to accept the status quo, for which I am forever grateful.

I would like to thank James Killian for being such a major influence in my life as my mentor, counselor, teacher, and guiding compass throughout my career. From the moment I heard Chaucer proclaimed with enthusiasm from your lips, I was hooked. I always think of you when I stand at my own podium, hoping to inspire my students by channeling your passion.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Matthew, and children, Christopher, Samuel Logan, and Sofia Alegra Schiller for their love and support every step of the way. You allowed me to follow my dream and fulfill my hopes, and I will cherish this always.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE.....1

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....2

TABLE OF CONTENTS .....3

ABSTRACT .....4

INTRODUCTION .....6

    STATEMENT OF PROBLEM.....8

    PURPOSE STATEMENT.....8

    RESEARCH QUESTION.....8

THEORETICAL RATIONALE.....9

    ASSUMPTIONS.....13

    BACKGROUND AND NEED.....13

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....15

    LIMITATIONS/GAPS IN THE LITERATURE .....23

    IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH .....23

    OVERALL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH.....24

PILOT STUDY .....25

    STUDY DESIGN .....25

    THE PARTICIPANTS .....25

    METHOD .....25

    RESEARCH GOALS .....26

    FUNDING .....26

    DATA ANALYSIS APPROACH .....26

    ETHICAL STANDARDS.....27

REFERENCES .....28

APPENDICES.....30

APPENDIX A .....31

    TABLE I. SURVEY QUESTIONS COMPRISING SCALES.....31

APPENDIX B.....33

    TABLE 2: PRE TO POST CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES .....33

APPENDIX C.....34

    TABLE 3: OPEN RESPONSES TO SURVEY QUESTIONS .....34

APPENDIX D .....36

    INTERVIEW PROTOCOL WITH DR. CATTERALL.....36

## ABSTRACT

The use of drama to teach social skills to public middle school students labeled as at-risk is powerfully effective. Drama is a universal form of human expression found in cultures all over the world and throughout history. For students at-risk of poor educational outcomes, drama is effective for teaching social, emotional, and physical development. Drama allows at-risk students to represent externally what takes place internally. It places students in a leadership role when they might not be chosen as a leader in a traditional academic school setting. This increases self-esteem which crosses over into the classroom to support academic success in all subjects.

Howard Gardner came up with a list of eight independent modes of learning that are inherent to all human beings. Drama activities and productions develop all of Gardner's intelligences, while other methods might neglect one or more of the different modes of learning. There is persuasive research evidence over the past 25 years which documents that students exposed to theater arts training perform better in school, have more consistent attendance, demonstrate more empathetic behavior towards others, and have greater self-esteem.

This article explores how drama affects self-esteem, student motivation and success, and pro-social behavior in at-risk students. There have been several contributions to the literature in the area of using drama for students, often at the elementary and high school levels. There have not been many formal studies done with adolescents at the middle school level, which is 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The presentation then turns to a pilot study informed by theories and ethnographic

research with at-risk students and the teachers who work with these students. This is a future project that will fill in the gap in the current literature at the middle school level.

## INTRODUCTION

Two well-known "troubled" youth walk down the hallway of Westborough Middle School. As the principal passes them, she is concerned that they are in a heated and animated conversation. Should she intervene? The students had been involved in gangs in the past and she did not want this to escalate. As she gets within hearing distance of the two boys, she stops dead in her tracks. The boys are passionately delivering a scene from Shakespeare as preparation for Mrs. Schiller's performance of "Romeo and Juliet." The principal is speechless as she hears the lines expertly and proudly delivered back and forth between the boys. She never thought that she would see the day when two former enemies would be able to stand in the same hallway together, let alone act out a scene between Tybalt and Romeo.

The term at-risk was first used by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (2007) in their report, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Students considered to be at-risk are youths whose potential for success in school, home, and communities is limited. These limitations are due to specific ecological, social, and psychological problems. Behaviorally, these youths exhibit their problems through suicide, school dropout, juvenile delinquency, and teenage pregnancy.

Numerous research studies for over 25 years document that disadvantaged students' involvement in theater arts leads to gains in reading proficiency, motivation, and higher levels of empathy and tolerance for others. The definition of drama is "an art form that explores human condition and tension." Drama has an emotional and intellectual impact on both the participants and the audience members. It holds up a mirror for us to examine ourselves, deepening our

understanding of human motivation and behavior. It broadens our perspective through stories that portray life from different points of views, cultures, and time periods (Drama Education Network, 2007). Education can be seen as preparation for real living. Drama allows for a safe place to try out the situations of real life; for experimenting with expression and communication; and for deepening human understanding. These are developments that are crucial to all human beings, especially at-risk students who may have insufficient role-models or opportunities for practicing positive living experiences.

Drama is a powerful teaching and learning tool with profound positive effects on a student's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. The benefits of regular drama instruction spill over into all school subjects and everyday life. Drama is sound pedagogy that reaches students of multiple intelligences and different learning styles. It is a multi-sensory mode of learning that engages mind, body, senses, and emotions to create personal connections to the material that improve comprehension and retention (Drama Education Network, 2007).

Within the aspect of using drama for at-risk youth, it is especially relevant and effective because of its unique balance of thought and feeling makes learning enjoyable, exciting, challenging, and relevant to real-life concerns. At-risk youth are more than mere participants in a classroom or environment when using drama, but serve as playwrights, actors, directors, audience, and critic, imagining and creating an entire event. Experiencing school from these different role-playing situations allows at-risk students to explore issues, alternate courses of action, relationships among people, and the emotional subtext of encounters with others (Wagner, B. 1999). Through dramatic work, students acquire tools for forming clear personal objectives, learn rhetorical strategies to achieve those objectives, and recognize when those strategies have succeeded or failed. They become comfortable in front of an audience, develop

self-confidence and self-preservation skills, and are likely to stay actively involved-and to have fun (Edutopia, 2007).

#### Statement of Problem

Students at-risk of achieving poor educational outcomes need drama in education to learn how to express ideas, use their imaginations, and take risks in learning and relating to others. At-risk students have a history of truancy or other absence from school. They also may not be motivated to learn. Additionally they may have poor social skills and limited connections with adults. Professionals need to consider strategies for connecting students to school.

#### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this review of the literature is to build background knowledge for school administrators and teachers to encourage the use of drama program as an instructional strategy for improving social skills in at-risk students. Research shows that drama promotes critical thinking skills, develops collaboration between peers and adults, and improves student engagement in learning.

#### Research Question

The focus of this paper is the role of drama in the middle school curriculum targeting the at-risk population. The main question is as follows: Does drama directly improve the social skills and academic performance of at-risk students in public middle school? In reviewing the literature I am also interested in any indications of long-term academic and social benefits beyond secondary education.



## THEORETICAL RATIONALE

Gardner (2007) suggests that drama is effective because it is one way to tap into the different intelligences that students possess to help them learn and realize success in academia as well as life. In his Multiple Intelligences Theory, he proposes that each person's intelligence is made up of not one but several independent and autonomous modes of learning that can work alone or with each other to develop knowledge and process ideas.

Gardner's intelligences inherent to all human beings are bodily/kinesthetic, linguistic, interpersonal, or social, intrapersonal, or self-awareness, and naturalistic. Gardner felt that the educational system relies too heavily on Linguistic and Logical/Mathematical intelligences. This was based on the heavy emphasis of standardized testing and IQ tests which measure just such intelligences. The emphasis on reading, writing, and math as the primary focus of our intelligence has been to the exclusion of innate human intelligences more highly valued in other cultures and at different times in history ([www.dramaEd.net](http://www.dramaEd.net) 2007).

Drama develops all of Gardner's intelligences and allows for a more successful teaching method for at-risk students who may not thrive in a traditional classroom. At-risk middle school students may not have many successes in a classroom format, whereas they may feel success within drama activities and exercises which translates later into higher self-esteem. Because of the emotional involvement in drama activities, drama is able to promote a deepening of understanding and improved retention of the information. Finally, "rather than study knowledge, these students have the opportunity to become producers of knowledge" ([www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org), 2007).

Another principle of learning comes from Bruner's constructivist learning theory (Bruner, 1960, 1966). This theory proposes that learners acquire knowledge through the

interaction of new stimuli with pre-existing understandings, or through the construction of meaning (Catterall, 2006). Wagner states, “in their effort to understand or make sense of a certain imagined situation, they have to use all their previous knowledge and experience—physical, cognitive, intuitive, and emotional. Often, students discover responses in themselves that are unexpected and more mature than even they realized they were capable of” (Wagner, 1999 p. 6).

Bruner also refers to meta-cognition as a form of constructivist learning. Meta-cognition refers to active self-monitoring of one’s learning and thinking processes. Meta-cognition consists of two basic processes occurring simultaneously: *monitoring your progress* as you learn, and *making changes and adapting* your strategies if you perceive you are not doing so well. (Winn & Snyder, 1998) Bransford and Schwarz (1999) report that attempts to teach through isolated problem solving produce many errors, whereas, “after only a single opportunity to (publicly) ‘test their mettle’ and revise, students’ performances improved dramatically.” (Catterall, 2006, p 4). Students are engaged when they learn through drama, and this translates to reflection and self-revision of ideas.

A popular idea of learning comes from Vygotsky’s theory of social development (Vygotsky, 1960; 1978). Vygotsky studied infants and language acquisition, and developed the theory that all learning is social first, and then individual. He theorized that language development requires an expert who teaches it through dramatic expression; language, thought, and feeling. He came up with the term “zone of proximal development,” or the place where learning requires experience. Once children learn to help themselves, they ultimately internalize this learning and move to a higher level of learning. Within the context of drama, this is important, as the role teachers play in the learning process is significant to the students as the

teacher is the “expert.” Once the students learn certain behaviors, the teacher is able to shift to new levels of teaching and learning based on their understanding (Catterall, 2006).

Vygotsky studied the role of the arts in regulating emotion and the role of arts in formal education. Dramatic tension is an essential part of personality development, while dramatic arts are typically peripheral to the goals of conventional schooling. Treating the arts as ornamental ignores their basic role in human development (Wagner, 1999). In the 1980s, many states removed funding for the arts, including drama, from public schools. Budget concerns allowed only for traditional schooling with limited access to the arts within the walls of the classroom or school building. Ignoring the arts as a method for engaging students and teaching social skills is to create an environment for at-risk learners where “school is work and work, by definition, cannot be fun. That which is not fun is not interesting” (Wagner, 1999, p 66). At-risk students often withdraw from traditional classroom experiences, finding that the instructional method of teacher as expert and lecturer and student as receiver and transmitter, did not incite positive learning experiences.

The teachers of at-risk students can set up situations upon which students can discover why people behave as they do, so that they can be helped to reflect on their own behavior. “All too often in their real lives, young people act without even imagining the consequences, and the results can be disastrous-not only for them but for their communities as well.” (Wagner, 1999, p. 12). Using Vygotsky’s theory of social development, teachers can provide a safe method for their students to learn to help themselves, ultimately internalizing such learning. Vygotsky believes that dramatic interpretation of literature is also a dramatic performance of one’s own life, as personality, with its psychological foundation and art, with its dramatic inspiration are =

intertwined. In other words, personality is inherently dramatic, and art is inherently psychological, suggesting the interdependence of the two (Wagner, 1999).

Current drama in education theorists cannot be complete without the work of Dorothy Heathcote, an expert in drama education. Heathcote's theory is that "theatre can create an impetus for productive learning across the whole curriculum." (p. 5) Her approach, called the Mantle of the Expert, "is like a spiral, a continuous path followed by the students through knowledge into theatre and theatre into knowledge on a more sophisticated plane as they develop responsibility for their own learning" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 5).

Heathcote was a practitioner and disseminator of a unique methodology based on the use of drama as a tool to stimulate holistic learning. Drama, when used in this way, invokes an educational process akin to a continual journey, in that learning is never completed and is always "just beginning". The relevance of her methods has found a continued resonance in a wide spectrum of applications at all levels from the primary classroom to the management boardroom (Manchester Metropolitan University Institute of Education, 2007, Introduction).

Heathcote suggests that teachers take on the role of facilitators, empowering their students rather than using the traditional transmission of learning from teacher to student. In this way, there is a partnership between teachers and students, and students begin to understand and take on their own responsibility for learning. In this learning environment, teachers and students use an inquiry approach to teaching and learning, which supports contemporary learning theory. This approach is built upon the idea that students are actively involved in learning and continually reconstruct understandings in the light of experience. It encourages students to

participate in active investigation, and to integrate, rather than separate knowledge, as they move from acquisition of facts to the development of deep understanding (Murdoch, 1998).

### Assumptions

Drama directly influences the social skills of a student considered at-risk of poor educational outcomes. Students enjoy drama as an outlet to express themselves as well as watching others around them open up. This sharing creates relationships and trust.

Drama programs in schools are not just an "extracurricular activity" but an important and necessary instructional strategy for improving social skills among at-risk teens.

Drama transforms the relationship of teacher and student from one of authority-recipient to one of a shared experience. For at-risk students, this is especially important as it allows for a relationship of trust and acceptance between student and teacher.

### Background and Need

Bandura's theoretical framework explains the psychological procedures designed to change behavior. The theory suggests that all psychological procedures create and strengthen a person's self-concept which is conceptualized in terms of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to a person's confidence that one can perform certain behaviors in certain situations. Bandura began to look at personality as an interaction among three "things:" the environment, behavior, and the person's psychological processes. He believed that people can learn by observing the behavior of others and the outcomes of those behaviors.

Drama is effective for each of Bandura's four conditions necessary for a student to effectively model the behavior of someone else. First, the condition that holding a student's

attention is crucial for learning social behaviors. If students are bored and not participating, they will not pay attention to the behavior to be learned. Second, that students must retain the learning in order to repeat the desired behavior. One way to increase this condition is through rehearsal. Third, the student will reproduce the behavior at a later time, ingraining it further as a new social skill, and finally, that the motivation is there for the student to want to demonstrate what he or she has learned. This is especially effective in a drama setting as students see each other modeling and enjoying the experience, and want to show their own ability.

The effect of modeling desired behaviors in drama is that it teaches at-risk students new behaviors, that it influences the frequency of previously learned behaviors, that it encourages certain positive behaviors that may have previously been seen as forbidden, and it increases the frequency of similar behaviors. In drama, this is can be extremely important, as the use of scripted situations, rehearsed scenes, and positive outcomes with peers can in fact change a student's behavior and self-efficacy throughout life.

## REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This paper addresses the need for drama instruction as a tool to teach social skills to at-risk middle school students. There are two different methods of drama instruction. One uses creative drama which is used for the experience alone and not as a preparation for a performance or for any type of audience. The second method of instruction is teaching students to read and study scripts, theater basics, technical skills and preparation culminating in a performance for an audience. A recommendation will be offered to use the second method of traditional theater and drama activities to teach social skills and improve academic skills in at-risk middle school students while using pieces of creative drama in the process.

Freeman, Fulton, and Sullivan (2003), observed the effects of creative drama on student self-concept, social skills, and problem behavior of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade students. The students participated in creative drama activities one day per week for eighteen weeks.

Researchers found that drama contributed to an improved self-concept by providing opportunities to gain personal confidence by working in an uncritical atmosphere. According to Way (1967), drama overcomes self-consciousness in favor of a healthy consciousness of self. Drama facilitates social growth by developing an understanding and acceptance of self and then by accepting others and sharing with others. Students collaborate and cooperate with each other which allows for positive experiences with peers.

Researchers in this study used Bandura's construct of self-efficacy as the instrument to measure self-concept in the students observed. Using repeated observations, researchers found that creative drama participants develop social skills through four components of training: response acquisition, response practice, response shaping, and cognitive restructuring (Courtney, 1995; Jendyk, 1981).

Researchers found that creative drama has the potential to change how the child thinks and acts in relation to others. As children acted out stories and situations that pertained to everyday living, they in turn learned about life. The students explored actions, motives, and lives of different characters and upon examination of these characters, learned about their own attitudes towards self and others around them. This goes back to Bandura's theory (1977) that the students behavioral change was due to the psychological procedures given, as drama experiences, which transferred to their ability to exhibit appropriate behavior outside the safe setting of the drama classroom and move into uncontrolled settings such as playgrounds and hallways.

Researchers in this study found that there have been few empirical studies conducted in the area of creative drama. They read 200 studies of U.S. publications and doctoral dissertations and found that only six studies had social skills, self-concept, or behavior as dependent variables. The researchers bridged this gap by conducting an experiment using creative drama to improve self-concept and social skills. However, the students were elementary grade students. There have been very few studies using drama as an instructional strategy to teach social skills and improve academic performance for public middle school students, that is, 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> graders in California.

It should be noted that the study used a certified drama instructor and certified music instructor with formal training and experience in performing arts. The drama instructor knew of the study and the expected positive outcomes, while the music instructor was given a description of the activities but was not advised of the specific outcomes expected or the measurements or instruments used in the study.



Wagner (1999) gives an alternate perspective using creative drama rather than traditional drama to reach at-risk students. This form of drama in education is less formal and structured and geared towards conflict resolution and community building. This is achieved through modeling and testing hypotheses which mirror real-life experiences. There are several studies in this book outlining specific cases of drama being used to reach at-risk students. These cases show the effect of drama on student attitudes, social behavior, and moral reasoning.

Wagner's study brings up an important point, that simply requiring students to engage in drama is not a guarantee of meaningful experiences. Collaborative learning requires that each participant gives and takes freely from the experience, and this is not always the case. Often, students who perceive themselves as leaders will take on this role in collaborative work and will delegate instructions to other members. Students who consider themselves as followers will often allow others to make choices for the group without complaint. In collaborative drama experiences, it is only when students step out of these perceived roles that drama becomes meaningful. Drama has the *potential* for helping to achieve the goals of a growth-centered pedagogy (Wagner 1999).

Wagner's study makes the argument that young people learn about social life through performance, not the passive receiving of information. Learning conflict-resolution skills, self-acceptance and confidence, improving cross-cultural understandings, improving human relations, and reducing racial and ethnic tensions are all the results of incorporating drama in education (McLaughlin, 1990, Wagner, 1999). According to Wagner, in the late 1980s, several research projects focused on the learning environments young people judged effective in fostering their social and academic learning and persistence. They found drama and role-playing to be a component of 90% of these organizations.

When it comes to at-risk students, these studies are even more significant as it reaches students who traditionally perform poorly in social and academic environments. Backstrom (1988/1989) created an ethnographic study of eighth grade students. Backstrom found improved self-concept, according to the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale, improved attendance, grades, cooperation, and attitudes toward the teacher and other students, as well as toward reading. They also improved in reading comprehension and in the ability to remain focused on tasks. Backstrom observed that students grew in self-confidence, became more independent learners, and volunteered more often (Backstrom, 1988, 1989; Wagner 1999). These are significant goals for all learners, but especially those deemed at-risk for poor social and emotional outcomes.

A review of the work by Heathcote (1995) gives further insight into the importance of drama in education. Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert approach is interesting, because it presumes that when using this method of inquiry, students are always aware of presenting material to others, or an "audience." This is not the typical audience that teachers expect, but the sense of audience derived from the continual awareness of preparing something for each other or for the teacher. "Scrutiny of each other's work is built in as part of the mantle of the expert system" (Heathcote & Bolton, 1995, p. 190). According to Heathcote, the use of drama is embedded within the learning environment. Bolton clarifies:

Both mantle of the expert and theatre are based on fiction, an initial "lie" so that what follows can be truthful. As I have argued above, there is a parallel between an actor's building of a character and the building of expertise in the students. Everything done in a mantle of the expert approach is audience oriented or at least done with a sense of audience-not, of course, an immediate audience to be entertained, as in theatre (although even this is

not precluded), but a “client’s” or “colleague’s” imminent scrutiny (Heathcote, Bolton, 1995, p. 190).

Heathcote’s method works well with at-risk students as it teaches empathy, responsibility, and creates a positive learning environment where all students are “experts” when it comes to learning. For at-risk students, learning empathy is a valuable tool. Heathcote described the core of her philosophy in the video *Teaching Through Drama* (Manchester Metropolitan University Institute of Education, 2008).

Drama is about man’s ability to identify. It doesn’t matter whether you are in the theatre or in your own sitting room. What you’re doing if you are dramatising is putting yourself in somebody else’s shoes: Man’s gift, with which we seem to be born, of just putting ourselves instantly into somebody else’s shoes and having a sort of total picture of how it must feel to be feeling like that person right now. We have as yet not done very much about harnessing this to the education of our children but everybody uses this. We don’t know how young they are when they begin to use this. Its just about time we said to ourselves - Can we use this in the classroom situation? ( p. 9).

Heathcote’s philosophy of empathy does not just reach students in the classroom, but also teachers of students. Heathcote believes that the teachers should place themselves into the children’s shoes ,for children are being taught, not subjects, and allow the children to place themselves in the teacher’s shoes. Her methods transformed how teachers view the transmission of learning from a traditional method to this cooperative method which teaches more than mere curriculum. In Heathcote’s mind, teachers are similar to sculptors or playwrights, revealing

inner truth while creating awareness of a particular curriculum concept through drama. “It is like a continual journey with built-in ‘inner pathways’, for both teacher and child, similar to the archetypal quest of the hero in that the learning is never completed and “the process of becoming” is always just beginning” (Heston, date, p. 11).

Contemporary research could not be complete without the work of Catterall (2006). Catterall studied peer conflict resolution skills using drama with students over twenty-four weeks in a program called *The School Project*. Once the study was completed, student outcomes were measured. It was determined that advances in the ability to work in groups and in self-efficacy stood out. Student motivation also improved, according to surveys given both pre and post test of the program.

There have been few formal studies of adolescents using drama in education. Catterall’s study was designed to work with adolescents over an extended period of time proving that drama can promote specific learning and development. According to Catterall, the project aimed at “developing a more positive sense of self, strengthening in standing up for one’s own views and ideas, respecting the views of others, and more positive social interactions. (Catterall, 2006, p. 8). Adolescents in the group would use drama, theater, writing, and visual arts to create and act in original plays. Ninety-minute workshops took place after school once a week (p. 8). It is important to note that the program included professional acting, writing, director, dancing, singing and visual arts instructors.

The program aimed at discovering the conditions in which learning might have taken place through the use of drama, and whether or not drama influenced students to move towards pro-social behavior. At the end of the study, Catterall determined that students did improve

social skills and built individual learning through understanding others and learning by example and simulation. (Catterall, 2006 p. 13).

This study is significant for students labeled as at-risk, as the effects are consistent with previous research in determining that students learn self-efficacy through feelings of competence. As students grew in their expertise, critical thinking skills improved and students' motivation to succeed followed. Even more significant, was the students' desire to return to the program to mentor future students to succeed as they had. Catterall's study provides research that drama in education works for at-risk students.

In a study by Williams and McCollester (nd.) about participation in an extra-curricular drama club and self-esteem of at-risk students, researchers created an after-school drama program aimed at improving self-esteem and reducing at-risk behaviors. Comparing 72 drama club students to 172 non-participants indicated that the students who participated in the after-school club had positive changes in self-esteem and reduced their at-risk behaviors.

Middle school students are particularly vulnerable for low self-esteem. Self-esteem, defined as "the evaluation one makes of oneself... a dimension of self-concept which positively or negatively affects personal growth, social interactions, and the academic success of students" (Williams & McCollester, nd). For the at-risk child, self-esteem issues are often the root of academic and social problems.

In this study, Williams and McCollester chose an after-school model as extra-curricular activities allow for socialization in a non-academic environment. Drama was used for its role-playing and verbal methods of learning. The researchers discovered that teacher bias was evident in the analysis of test scores. Males were perceived to exhibit more at-risk behaviors while females were perceived to exhibit less. However, this discrepancy was not evident in

students' own self-reported scores. This is a cause for concern, as administrators and teachers label students as at-risk.

The program took place over one year, and students were given many opportunities to perform. Curriculum was introduced and included researching the ethnic background of students' families, learning and performing dances from different cultures, reading native poetry, reader's theater, geography lessons, cultural lessons, and music lessons. The end of the program culminated in an anti-drug, alcohol, and tobacco program which was presented to an elementary program.

The researchers reported a causal relationship between participants in the drama club and a positive change in member's perceptions of those personal and environmental characteristics related to at-risk behaviors (p. 10). Data revealed a significant positive change in drama participant's self-concept. During the course of the program, participants exhibited fewer at-risk behaviors. Classroom teachers reported less at-risk behaviors displayed in the classroom with members involved in the drama club. Recommendations were made at the end of the program to reduce the number of participants in the program as there was frustration by some of the students who expressed that they had to "wait for the bad kids."

This study reveals that the use of drama with at-risk students is effective as at-risk behaviors decreased as self-esteem grew. In each of these studies, the use of drama significantly changed the self-esteem and motivation of students who participated in each program. Clearly, drama in education is not a peripheral need, but necessary to develop social skills and self-efficacy in all students, particularly those labeled as at-risk.

### Limitations/Gaps in the Literature

The studies conducted by various researchers have been helpful in determining whether drama is an effective strategy for teaching social and academic skills to at-risk public middle school students. There are two methods for using drama in education, each having benefits and reaching students of all learning abilities and levels. However, there is little research in the area of at-risk middle school students and the use of drama in education. Often the studies focus on elementary school children and the use of drama within the classroom. Or, at the high school level, research has been conducted using drama within the classroom, providing a method of instruction for history, English, and math, or as a separate elective activity to teach team building and self-esteem skills.

At the middle school level, there are few such studies which have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of drama as a means to teach social and academic skills. Furthermore, no long-term studies have been conducted to determine whether or not the presumed benefits of drama in education at the middle school level have far-reaching consequences within the lives of the adolescents studied. Studies following students after graduation from high school would provide much-needed research in the long-term benefits of education which embraces drama curricula in its framework.

### Implications For Further Research

Further studies need to be conducted to determine the effectiveness for using drama in the educational setting for the middle school at-risk population. The use of drama has been shown to

engage students while modeling positive behavior. Long-term studies to determine the retention of social and academic skills would enhance the current theory that drama uses different modes of learning to create lasting social and academic skills.

### Overall Significance of the Research

Research points to drama in education as an effective learning strategy for at-risk students. Further studies need to be aimed at the middle school level, encompassing 6<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. Through dramatic work, students acquire the necessary tools for forming objectives and learn strategies to meet those objectives. Students recognize when those strategies have succeeded or failed, changing the way they approach objectives in the future. They become comfortable in front of others, develop self-confidence and presentation skills, and are likely to be more engaged in school, decreasing at-risk behaviors. Drama not only gives young people the desire to learn, but also teaches them how to learn, creating a life-long ability for critical thinking skills. Research shows that at-risk students are at the greatest risk for failure in educational settings. Drama provides a reason for being engaged in school and connecting with peers and adults. “Problem” students often become the best students in a drama setting, working in an environment that embraces holistic learning. At-risk adolescents deserve a quality education that engages and challenges them. Drama in the educational context achieves this goal.



## PILOT STUDY

### Study Design

Students labeled at-risk for poor educational and/or social outcomes by school administrators or local community leaders will participate in a two week-long summer camp designed to use drama as an instructional strategy to teach community building, social skills, and connectedness with teachers. Teachers will participate in the two week-long camp to learn how drama works in the educational setting, and will leave with a framework of how to use drama in their own classroom or schools. Teachers will receive a take-home packet of strategies and lessons that will enhance their current curriculum.

### The Participants

Students labeled at-risk for poor educational and/or social outcomes by school administrators or local community leaders will participate in a two week-long summer camp aimed at improving pro-social skills and motivation in the school environment. Considerations will be given to students with low socio-economic status, from low academic performing schools, and those chosen by administrators or leaders as experiencing behavioral, academic, or language difficulties. The participating students will be compared with a non-participation group. The non-participation group will not participate in any of the program's activities, nor had they done so in the past. Approximately 15-20 students will be studied from each group.

### Method

The means of generating and gathering data will be through surveys administered to all students prior to the program and again after completion of the program (pre-test, post-test design). Permission was granted by Dr. Catterall to use his survey questions as the statistical

means to assess data by students. The survey also included twelve open-ended response questions addressing student views of what they learned during the program and their assessments of critical activities.

In addition, I wrote 10 interview questions to gather data from UCLA researcher, Dr. Catterall. These questions were designed to improve pilot study effectiveness by using data to create an instructional program for at-risk students in a summer camp (See appendixes).

#### Research Goals

The pilot study is designed to provide a summer intensive experience using drama for at-risk students to enhance pro-social behavior and a connection to teachers and peers through community building. Providing an experience away from traditional learning, students will engage in improvisational drama as well as a culminating play to be performed for teachers, caregivers, and their families.

#### Funding

Private funding will be provided for all participating students at a two week-long drama camp at an educational working ranch in the Napa Valley. Teachers will be asked to participate and pay a fee for training materials and expenses, taking into account limited teacher budgets. Grants will be applied for to offset unforeseen and expected expenses.

#### Data Analysis Approach

The analysis will focus on the difference in scale change scores pre to post for students enrolled in the program compared to non-participating students.

### Ethical Standards

This study conforms to all ethical standards of research as determined by the American Psychological Association. This project will be reviewed by the California Institutional Review Board.

### Conclusion

Research points to the need to conduct further studies using drama with at-risk middle school students. This study is aimed at giving at-risk students the opportunity to connect with peers and teachers using drama as the framework for learning. The primary goal of this study is to discover if a short, intensive program using drama and performance engages at-risk students, translating into the academic environment during the school year. A secondary goal is to work with teachers in their understanding of how to incorporate drama into the daily routine in the classroom, using Heathcote's Mantle of the Expert method.

REFERENCES

- Acting Up, Edutopia (2007, Edutopia) Retrieved on March 20, 2007 from  
[www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org).
- Bandura, A. (1977) *Social Learning Theory*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice Hall).
- Bruner, J. (1960) *The Process of Education* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).
- Bruner, J. (1966) *Toward a Theory of Instruction* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).
- Bruner, J. (1987) *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*. (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press).
- Catterall, J. (2006) *Enhancing Peer Conflict Resolution Skills Through Drama: An Experimental Study* (University of California, Los Angeles, CA) Retrieved May 29, 2008 from  
<http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/files/catterall/catterall.peerconflict.pdf>.
- Conrad, Diane (2005, February). Rethinking 'at-risk' in drama education: beyond prescribed roles. *Research in Drama Education*, 10(1), pp. 27-41.
- Danielson, Trygve R. (1990). *Evaluating the Ability of Drama-Based Instruction to Influence the Socialization of Tenth Grade English Students Labeled as "Low Ability."* New York University. Sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts and the United States Department of Education.
- The Dorothy Heathcote Archive (Metropolitan Manchester University Institute for Education) Retrieved May 31, 2008 from <http://www.partnership.mmu.ac.uk/drama/archive.html>.
- Freeman, Gregory D., Fulton, C. Ray, Sullivan, Kathleen. (2003, January-February). Effects of Creative Drama on Self-Concept, Social Skills, and Problem Behavior. *Journal of Educational Research* 96(3) p131-38.

Gay, Geneva, Hanley, Mary Stone. (1999, July-August). Multicultural Empowerment in Middle School Social Studies through Drama Pedagogy. *The Clearing House* 72(6).

Heston, S. (The Dorothy Heathcote Archive PhD Thesis), Retrieved June 1, 2008 from <http://www.partnership.mmu.ac.uk/drama/HESTON/default.html>.

McLaughlin, J. (1990). Building a case for arts education. Lexington, KY: The Kentucky Alliance for Arts Education and the Kentucky Arts Council.

Morado, Carolyn, Koenig, Rosalie, Wilson, Alice. (1999, October). Miniperformances, many stars! Playing With Stories. *The Reading Teacher*. 53(2).

Murdoch, K. (1998) *Classroom Connections: Strategies for Integrated Learning*. Melbourne, Eleanor Curtain Publishing.

Wagner, Betty Jane. (1999). Building Moral Communities Through Educational Drama. (Stamford CT., Ablex Publishing Corporation).

*Why Drama Games?* (2006, Drama Education Network) Retrieved February 24, 2007 from [www.dramaed.net](http://www.dramaed.net).

Winn, W. & Snyder D. (1996). Cognitive perspectives in psychology. In D.H. Jonassen, ed. *Handbook of research for educational communications and technology*, 112-142. New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan.

APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

Table I. Survey Questions

Construct alpha	Description
<u>Pro-social changes in behavior</u>	
<b>Working with others with whom I disagree</b>	<p>If I disagree with someone it means I don't like him/her</p> <p>I refrain from anger when disagreed with</p> <p>I can work with someone with opinions different from mine</p> <p>I am good at listening to someone whose opinions differ</p> <p>Disagreeing is not the same as being angry with someone</p>
<b>Working effectively in groups.</b>	<p>I like working in groups</p> <p>I am able to solve problems with help from others</p> <p>I receive respect from fellow students</p> <p>I imagine having more friends in future</p> <p>I am someone others look up to</p>
<b>Problem resolution skills</b>	<p>I have found new ways to deal with my problems</p> <p>I am good at figuring solutions to my <u>problems</u></p>
<u>Conditions and processes of learning</u>	
<b>Meta-cognitive skills</b>	<p>I learn a lot about myself</p> <p>I have changed my way of thinking</p>
<b>Self-efficacy</b>	<p>I don't need to be in control all the time</p> <p>I make my own decisions</p> <p>I imagine being in control of my own life in the future</p> <p>I am patient in getting what I want</p>
<b>General outlook</b>	<p>I am optimistic in facing challenges</p>

I look forward to the future

Reflection on the drama medium

**Attitude about Acting (na)**

I like to act or perform



APPENDIX B

Table II: Pre to Post Changes in Perceptions and Attitudes

Scale	Net Gain	p-value	signif.	Absolute Effect size Gain
<b>Pro-social changes in behavior</b>				
<b>Ability to work w/ others when disagreeing</b>				
<b>Ability to work effectively in groups</b>				
<b>Problem resolution skills</b>				
<b>Conditions and Processes of Learning</b>				
<b>Meta-cognitive skills</b>				
<b>Self-efficacy</b>				
<b>General outlook</b>				
<b>Reflection on drama medium</b>				
<b>Liking to act and perform</b>				

APPENDIX C

Table 3: Open Responses to Survey Questions

**Question Characterization of Responses**

**1) What was the most difficult thing you did in the School Project?**

**2) How would you best describe your relationship with program artists?**

**3) How would you best describe your relationship with the School Project teacher from your school?**

**4) How would you best describe your relationship with other School Project participants?**

**5) What made you decide to take part in this program?**

**6) Why did you keep attending?**

**7) Would you enroll again?**

**8) Are you comfortable with School Project leaders?**

**9) Did you get to know the artists more or less than other adults in you life beside your parent(s)?**

**10) Besides having fun, what do you appreciate most about the School Project?**

**11) What would you change about this program and why?**

**12) What do you feel you learned from this program?**

**13) What do you feel you learned about yourself in this program? group's play?**

**14) How do you feel about your group's play?**

**15) How did you feel the night of the performance, before and after the show?**

**16) Any other comments?**

## APPENDIX D

### Interview Protocol with Dr. Catterall

1. Research has shown the potential to serve as an agent for advocacy to show decision makers that drama and theatre for youth “works” (Johnny Saldana and Lin Wright, 1996). Is it more important, then, in this stage of drama research to show the effects of drama rather than analyzing the drama itself?

It’s hard to argue that one target or purpose should be argued more than another, as both are important. I would add a third category to this, and that is research. Research the process of engaging on the participant and find out the how and why it works. Explore up close the dynamics of how it works and that is the most important category, I think.

2. How important is the role of reflection after dramatic experiences for the student when looking at transfer?

Reflection is a scarce commodity in all of life. Getting learners to pause about what they are learning and why is crucial. Reflection with others and then dialogue with others is important. I would say to teachers, don’t let things go by without pausing to critique the process.

3. Did you find in your studies that simply requiring students to engage in drama did not guarantee meaningful experiences?

You would have to ask this of a drama teacher, since I can’t answer. I am not there in the day to day life of a drama teacher.

4. How would you suggest a curriculum be developed for teachers to use drama that provides meaningful experiences who have limited extra time to add to their workload?

I am drawn first to using it in the classrooms, for instance history, social studies, literature, and story understanding. Some teachers naturally do it, and some have never done it. Teachers need to see efficient ways to see how it can work, plus see the results. They need to see sample plans brought to life. Take a look at Dorothy Heathcote’s videos which show teachers how to integrate drama in the classroom. Teachers need the motivation to make changes. Get the good stuff on a plate and get it out there to teachers, and they will want to use it!

5. How important is it for schools to be concerned with the emotional health of students along with academic achievement?

It is absolutely essential! These are whole people. Parents do not want robots; they want sane, moral, interesting kids.

6. Teachers often become excited about using a new program (such as drama integration) in their classroom, only to be discouraged by the suspicion, indifference, and reluctance of at-risk students to embrace their vision. Is there a way to use this reluctance with students to build a positive community through dialogue and dramatic expression?

Teachers of all stripes, particularly those of at-risk students, hope of building and integrating arts into the curriculum. Drama is the “hook” that can pique the interest of at-risk students. It can be used to make it more interesting. I haven’t analyzed how using reluctance can build community. Usually I am analyzing the other way around, how drama overcomes the reluctance of at-risk students.

7. Do you believe that learning becomes more relevant to the student when combined with drama experience?

It is relevant if the student is engaged in the subject. If the subject the drama is about is relevant to the student, then yes.

8. G. Bolton believes that the effect of drama is long-term: “sensitivity, commitment, confidence, self-assertion, eagerness to learn, the development of positive thinking and the acquisition of wisdom is a kind of natural outcome of drama” (Bolton, 1990, pg. 11). Have you been able to track students who participated in drama programs years later (as adults, perhaps) to find out if this is true?

People like Bolton make these statements as if they are self-evident. People gather around and say, “Yes, that’s good.” There have not been many long-term studies of tracking students, as it takes resources and people usually publish and get on with it. Bolton has been around for a long time and has seen many different things, so he has some insight. However, there have not been more than three long-term studies that I know of. There is a video, however, about a French dance teacher who used dance with students called “He Makes Me Feel Like Dancing.” Tune in to that one. It is from 25 years ago and tracked students 20 years later asking them how the program changed them or what it did for them. Music is easier, as specific questions can be asked which can show the significance, but for drama, you can’t get those same types of results. If you were to write a paper capturing about 6-8 kids you taught 10 years ago and the significance of drama on their lives, well, then, that would be something.