An Embodied Drama Therapy Approach to Restorative School Practices: A Method

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Abstract

Restorative School Practices offer schools a circle structure to shift the punitive mindset and power dynamics commonly found in America's schools, to a model that focuses on relationship, connection, and mutual respect. Drama therapy interventions utilize embodied or active work that engage the entire person. The purpose of this thesis was to create a method to explore the addition of embodied drama therapy techniques to deepen the experience of the restorative school circle process. Three community-building and social emotional learning focused circles, in a second, fourth, and sixth grade class, were compared using the traditional scripts and then the same scripts with the addition of drama therapy techniques. Observations of each session were noted. A rubric comprised of two factors, ease of facilitation and participant engagement, was scored for each session. The results from the fourth-grade circle showed promise of embodied techniques enhancing the process, with increased participant engagement and little need to redirect the group as a facilitator. The merging of embodied drama therapy and restorative practices may create a more inclusive, engaging, and exciting process that has the possibility to change the way groups and individuals experience listening and speaking from the heart in the circle process.

Keywords: *drama therapy, Restorative Justice, restorative practices, behavior management, embodiment.*

Author Identity Statement: This author identifies as a straight, cis-gendered White female from New England of mixed European ancestry.

An Embodied Drama Therapy Approach to Restorative School Practices: A Method

"When students feel supported and successful in the classroom, they rarely act out. When teachers feel supported and successful at school, they rarely burnout." (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p. 12) What is at the core of feeling supported? Positive relationship and connection (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Rerucha, 2022). Restorative school practices are focused on the relationships and connections built at school. When a student feels valued, heard, and supported by their peers and teachers, I've seen positive outcomes occur, including when conflict arises in the school community.

"Restorative discipline is rooted in the core assumption that everyone wants to be in good relationship with others and themselves. Everyone wants to feel respected, to have a sense of dignity, to feel as if they matter to others, and to feel valued." (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015, p. 477)

Restorative practices shift away from the "zero tolerance" mindset that has plagued the American school systems for many years, creating an "us vs. them" power dynamic. Too many students spend time outside the classroom because of exclusionary discipline approaches (Lawrence & Hinds, 2016). Restorative practices seek to create a culture of equity, communication, growth, and relationship.

Drama therapy offers participants the opportunity to be engaged in an embodied and active method. Group drama therapy allows for an even more dynamic approach, where participants learn, engage, and grow together. My internship site is an elementary school where my role has been to implement and model restorative school practices school wide. As a result, I worked exclusively in groups and focused on social-emotional topics within the circle setting. I began the process of conceptualizing this thesis with the addition of drama therapy techniques

into my groups. Musika-Williams (2019) and D'Amico et al. (2015) outline two examples of how the use of group drama therapy can provide social skill development and social emotional learning with children.

Musika-Williams (2019) conducted a group drama therapy study with adolescents with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The study used verbal and dramatized reflections of group experience to focus on the perceptions of significant relationships in the adolescents' lives. The data showed the group gained necessary behavioral and social skills for typical functioning in social settings—places like school where stigmatization is more likely to occur. Similarly, D'Amico et al. (2015) conducted a focused study on the efficacy of drama therapy interventions in learning social skills with six 10–12-year-old children with autism spectrum disorder. The study utilized drama therapy core processes of dramatic reality, dramatic projection, role-playing and storytelling. The results of the study suggest that drama therapy interventions can target need-based social skill deficit areas, specifically areas that arise from behavioral difficulties. Drama therapy techniques allow participants of all developmental abilities the opportunity to process and learn through many of the core processes.

Restorative School Practices (RSP) and drama therapy are made for each other. There is significant literature and data to show the efficacy of the implementation of RSP to: make a positive difference in the school culture as a whole, (Bevington, 2015; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018; Linares et al., 2005; McCluskey et al., 2008; O'Reilly, 2018; Weber & Vereenooghe, 2020), uphold dignity (High, 2017) and teach social responsibility as members of the school community (Macready, 2009; Rerucha, 2022). Restorative school practices create and foster an environment of safety, community, and mutual respect, which results in more staff retention and overall student success (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). However, current research

in school-based drama therapy lacks depth and breadth and there is no literature to date on the use of drama therapy to enhance the circle experience in RSP.

Drama therapy offers an embodied approach to creating connection to self and others (Jones, 2008; Mayor & Frydman, 2020; Pendzik, 2006), building community and relationships (Blatner & Blatner, 2018; Joronen et al., 2011), and teaching social emotional skills (Amatruda, 2006; Celume et al., 2020). Drama therapy can also be trauma informed (Bleur & Harnden, 2018; McAdam & Davis, 201; Sajnani & Johnson, 2014), an important factor in many schools. This thesis seeks to answer the question, can the addition of drama therapy techniques enhance and deepen the experience of a restorative school practice community-building circle for both the participants and facilitator?

I seek to discuss a method development based on Restorative School Practices (IIRP) circle format, with the addition of drama therapy techniques to create a more engaging and more easily facilitated circle experience. I will explore how the use of drama therapy focused techniques can enhance the experience of a circle from both the perspective of the facilitator and the observations of engagement from the participants. I am currently trained in restorative school practice implementation and the use of the circle format; however, I have experienced the circle scripts found in *Circle Forward* (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015) are verbal processing focused, which is only engaging for some developmental groups. It is also a difficult format to follow for K-2nd grade students. The addition of embodied techniques I hope will engage students for longer and provide a lasting experience.

Literature Review

Efficacy of Restorative Practices in Schools

The literature available on the efficacy of RSP implementation is substantial, representing research from different parts of the world (High, 2017; Macready, 2009; McCluskey et al, 2008; Reimer, 2020). Why does it matter? Human beings seek social connection and want to be seen and heard, no matter the environment. In schools, when a child is developing social connections, a positive school environment could provide growth regardless of ability, identity, socioeconomic status, and mental health status. It matters to be seen, heard, and respected by others and your own self. Macready (2009) discussed how the implementation of restorative practices provides the community with opportunities to learn social responsibility, to take responsibility for oneself as part of a whole, and to reflect on the values and principles created by the school.

Mirsky (2007), conducted a quantitative longitudinal study focused on the changes in school climate over 2-4 years in a public school system located in southeastern Pennsylvania, after the implementation of the restorative school practices called *SaferSanerSchools*. "Restorative practices, the term used for these strategies, involve changing relationships by engaging people: doing things WITH them, rather than TO them or FOR them—providing both high control and high support at the same time" (p. 5). Restorative practices aim to create a school climate of mutual respect, understanding and safety on a student-to-student level, staff-to-staff level, and staff-to-student level.

There were significant decreases in the disciplinary data, for example in the amount of in school suspensions and disruptive behavior, in each school once the *SaferSanerSchool* model was implemented. The article had first-hand accounts of the difficulties, outcomes and shifts from the members of the school community, offering a holistic picture of how implementation and continued use of restorative practices can benefit multiple ages groups and school personnel.

Hibbin and Warrin (2019) described a study using "Nurture Groups" in seven schools and restorative school practices in ten locations in England. The authors sought to offer schools a less punitive, more language-based inclusive structure to deal with challenging behavior. The following are challenges experienced for children who receive special education services: differentiated treatment by their teachers, peers, and thus the quality of education they are receiving. This is in addition to the loss of educational instruction that occurs as a result of punitive measures. The authors note that the children who receive these services and differential treatment compared to their typically presenting peers, are more likely to have experienced trauma. The experience of trauma often leads to the challenging behaviors, thus punitive discipline is not a trauma-informed practice.

Nurture groups refer to an approach focused on providing the child with social and emotional experiences designed to address gaps in their development that are a direct result of neglect and abuse in children who have dysregulated attachment styles and as a result have difficult presenting behaviors (Hibbin & Warrin, 2019). Restorative school practices have a similar focus on repairing ruptured relationships, building mutual respect, and developing trusted and secure interpersonal relationships. Both approaches aid the child in gaining social emotional growth through the use of communication and positive language. The authors centered positive language and communication around four areas: developing emotional literacy; using inquiring language; offering meaningful opportunities for self-expression and listening skills; and training staff to maintain self-awareness and to model positive communication practices.

The findings of the study showed that the implementation of nurture groups and restorative practices helped construct consistent, positive relationships between staff and students. As noted in participant interviews, trust was established when positive language and

communication-based strategies were used. The authors highlighted examples of staying calm and using an even tone of voice when something "goes wrong," (p. 13) as opposed to telling a student to "stop" (p. 13) or shouting.

Restorative practices emphasize that through the building of relationships, equal voice, and the physical structure of the circle, power dynamics are challenged, because the emphasis is on "we" and working with others in the community (Kaplan, 2020). One of the most important relationships within the school community is the teacher-student relationship. Drewery and Kecskemti (2010) note the teacher student power dynamic that shows up in the classroom. The authors describe the power dynamic within the teacher-student relationship: when instruction is given, as is assumed in most school settings, by the teacher, the teacher has the power, the students do not. Drewery and Kecskemti suggest that restorative practices lessen this power dynamic. The dynamic of the teacher having the power and the students being information receptacles results in teacher-student conflict and the need for behavior management. Macready (2009) conceded that restorative practices view "a problem as a problem" instead of "people as the problem", which provides a person-centered framework for discussion of behavior and choices instead of blaming a person for "who they are" (p. 217).

Art-based Interventions in Schools

Tumanyan and Huuki (2020) suggest that a participatory approach helps young people discuss and raise interesting issues but also allows for increased understanding of their needs and provides them with other processing opportunities that are not verbal. The addition of drama therapy techniques to the *Circle Forward* (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015) scripts allows for the participants to process in ways other than oral communication. School communities often deal with emotional and vulnerable topics, such as violence, bullying, grief, and loss. These can be

difficult topics for children to process verbally through spoken word. Drama therapy offers participants the opportunity to process difficult topics without oral processing, which creates more equity of expression for children of differing abilities and language acquisition skills (Brouillette, 2010; D'Amico et al., 2015).

Joronen, et al. (2011) conducted a longitudinal study in Finland, with elementary students, teachers, and parents, using a drama program to enhance social relationships and anti-bullying. Their study found a decrease in bullying behavior and an improvement in children's social relationships at school, suggesting the use of drama methods as social intervention have positive outcomes in the social emotional development of school-age children.

Musika-Williams (2019) conducted a qualitative doctoral research study with 15 adolescents aged 15-18, with intellectual/developmental disabilities. The study used a constructivist grounded theory, which allowed the group to be the experts on their own relational experiences, through creative interviewing in a dramatherapy group. The focus of the study was to explore the experience and perceptions of the key relationships in their lives and to reflect on the use of dramatherapy to promote experiential learning.

The results of this study found a theme of "copying" or "imitating" one another connecting the purpose of imitation to feel less ostracized and "othered" by peers and society. The researcher noted the importance of imitation and the cognitive flexibility required to naturalistically imitate, moving to stylistic imitation is a skill to be gained and significant in the "fitting in" of the participants. The author concludes the significance of using imitation as a core process for this population as social imitation can aid in the gaining of behavioral and social skills necessary for typical societal functioning. Even more is to be gained if the participant can adjust their copying style to the needs of the present moment. These studies show the efficacy of

exploring relationships, and connections that can be made when art-based interventions are implemented in a school setting, allowing participants other ways of processing besides strictly verbal.

Inclusivity

O'Neill and Moore (2016) conducted an arts-based research study with ten primary and six secondary schools, where students and teachers were asked to create a poster illustrating what expressed and communicated the thoughts and feelings on their mental health—both what makes their minds happy and what causes sadness and distress. Common themes that emerged from the primary aged children, teachers, and secondary students were; stigma, mental health disorders, bullying, social isolation, supportive and protective measures (significant relationships, friends, coping etc.), and positive mental health functioning. The authors concluded that the intrinsic value of art-based interventions and research with children to express and reflect on mental health difficulties to better understand, thus provides meaningful and invaluable insight into what keeps children's minds resilient and strong. It also promotes positive mental health and the issues that cause difficulty**.**

Being a provider in a day-treatment setting means acutely focusing on mental health, as every child attending has varying mental health diagnoses. O'Neill and Moore (2016) offer insight through their poster creation and interview process. This process promotes positive mental health in children and teachers and gives providers and school personnel themes to help children understand mental health, such as stigmas and bullying. Stigma is often the focus I have in my setting, so I actively choose to disclose my difficulties with mental health, normalize counseling, and openly discuss mental health with my students.

Tumanyan and Huuki (2020) examined available literature on arts-based methods used with youth that allow for significant opportunities for expression and processing of difficult or sensitive topics. They discussed arts-based methods that allow for: transformation, better understanding and awareness of self-concept, inclusivity of who can participate, access to areas of the brain that verbal processing does not reach, and space to process vulnerable topics.

Integrating the arts into school programming offers an ease and depth of processing a variety of issues, such as: social-emotional topics, self-concept and relationships, trauma, and conflict-resolution (Amatruda, 2006; Bleuer & Harnden, 2018; Brouillette, 2010; Henson & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Mayor & Frydman, 2021; McAdam & Davis, 2019). Similarly, restorative school practices value relationship and community at their core, which allows the participants to express themselves and practice Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills in an inclusive framework (Froggett, 2007). The circle process gives the facilitator a starting point to discuss and model difficult subject matter, and to introduce skill-building. Drama therapy techniques work to provide participants safety and, therefore, the ability to take risks. The importance of combining these two practices is to offer our schools a method to engage the whole person in a better understanding of themselves, others, and their role within the school community. In turn, this understanding could generalize into the world in which they live. This reinforces the need to create a method that combines the power of the embodied core processes and the efficacy of the restorative circle process to build programming that serves the whole person.

Method

This method was created to present the addition of embodied drama therapy techniques to enhance the goals and purpose of the restorative circle process as evidenced through ease of facilitation and consistent engagement from participants. At my current internship site, a licensed

social worker and I have been aiding a charter elementary school in the implementation of restorative school practices, starting with a focus on community building and social-emotional learning circles. The school has a population of PreK-6th grade. PreK has three classrooms; every following grade has two classrooms. I currently run regular SEL circles in: one kindergarten class, both first-grade classes, one second-grade class, one third-grade class, both fourth-grade classes (co-facilitated with the social worker), and one fifth-grade class. My co-facilitator regularly runs weekly circles with: one second-grade class, one third-grade class, both fourth-grade classes (co-facilitated with me), one fifth-grade class, and both sixth-grade classes.

Since our focus in the school has been on SEL, I chose *Circle Forward* (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015) scripts that continued with that learning topic. I collaborated with the social worker to determine what he had been doing with the sixth-grade class. This part of the process was integral in choosing the scripts as scaffolding was necessary for determining SEL topics to continue with each group. I chose to implement three circles: one with the second-grade class I regularly run, one with both the fourth-grade classes (regularly co-facilitated with the social worker), and one with both the sixth-grade classes (regularly run by the social worker). For the first week, my co-facilitator ran each circle alone by following the script, while I observed from the outside to gauge the facilitation and engagement. The following week, I ran the same circle scripts with the addition of drama therapy techniques instead of the prescribed *Circle Forward* script. Grades were chosen based on scheduling and who typically led each circle. Each group was run weekly at their typical time: fourth-grade for 60 minutes, sixth-grade for 30 minutes, and second-grade for 45 minutes.

The Typical Circle Process

The foundational aspects of RSP are: the formation of the participant circle, the use of a "talking piece," (an object that is passed from person to person signifying the speaker), and the creation of community values and guidelines. There are three types of circles: community building circles, academic circles, and restorative circles (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). The community building circle is the first level of the restorative process. This type of circle is done most frequently because it is a foundational part the relationship-building culture. Another level of the restorative process is the academic circle. This type of circle involves teaching any academic subject in a circle while using the "the talking piece" to help facilitate learning. One more level of the restorative process is the restorative circle. This type of circle is specifically utilized when conflict occurs. Each of these levels build upon one another. In my experience, it is difficult to lead a restorative circle conversation if the relationship building has not occurred. Simply put, if the relationship that needs repair does not hold importance to the persons involved, there is no point in going forward, as no relationship has been formed.

Circle Forward Scripts

I focused on three scripts from the social emotional lesson section of *Circle Forward* (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015). I observed my co-facilitator run three circles, using the formats available in the *Circle Forward* as written. I sat on the outside of the circle while the circle was being conducted, and I wrote direct observations in a notebook. Then, I processed post-session in a video journal where I made additional observations of the participants engagement and ease of facilitation on a scale of 1-5, following a rubric (see table 1). The following week I ran the same circles with the same grades, but with the addition of embodied drama therapy techniques. I repeated the video journal process, following the rubric again. The scripts chosen were based on already scaffolded work done with groups, so as not to shift the experience of facilitation and

engagement. I created the rubric for engagement and facilitation based on basic social skills for attending. I did not pull from a particular resource, as I have been teaching social skills to children for five years, and instead, combined the basics of what is needed from participants to aid the facilitator in presenting the material planned and the prosocial behaviors needed for ease of presenting.

Table 1

Rubric for Engagement and Facilitation

1	2	3	4	5
Very poor full body listening, significant need to redirect participation	Poor full body listening, need to redirect participation	Moderate full body listening and moderate need to redirect participation	Good full body listening and some need to redirect participation	Excellent full body listening and little to no need to redirect participation

Fourth Grade: What are you Worried About Circle. The first circle conducted was with the fourth-grade class. The session lasted 60 minutes. There were 14 boys and 22 girls. My co-facilitator and I lead this group regularly with him leading solo for the purpose of this research. The purpose of the circle was to identify sources of worry and sources of coping. Following the script, my co-facilitator began with a review of circle expectations, then continued with the check-in round. In the script, the authors indicate for the facilitator, or "circle keeper", to choose a check-in. He asked, "How are you doing?", and waited for verbal responses from the students. The question for the first round was, "What gives you hope?". Round two had the students verbally share and process their worries. The question for round three was, "How can you tell if you or someone else is worried or very stressed?". As per the script, the circle concluded with my co-facilitator saying, "Thank you for coming to circle today".

Sixth Grade: Managing Mountains Circle. The second circle was conducted with the entire sixth-grade class. The room was small, so the students formed a circle while the staff sat on the outside of the circle. This circle is typically facilitated weekly by my co-facilitator. The purpose of the circle was to examine specific individual "mountains" the group was experiencing, and the coping skills needed to begin to overcome. The circle also had an art component that required the students to have space to draw on a piece of paper. My co-facilitator began the circle with a check-in round by asking, "How are you doing?". Round one had the students think about a problem or mountain they were trying to climb over, and what obstacles were in their way. Then, my co-facilitator led the group through the drawing of their mountain process. Round two had the students share and reflect on their mountains. As per the script, the circle concluded with my co-facilitator saying, "Thank you for coming to circle today".

Second Grade: Safe Spaces Circle. The third and final circle was conducted with a second-grade class. I typically facilitate this circle on a weekly basis. For the purpose of the method, my co-facilitator ran this circle so I could conduct observations. The purpose of the circle was to have the students identify a safe space, either real or imagined and reflect on how the safe space made them feel. My co-facilitator had begun the circle a few minutes before I arrived to observe. The direction for round one was to imagine and draw a safe place. The original last two questions of the circle were: "Looking at your drawing, what have you learned about yourself and your own needs?", and "What could you do to create more spaces in your life where you can most fully be yourself?". To allow for a more developmentally appropriate reflection of the task, my co-facilitator changed the questions to: "How did it feel to make the drawing.

Embodied Restorative Circles

Fourth Grade: What are you Worried About Commercials

For the fourth-grade embodied circle, consisting of the same group as the previous circle, which integrated drama therapy practices into the restorative circle practices, I scaffolded from the previous circle by using the themes that arose from the group. I began the group with a sound and movement check-in. The students were directed to share a sound and a full body movement that described how they felt in the moment. Then, the entire group reflected the sound and movement back to the student who created it. Once the group was finished sharing, I asked for reflection from the group on how the group was feeling, based on the sound and movements shared and reflected. This activity used personification, embodiment, and witnessing, which are core drama therapy processes (Jones, 2008). Next, I instructed the group to verbally process some of the sources of worry discussed in the circle from the previous week, as well as the coping skills that aided them in feeling better or gave them hope. Answers were written on the whiteboard by my co-facilitator. Then, I broke the large group into four smaller groups with nine students in each group. Two of the groups were given "worry" and the other two groups were given "hope". The "hope" groups were directed to create a commercial for the selling of "hope" as a product. The "worry" groups were instructed to create a commercial for how to get rid of "worry", such as a medication for depression or anxiety. The students were split and worked separately in the two fourth grade classrooms. I walked around to check in with each group and to field questions and suggesting frequently that they "put it on their feet." After small groups, we gathered back into the larger classroom, and I gave them an order in which to perform their commercials. The groups shared their commercials for "worry" and "hope". I closed the circle with a group processing exercise, asking each student to choose one word to take with them from the lesson.

Sixth Grade: Managing Community Mountain of Bells

For the sixth-grade embodied managing mountains circle group, consisting of the same group from the previous circle, I held the circle in the larger classroom, for ease of movement and better social distancing. I opened the circle with a sound and movement check-in and asked them to reflect in their bodies how it felt to "draw" themselves overcoming their mountain from last week. The circle was scaffolded from the previous circle with reflection on some of the mountains experienced as individuals in sixth grade. I asked them to think of a mountain that the sixth-grade community faced. Quickly, the group began to discuss their dissatisfaction with the schools opening and closing bells ritual. *Bells* is the vernacular term for a school-wide mindfulness practice held for two minutes at the start and end of each day, signaled by the sound of a bell. This is a practice that is non-negotiable from the administration, but engagement varies by classroom and grade. I asked the group to utilize the space in the circle to show me an image of the *bells* mountain. The group worked together to create a physical group sculpture in the center of the circle. I asked them if there was anything they could do to change *bells*—understanding the administration's mandate of the mindfulness practice—and the group decided that they could not do anything to stop the *bells* from happening. Then, I had them show me what was within their control, and of what they hoped the *bells* could be. I closed the circle with a group processing exercise, asking each student to choose one word to take with them from the lesson.

Second Grade: Safe Space Key Circle

The second-grade embodied safe space circle, consisting of the same group as the previous circle, began with a sound and movement check-in. I asked them what they did last

week with my co-facilitator. They told me that they drew their safe spaces. I asked them to show me a statue of how drawing and sharing their safe space felt.

Realizing that the concept of safe space could be more vulnerable to explore, I asked the above question to gauge consent levels. It became clear that the group did not want to allow anyone into their space. I adjusted the activity, in the moment, to have the students explore the keys to their safe space. Next, I asked them to share, verbally, what their key looks like. Then, I asked them to "become" their key, and to think about how they had described it to the group. Next, they were directed to name the key. Then, I had them introduce themselves as the key. I wrote a script on the board for the students to follow: "I am (name of key), I am (name of student)'s key and I (what the key does for the student)". Each student shared their script while acting as their key. Finally, I led the group in a de-rolling exercise, which had the students unzip their keys, step out of their keys, and toss their keys away. I concluded the circle by having the students choose one word or action that they wanted to keep with them, then I instructed them to place their word somewhere in their body.

Results

Fourth Grade

Fourth-Grade Worry Circle Observations

For the fourth-grade round one question, the students were observed raising their hands and waiting for the "talking piece," (which was a squishy purple dog toy, chosen for its ease of catching and washing). The students were directed to pass the talking piece sequentially, to the person next to them. The answers to the question varied between "bored, tired, fine, sad". I observed many students shift in their seats, poke one another, talk to their neighbors; generally, showing disengagement. However, when it came time for them to answer the round question,

they answered on topic. I noticed waning engagement from the students as the talking piece went around, as the students were expected to answer the same question as their peers.

In round two, I noted the group remained quiet as they listened to each other's answers. However, the full-body listening waned as before as more answers were given and time passed. Many shared openly about loss, worry of the unknown, fear, sadness and hurt. My co-facilitator was observed validating the experiences of the students, reflecting what he had heard and eliciting responses of commonality within the group. At this point, little to no side conversations were occurring, though some students continued to shift in their seats.

In round three, I observed 10-15 hands raised immediately to answer the question. Students were also observed attempting to aid one another in better listening. For example, one student had his hands inside of his shirt, and the student next to him attempted to get him to sit more appropriately in the circle. 45 minutes into the circle, I noted a significant decrease in participant engagement as evidenced by side conversations, students tipping in chairs, students touching one another, and students playing rock, paper, scissors. My co-facilitator noted this as well, as he was heard reminding the group of circle expectations. I observed my co-facilitator scanning the room, making note of who was focused and following expectations, and delivering verbal reinforcement of the students following directions. I recorded the ease of facilitation as a 2 and participant engagement as a 3 in my notebook and video journal (Table 1).

Fourth-Grade Embodied Worry Commercial Observations

After the sound and movement check-in, the group energy was high, and the room filled with laughter and loud talking. The engagement level was high, and all students were observed participating in the activity. When I asked how the group felt based on the check-in, the group shared similar feelings from the previous group, such as tired; they also shared feelings of

excitement, silliness, calm, and happiness. After the group was given directions and broken into small groups, the entire group was observed engaging in the activity. Each small group spoke loudly and excitedly. In their performances, the "worry" groups commercials shared themes of anxiety, fear of the unknown, and the pandemic. They connected coping skills to their worries, such as support of friends and family, taking space, and listening to music. The "hope" groups commercials shared themes of connections, friends, family, and happiness. The entire grade was so loud while performing and applauding that a teacher from an adjoining classroom had to ask the group to "quiet down." I noted in my video journal the participant engagement level was a 5 and ease of facilitation was a 4.

Sixth Grade

Sixth-Grade Managing Mountains Circle Observations

The check-in round yielded similar answers to those given from the fourth-grade group, with answers such as fine, bored, great, and excited. I observed developmentally appropriate attending and full-body listening, with some talking out and side conversation. After the round one direction of thinking about a mountain and obstacles, the group took roughly five minutes to draw their mountains. All the students followed directions immediately without additional prompting. Round two reflections revealed themes of worry, sadness, coping skills, and support. I scored ease of facilitation and engagement of participants as a 4 for both in the video journal and observation notebook based on the behavior demonstrated by the participants and my co-facilitator, as there was little need for redirection and the group demonstrated developmentally appropriate attending, with a factor of the smaller classroom space causing mild physical discomfort for participants, resulting in more shifting and adjustment.

Sixth-Grade Embodied Managing the Mountain of Bells Observations

During the sound and movement warm-up, themes of excitement, pride, and happiness were expressed and reflected. Some themes of the bells being pointless, dumb, annoying, and stupid, were expressed. The *bells* topic took me by surprise, as almost every circle prior had been about bullying at recess. After I asked the group to show me what the experience of the *bells* was to them, students were observed entering the center of the circle with no direction. One by one, the students laid face-down, laid away from others, stood up, sat cross-legged, etc. I asked them if their body movements reflected what they thought the *bells* were supposed to be, or if their body movements reflected how the bells felt for them. The group returned to their seats and shared that they hate the experience of the bells. They shared from their formation in the middle things such as: I am looking bored, and I am turned away because it's pointless. When I asked the question, "What do you want *bells* to be?", the image in the center of the circle reflected themes of engagement in bells, sitting up with eyes closed, laying face-up, and having relaxed bodies and breath. I observed and noted the students who showed images more closely aligning with what a mindful minute would typically look like, were the same students who has previously expressed the most distain for the practice. The observed responses to the closing were themes of supporting one another, being quiet, and just doing it. I noted in my video journal that the ease of facilitation and engagement level were 4.

Second Grade

Second-Grade Safe Space Circle Observations

Since the circle began without me, due to having back-to-back scheduled circles, I entered after the check-in. The students were in the middle of round one and were imagining a safe space. When I entered the classroom, I witnessed the students sitting on the floor in a circle with their bodies turned toward my co-facilitator while he delivered instruction. The group was

almost silent, atypical of this group when I led. I noticed my co-facilitator adjusted his voice level to meet the needs of the group, speaking in lower tones while facilitating. The students were observed drawing and coloring quietly after given the round two direction of drawing their safe space. Themes that arose were coping skills that made the students feel calm, such as hugging a pet or listening to music. The circle ended with my co-facilitator saying, "Thank you for coming to circle". For this observation, I scored ease of facilitation and participant engagement as a 5 for both, based on my previous experience with this class. More often this group is observed being loud, often disruptive, leading to a need for frequent redirection. When I observed this group, they were attentive the entirety of the time thus my co-facilitator did not need to redirect the group to the activity.

Second-Grade Embodied Safe Space Key Circle Observations

When I asked the group to show me statues of how it felt to draw their safe space, they showed statues with open positions, arms up, faces up, and smiles. I asked them to show a thumbs up if they would ever let anyone into their safe space. Only two students put their thumbs up. I had planned on having them give a blind tour of their safe space to each other, as this is a group that enjoys sharing and collaborating. However, once I noticed the hesitancy to share, I shifted the group to focus on their safe space keys. Many shared their key's color, shape, magical abilities, and what it does for them. The primary theme of protection and safety emerged repeatedly. I scored the ease of facilitation with a 4, due to the quick unplanned shift in activity that had to occur and participant engagement as a 5, as the group showed continued and consistent engagement throughout the entire circle.

Summary

The results were processed through a comparison of direct observations, scores in a notebook and video journal of the circles run by my co-facilitator, and video journal reflections of observations of engagement level and ease of facilitation in my circles after incorporating drama therapy embodiment techniques. The results are subjective to my own observations of baseline circle facilitation and reflections following embodied facilitation. Table 2 notes the grade level, the number of participants, the group facilitator, and the 1-5 scores of engagement and facilitation.

Table 2

Participant Engagement and Ease of Facilitation Final Scores

Grade Level	# Of Participants	Length of Session	Facilitator	1-5 Engagement Scale	1-5 Facilitation Scale
4th Grade	36	60 min	Co-facilitator	3	2
*4th Grade	36	60 min	Author	5	4
6th Grade	21	30 min	Co-facilitator	4	4
*6th Grade	18	30 min	Author	4	4
2nd Grade	12	45 min	Co-facilitator	5	5
*2nd Grade	13	45 min	Author	5	4

*Note. * Indicates the addition of embodied techniques*

Discussion

The purpose of creating this embodied method was to enhance the engagement level of the participants, thus leading to an easier time as facilitator in social-emotional circles. Having a baseline was imperative in creating a consistent and measurable experience for the participants and facilitators. The scripts provided in the *Circle Forward* (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015) book allowed for the structural and scaffolding benefits of an already utilized resource, allowing me to easily include embodied techniques. My purpose was not to discredit the widely used and published books, but to begin the process of enhancing the established process. Overall, the addition of embodied practices to the circle format added positive engagement from participants

of multiple grades and developmental abilities, with the most significant difference being in the engagement of the fourth grade. The main findings of the comparisons of the embodied method and the strict circle scripts on participant engagement and ease of facilitation were mixed in the second-grade and sixth-grade groups who experienced new facilitators and non-verbal explorations atypical of what had been established with the group. Both the second and sixth-grade groups had one of the former factors, likely shifting the results.

For the embodied sixth grade circle, I was the novel facilitator who brought them non-verbal and an active circle process they were not accustomed to, and similarly, my co-facilitator brought the second-grade a visual art-based circle, which is atypical of the embodied circles they are used to participating in with me weekly. The following variables were important to note in the overall scoring. For the baseline second-grade circle, one of the students who typically causes disruptions was absent. This likely gave my co-facilitator less opportunities for redirection. For the embodied second-grade circle, the score for ease of facilitation was totaled according to the change of plan needed for what the group required. This improvisational skill, though important and necessary for being a successful educator, does not come easily for many working in education. I recognize that the skill of shifting, and improvising was not difficult for me, but it could prove difficult and stressful for others. It is worth noting the comparisons made in the fourth-grade circle where there was a clear delineation between the two factors when embodied work was added to the process.

In my view, the most compelling explanation for the positive engagement witnessed in the embodied fourth-grade circle compared to the strict script circle is based on two variables: the baseline script contained no art-based intervention and focused heavily on verbal processing, and the size of the group being led. For example, it is difficult to sit and genuinely listen to a

group of 38 people for an hour, no matter your age as was observed in the fourth-grade script circle, which was scored the lowest of all circles in both ease of engagement and facilitation. In the other two grades, the ease of facilitation was higher, likely due to simply having less students to manage. The ease of facilitation for the baseline circle script varied depending on the prompts. For example, the only circle that did not have an art-based activity, fourth grade as mentioned above, showed the lowest level of participation. This is likely due to the processing being strictly verbal, thus effecting the ease of facilitation, as when engagement was low, the facilitator spent time reviewing circle expectations and slowing the progress of the circle.

I learned through this experience that engagement and ease of facilitation are connected. When the group was experiencing lower levels of engagement through verbal processing, the facilitator had to engage in redirection more frequently than in the groups with more engagement, which made it difficult for the facilitator to remain on-track. Another result worth noting was the impact of student engagement based on the facilitator-student relationship. For example, in the circles where the facilitator led the group they do not typically lead, the level of engagement tended to be higher. This could be the case for several reasons. One insight could be the novelty of the facilitator. I have observed when a group becomes comfortable with me, I see an increase in disruptive behavior, as the group feels comfortable and safe to show that part of them. This experience is consistent with research on building positive relationships centered on mutual trust and respect in restorative practices (Boyes-Watson & Pranis, 2015; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018; Macready, 2009). When I and my co-facilitator lead groups we do not typically run, the engagement levels tended to trend higher.

Both the baseline circles and embodied circles engaged the groups in exploration of social-emotional topics, such as safe spaces, worry, coping skills, and hope. The addition of

using their bodies allowed students to express themselves outside of only verbal processing. This resulted in a more engaged group and easier facilitation with the fourth-grade class. Since verbal processing is useful and important for many, utilizing it within the embodied circles mixed with non-verbal processing yielded a more dynamic circle experience. The observations of just the sound and movement warm-up versus the verbal check-in showed more dynamic responses and appropriately scaffolded the embodied enactment each group partook in.

The experience of facilitating and observing both scripted groups and embodied groups revealed excitement and activation when the participants bodies were engaged. This was consistent with current literature on RSP and arts/based techniques where embodied engagement or expressing inner thoughts and feelings in a dramatic way, opened each group to an enhanced connection with others and self in the classroom community (Armatruda, 2006; Blatner & Blatner, 2018; Brouillette, 2010; High, 2017). The embodied approach also seemed to allow for the ability to process difficult/potentially vulnerable material (Tumanyan & Huuki, 2020). These results were reflected by the participants and directly observed by me in each circle.

For future studies, I suggest the choice of baseline scripts with no art-based interventions. This would enable a better observation of the connection between the ease of facilitation and the engagement of the participants. In my experience, as both facilitator and participant, sitting and verbally processing loses my engagement more often than if I am engaged in an embodied experience. This experience is consistent with current literature on the efficacy of the drama therapy core processes which allow for creating aesthetic distance through dramatic projection, personification/role, active witnessing, and the life-drama connection, leading to more engagement by participants (Jones, 2008; Mayor & Frydman, 2021). I know the connection is there, and this study was an indicator, as the circles with arts-based interventions scored higher

overall than the fourth-grade circle that did not featured an arts-based intervention. However, I would like to have selected two other scripts that did not have art-based interventions imbedded in the script to have seen more of a possibility for delineation in the scores. Another recommendation would be to explore the baseline scripts with the facilitator to see what their comfort levels are with the script as written compared to the scripts with the addition of embodied techniques. I imagine there would be a need for modeling and descriptions of each activity, and options for improvisation if the group takes off in another direction. As art-based practitioners who are used to engaging our groups and clients in embodied practices, we need to ask ourselves the question: How can we make embodied techniques accessible to all who may engage in the restorative school practice?

Certain limitations of this study could be addressed in further studies with a larger number of circles completed. This would provide researchers with a larger pool of data and give them direct feedback from the other facilitators and participants involved. Another limitation of this study was leading and observing at the same time, as opposed to sitting outside the circle only focusing on the observations. Though I noted how my body felt after the circles I led, there is merit in the collection of in-the-moment observations.

Despite these limitations, this research can be seen as a first step in integrating the use of drama therapy and other arts-based interventions into the restorative circle process. To my knowledge, the idea of combining drama therapy and restorative circles has not been explored. It is important to continue to connect embodied techniques to the circle process to allow for broader processing and relationship building between participants and facilitator. For those working within the education system, it is of the utmost importance that we begin to look at education through the lens of restorative practices and the foundational value that all human

beings desire connection through being in good relationship with others. What incredible

experiences lie ahead for our children if we do.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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