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### Student Research

# Using Theater and Drama Interventions to Reduce Bullying in School-Aged Children

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**Keywords:** *bullying, drama, theater, school age, children, education*

**Search Terms:** School Age AND Bullying, Drama AND Intervention AND Bullying, Theater AND Bullying, School Age AND Theater

**Years:** 2001–2014

**Databases:** Academic Search Premier, CINAHL, ERIC, Psychology and Behavioral Science Collection, PsychINFO, Music Index, Social Work Abstracts

**Number of Articles Reviewed:** 8

## Summary of Research Findings

Bullying is a pervasive problem for school-aged children that can carry serious implications for overall health and well-being (Beale, 2001). Bullying is characterized by a variety of behaviors that may lead to low self-esteem,

increased anxiety, depression, lower academic achievement and social isolation in those who are victims (Attwood, 2004). Children who are victims of bullying are also at risk for chronic absenteeism, reduced academic performance, apprehension, loneliness, abandonment from

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peers, and even suicide (Beale, 2001).

Comprehensive anti-bullying campaigns are typically directed at all school-aged children and consider issues relevant for victims, bullies, and bystanders (Baer & Glasgow, 2008). As professionals have explored different ways to address bullying issues, Drama in Education (DIE) has emerged as an intervention linked to a variety of positive outcomes.

Rooted in social learning theory, drama activities related to bullying topics are typically structured to help students acquire new knowledge and skills by observing other people and events without directly engaging in the behaviors themselves (Beale, 2001). Children are encouraged to process emotions while problem solving strategies for dealing with bullying. School age children are often able to make connections with their own lives, share in anxieties, listen to others' experiences, and articulate their opinions (Johnson, 2001).

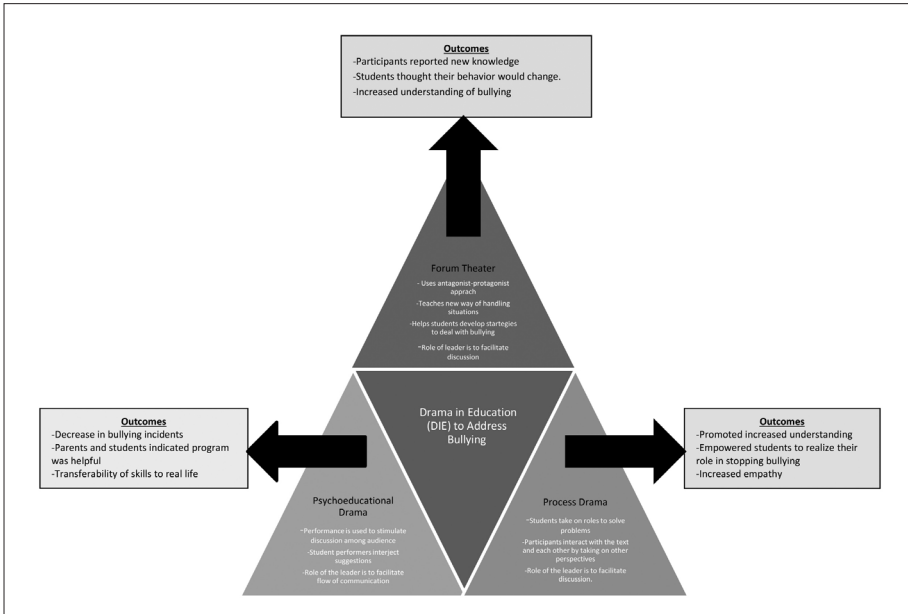
Several different DIE approaches including process drama (Baer & Glasgow, 2008; Joronen, Håkämies & Åstedt-Kurki, 2011), psychoeducational drama (Beale, 2001; O'Toole & Burton, 2005) and forum theater (Fredland, 2010; Gourd & Gourd, 2011; Johnson, 2011) have been utilized in order to achieve increased understanding (Gourd & Gourd, 2011), increased empathy (Joronen, Håkämies & Åstedt-Kurki, 2011), new knowledge (Fredland, 2010) and a reduction in bullying incidents (Beale, 2001). Additionally, it is encouraging to note that transferability was evident following interventions since students reported they had incorporated knowledge and skills gained through drama activities into real life situations (O'Toole & Burton, 2005).

## Knowledge Translation Plan

Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists (CTRSs) should consider drama activities as possible evidence-based interventions to address social functioning, peer relations, and conflict management in school age children. All these skills can be practiced during programs aimed at reducing bullying in this population. However, since drama activities can follow different formats, therapists should familiarize themselves with the specific dramatic approaches that have been linked to effective outcomes before developing programs and implementing sessions.

As depicted in Figure 1, process drama utilizes role play and problem solving activities that encourage the creation of imaginary, unscripted and spontaneous scenes. Participants are then asked to process the experience by making text-to-self and text-to-world connections (Baer & Glasgow, 2008). In psychoeducational drama programs, a dramatic performance is used to stimulate discussion around real-life situations (Beale, 2001), and forum theater uses an antagonist-protagonist approach to teach new ways of handling tough situations (Fredland, 2010).

Universal to all approaches is the emphasis on the group leader's role of facilitating discussion that focuses on content rather than performance. Specific techniques a CTRS might use include comparing and deconstructing scenes, pointing out specific aspects of different arguments, replaying scenes to view them from a different perspective, adapting the language, and highlighting assertive versus aggressive approaches (Fredland, 2010; Johnson, 2001).



**Figure 1.** Theater and Drama Interventions to Reduce Bullying in School-Aged Children

Given the recommendation that drama interventions be part of a larger anti-bullying curriculum or campaign, CTRSs should also look for ways to adopt a team approach and connect their ser-

vices with those provided by other professionals (e.g., educators, social workers and school psychologists). Parents can also be engaged to reinforce concepts at home (Attwood, 2004).

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