

# A Bag for the Journey: Dramatherapy with Adolescent Girls who are not Engaging with Others

Nicola McMeikan

## ABSTRACT

This is a research project that investigated dramatic group processes involving the use of containers (such as bags and suitcases) as dramatic starters to develop stories for therapeutic purposes with a group of adolescents who were identified as not engaging with others in a classroom setting. The purpose of the study was to see whether these processes could help the group to express themselves to others with more confidence in a group situation.

After six drama sessions, the student self-reports indicated an increase in aspects of their confidence in a group setting. It was observed that, amongst the students, aspects of expansion were demonstrated in the roles attempted and in the movements exhibited. Some students showed increasing confidence in the expression of their ideas within the dramatic structures. The preparation and performance of group scenes emerged as the most significant experience in terms of building confidence.

## INTRODUCTION

A group of seven adolescent female students participated in six drama sessions that worked through dramatic processes in a progression of embodiment, projection and role (Jennings, 1995). Each week the students selected bags from a selection available and used them to create characters. The variety of bags was intended to encourage experimentation with a range of roles, and thereby facilitate the development of self-awareness and fluency in social roles. These characters then interacted in scenes: first spontaneous scenes on a park bench and, later, prepared group scenes based on a given topic, such as a secret or gift. The group setting of the sessions offered the students a range of opportunities for paired and group interaction. Phenomenological methods, including questionnaires and participant observation, were used to gather information related to the impact of the dramatic processes on the students.

The aim was to encourage these students to create a forum to express themselves in alternative ways in the multi-dimensional language of drama. Early adolescents have developed the potential cognitive ability to express themselves in metaphor, something which offers them an indirect means of communicating their concerns (Saari, 1986). The concept of using containers, or bags, to facilitate the creation of a dramatic role was intended to be a springboard for the students into this metaphoric language. The bags formed a defined but varied category, and included frivolous and sturdy handbags, rucksacks, suitcases and a grimy old sack. In the potentially frightening context of a drama session, these props could be reintroduced each week as a form of familiar and safe routine, whilst still holding possibilities for novelty, experimentation and reinterpretation. The students could hide within the identities or stories suggested by the bags and thus show