INTRODUCTION
ENACT History
Since 1987, ENACT has been recognized as a specialized New York City arts in education organization that excels in working with troubled youth. Reaching thousands of students each year, ENACT delivers customized workshops that employ theater and drama therapy techniques to teach vital social emotional skills to students, parents and teachers. Now in its twentieth year, ENACT has expanded its programming to offer several long-term models that respond to changing school needs. At the heart of the ENACT program lies its signature methodology. In the ENACT model, two highly-trained teaching artists partner to run three forty-five minute theater-based classroom workshops each week for a period ranging from ten weeks (short-term work) to forty weeks (full-year program). ENACT ensures that each teaching artist—with his/her particular style and skill set—is appropriately matched with each participating school—with its own distinctive culture and environment.

Over the years, ENACT has grown to serve all five New York City boroughs, working mostly in high-risk classrooms with the neediest students. With years of experience using creative drama and drama therapy techniques with students of all ages and abilities, we have come to believe that many of the children we serve in the New York City school system suffer from unrecognized trauma resulting from the effects of poverty and dangerous and unstable living environments. ENACT’s partnering schools are located in neighborhoods in which poverty has contributed to high rates of violence, crime, and drug and alcohol abuse. Seventy-five percent of ENACT’s current work is in the South Bronx, a region in which more than 40% of the residents live below the poverty line. Almost all of ENACT’s remaining work takes place in high poverty areas in Queens and
Brooklyn. To date, ENACT has a cadre of 50 teaching artists trained in the ENACT method and has served over 100,000 students in the neediest neighborhoods of New York.

Changing perspectives on the arts and drama therapy in the school system and how they are funded have played a direct role in ENACT’s development. For years, given ENACT’s theater-based approach and use of drama therapists and professional actors as actor instructors, city arts funding proved the best source of revenue for a program that integrated theater arts and drama therapy techniques in the classroom. ENACT, like other school arts-related programs, depended on city budgets that annually determined the scope of arts programming in the schools. As is often the case, the arts were viewed as enhancements to core curricula and funding was tenuous from year to year.

Over the years, ENACT staff have seen the climate in our schools change. Students, especially those labeled with “behavior problems,” were so responsive to ENACT’s methods that teachers increasingly requested ENACT to help them learn creative approaches to managing chaotic classroom behavior. To accommodate requests from both teachers and students, school principals had to seek innovative ways to secure additional funding for ENACT programs. In addition, funding for arts programs began to see a rapid decline in the 1990s, while educators and policy makers were beginning to recognize the link between mental health services and learning. Before drama therapy was a recognized or credentialed field, however, ENACT had to work hard to define itself in a changing climate and had to negotiate both traditional arts and traditional mental health funding. Furthermore, funds coming from the state level were disseminated to more traditional social service agencies with licensed therapists.

The World Trade Center tragedy of September 11, 2001 had an important impact on all of this. Many students who had been affected by the disaster were not requesting counseling services. They did not want the “stigma” of being in therapy. In response, schools were worried and looking for alternative approaches that would be less
stigmatizing. By this time, ENACT had earned a reputation for reaching and empowering “troubled students.” Many in New York City schools had come to see us as the “resource of choice.” As a result, more and more teachers were requesting ENACT programs in their classrooms to work with students to address their feelings of shock and fear. New York City’s Central Board of Education responded by awarding ENACT a contract to specifically address prevention and intervention in response to the effects of the disaster on students. The tragedy had given many in the school system a new understanding of trauma and its documented effects on student functioning.

After the September 11\textsuperscript{th} tragedy, ENACT continued to be the only organization in the New York City school system that used the arts and drama therapy techniques to teach social-emotional skills. The agency was honored by the American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA) for its “creative approach to group counseling.” Foundations that had funded more traditional arts or mental health programs in the past were now looking at ENACT and drama therapy with new eyes. More and more opportunities finally were becoming available to work in schools, aided by New York State’s decision to certify creative arts therapists and grant licenses to organizations in the field.

Around this time, ENACT received a grant from the Ford Foundation to evaluate its best practices. ENACT had grown rapidly in a few years, and there was a need to closely evaluate programs and monitor quality. Staff also needed ongoing training and support. ENACT responded by providing staff with enhanced supervision and a series of specialized trainings. The grant from the Ford Foundation, which saw our program as a unique addition to the arts education field, helped ENACT to hire specialists in education, psychology and the arts. Together, they took a focused look at ENACT’s best practices for working with troubled youth, as we continued to adjust and improve classroom climate. At about the same time, the United Way of New York was seeking to fund programs that were successful in preventing school drop-out in the city’s highest risk schools. They awarded ENACT a multi-year contract to address this growing issue. In addition, ENACT responded to the
changing needs of the school system by expanding its program design to include individual and small group work. These new programs were facilitated by social workers and/or drama therapists. We also developed another integral component of ENACT: developing original plays that explored current social issues and brought professional theater performances with ENACT’s professional actors to the schools. This component of our programming expanded to include a repertory of plays for elementary, middle and high school students that were presented in school auditoriums. On occasion, performances were also for the broader public in an effort to increase community awareness around major issues, such as the effects of September 11th on students.

ENACT’s twenty-year evolution has coincided with both the growing needs of New York City public schools and the emergence of the field of drama therapy. Recent breakthroughs in the field of social-emotional education, spearheaded by Daniel Goleman, have been instrumental in increasing awareness of the important link between social-emotional functioning and academic achievement. In fact, a bill recommending the inclusion of social-emotional education in the New York State school curriculum was signed by former New York State Governor Pataki in January 2007. Social-emotional education seems to share quite a few goals with drama therapy, such as building self-awareness, developing social awareness and relationship skills, improving self-management, fostering responsible decision-making skills, developing the capacity for empathy and effecting behavior change. We are grateful that the New York City school system has become increasingly aware of the mental health needs of all students, including inner-city youth—a group that we believe has long suffered from unrecognized trauma.

ENACT has always held true to its mission to address the needs of struggling students by engaging them at their own level of development within the school environment. Drama therapy and the theater’s powerful tools engage students in a process of emotional integration, which is especially important for the students we serve. Today, ENACT continues its work in poor urban neighborhoods with high rates of crime, drug and alcohol
abuse. In these environments, we can reach students who may never otherwise have the opportunity to access much-needed services.

THEORY AND PRINCIPLES

The ENACT Method Draws from a Cross-Disciplinary Approach

When ENACT began teaching in the New York City School system, we were asked to work in special education classes within a regular school setting. The classes were small and contained, and were run by both a teacher and an assistant teacher or “paraprofessional.” This setting proved to be quite conducive to drama therapy work, because it already was a supportive and contained environment. We began working with students labeled “developmentally delayed,” with difficulties ranging from autism to mild retardation. Additionally, some students were severely physically and emotionally challenged. Working consistently with these young people, we had the opportunity to learn how to connect with them and endeavored to respond to their needs in an authentic way. As a result, the students began to guide us, through their responses, showing us the level at which they could learn and we should teach. To this day, we are thankful for their guidance. Our work with these students became the basis for the founding principles on which much of ENACT’s work is based.

It was through this experience that we at ENACT learned about and began to implement a “developmental approach” to teaching. As we worked to “join” students (work with them at their emotional and physical level of development), to connect authentically with their ongoing needs, and to move at a pace that was developmentally appropriate for them, we began to see profound improvements in social and emotional functioning. Our experience with these students also made clear the importance of creating a “therapeutic alliance.” As time went on, the Enact approach that we developed included creative applications of joining and working with every student at their level of development—in terms of age and functioning. Today, ENACT staff are trained in this methodology, and they continue to utilize and teach these concepts and practices as necessary foundations for facilitating growth and change with any population.
Joining: The Discovery of Theater as a Powerful Means of Connection

Before we could thoughtfully teach our methodology to others, including classroom teachers anxious to reach their students, we felt the need to explore more closely why it was that students were responding so quickly to our work in such a meaningful way. We had already identified and named some key concepts—such as working developmentally, joining, and forming a safe space or what we call the “creative container.” However, we needed more analysis of our work. Through this examination, we found that the importance of joining and empathy seemed to underpin much of our particular application of theater games and role playing techniques.

Empathy has been described as “the capacity to think and feel oneself into the inner life of another person” (Kohut, 1984). In our work at ENACT, the drama therapist/actor-instructor must be open and receptive to the thoughts, feelings, and needs of the client/student in order to create scenarios and characters that reflect the client’s/student’s feelings and experiences. In much of our work, the drama therapist and actor-instructor becomes a vessel that both holds and reflects back students’ feelings in the characters they portray in the scene work. As a crucial element of the therapeutic alliance, empathy validates the students’ experiences and forges a connection. We found this empathetic connection was an essential element in our work. In fact, understanding the importance of this connection led us to a discovery of one of our key dramatic role play techniques, which we call “externalizing the unspoken” and which we have used with individuals of various ages and abilities, both in verbal to non-verbal ways. By bringing to surface unspoken thoughts and feelings in a distanced creative or metaphoric way, or “letting the cat out of the bag” so to speak, clients feel seen and heard and ultimately safe enough to speak (if they can) about an experience, because the group leader has already revealed it in the scene work in a non-judgmental way. In our experience, this approach has had a profound impact while working with characteristically “unreachable,” non-verbal autistic children, as seen in the Moon Man example below.
Working with Autistic Children: A Visit to the Moon Man

A group of about 12 severely autistic, non-verbal children were wandering around the classroom when the ENACT drama therapist and actor-instructor entered their classroom. The children did not seem disturbed by our presence, because they continued wandering around the room, spinning in circles and playing with toys in cognitively disconnected ways. Despite their teacher’s efforts to get their attention, they continued what they were doing. Finally, the three of us, the teacher and ENACT staff, were able to guide the students into a circle by having them hold hands to keep them from wandering away. We started the session by moving together. Some children made little sounds, others just swayed back and forth. We moved together in the circle, round and round in slow motion, and did various other simple exercises and techniques, using sound and movement, to assess the kids’ level of functioning and to see how we might connect with them.

We did connect to some extent, but we wanted to connect in a deeper way. We sensed the feelings of isolation that these children seemed to be experiencing, and we wanted to “join” them, to let them know that we understood. After the class, we brainstormed about the best way to do this, and we came up with the following day’s main activity. We were going on a journey to outer space to visit a man in the moon who was very sad, because no one understood him and he could not speak anyone else’s language. One instructor was the pilot of the rocket ship. The other took up the rear, and the teacher stood in the middle, helping the kids get on the ship. We stopped and started several times, imitating the rocking back and forth as the ship slowed and accelerated. The children loved the movement. Once we reached our destination, we journeyed out of the spaceship and onto the moon, moving in slow motion as we looked for the moon man.

Suddenly, we heard sounds coming from behind a large rock (the desk). It was the moon man (the ENACT actor-instructor hidden under a flowing, purple piece of material). He was making soft longing sounds. We asked the students if they heard it, and told them that the moon man was very shy and that they would have to
be gentle with him. The moon man cautiously came around the “rock” and continued to make calling sounds. Then we asked one of the more outgoing students if he wanted to come up and greet the man in the moon.

Excited, the student came forward and gently touched the moon man, who jumped back in fear. The student seemed very concerned for the creature. Knowing that this child could make sounds, we suggested that if he repeated back what the moon man said, the moon man might feel more comfortable. The moon man said “aah,” and the student repeated the sound. The moon man laughed and jumped up and down. The student was very happy. Another student then came forward and greeted the moon man. We were very surprised when he presented the moon man with an imaginary gift, and the moon man jumped with joy. The student smiled. One by one on their own, other students stepped forward. They each presented the moon man with a gift and the moon man responded with joy. Finally, we encouraged another student who made sounds to repeat the sounds of the moon man and see what would happen. The moon man said “oooh”; the student said “OOO.” The moon man said “hello”; the student (who normally only makes sounds and does not speak) said “hello.” The moon man jumped for joy. We then explained to the students that the moon man was happy, because someone on earth was communicating with him. It was a very moving experience. Soon after, it was time to return to earth. The moon man said good-bye, and, in unison, all of the students said good-bye. The moon man disappeared behind “rock,” and we journeyed back to earth.

Although, as a class, we could not really talk about what had just happened, there seemed to be an authentic understanding and a true connection in the room. The ENACT actor-instructor came out from behind the desk and removed the material, showing the students that the moon man was not real. They each got under the purple cover and made believe they were the man in the moon, moving and making sounds.

Over the years, we have had many experiences like these, which have led us to conclude that students respond to ENACT work in a meaningful way, because our drama therapists and actor-instructors use their empathy and
artistry to gauge what the children are feeling and to reflect those feelings back to students on an emotional level—this, of course, is an essential skill for any instructor. In the moon man exercise, we externalized the students’ feelings of isolation through the metaphor of the lonely moon man, with whom they then communicated. This joining technique helped them feel more validated and understood which propelled their willingness to learn to communicate.

Role Playing as an Opportunity to Connect

Much of ENACT’s work takes place in inner-city schools with middle school students who have been labeled as having various behavior problems, ranging from “acting out” to withdrawal. Normal adolescence is a period of rapid change and turmoil. Since individuals at this stage in life generally have not mastered how to express their inner turmoil, they often display defensive behaviors that can be destructive and counterproductive. This often results in conflict. While many of the artful defenses these students have developed serve to block out strong, unwanted feelings (such as intense anger and fear), they also keep students locked into unhealthy behavioral patterns. Over the years, we have seen time and again how these defensive “masks” and “roles” are adopted and even habituated when students feel the need to guard against particularly distressful emotions, such as shame, embarrassment and grief.

The inner-city students ENACT works with are exposed to higher than average levels of crime and report that they are exposed to violence on a regular basis. Some are in gangs. They often live in housing projects, foster homes and/or neglectful living conditions. In our opinion, these young people are victims of their circumstances. Fighting against both internal and external obstacles on a regular basis can cause anyone to become highly anxious or depressed. A combination of age, culture, socioeconomic circumstances and failure in school tend to cause students to display behaviors that are inappropriate. This occurs not only because students have not mastered a positive means to express their inner turmoil, but also because their environmental conditions are not conducive to healthy and adaptive functioning. These students get labeled “at risk” and often
label themselves as “bad students.” They anticipate the typecasting or labeling that routinely occurs within the school system. Knowing they are bound for a label, students will be the first ones to say, “We are the bad ones, right?” They begin to see their “bad” behavior as who they are, as who their peers are. These negative, narrowly-defined labels are “roles” that, from a drama therapy perspective, could benefit from rethinking.

Drama Therapist, Robert Landy’s Role Method offers clients the opportunity to expand, revise and seek balance within their role system. It is a very useful approach to draw from in helping adolescents see that they can both get stuck and expand the repertoire of roles they play in their lives. ENACT’s role play methods gives students the chance to both observe and revise their limited self-perceptions in a protective, shame-free environment. In ENACT scene work, for example, students have the chance to see themselves in a safe way, as the actors portray students in non-judgmental ways. In this way, ENACT instructors guide students, helping them to discover more effective ways to manage troubling feelings.

In chaotic classrooms that do not have adequate support systems in place, well-meaning teachers often contribute to the escalation of “bad” student behavior. Teachers “throw salt in students’ wounds” by punishing them for acting out, while at the same time not helping them learn new coping skills. These types of teacher-student confrontations often and unfortunately shame students in front of their peer’s—ironically, it is students’ desire not to feel shame that precipitates acting out in the first place. Because students may not have the emotional tools to understand and or regulate their behavior, they typically rely on the defensive behavior they know for protection. ENACT has always been interested in reading adolescent behavior as a “protective role” and an indicator of the level of distress a student may be experiencing. In fact we see these “roles” as opportunities to connect with and gain access to our students by portraying these behaviors non-judgmentally in our scene work. In this way, we use theater as an agent for change that helps students access their creativity and

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1 Landy, Drama Therapy: Concepts. Theories and Practices 1994
transform their lives. When working with a group of students for a long period of time, we often create culminating performances, an empowering process that redirects and transforms student behavior.

Our three-year research/evaluation grant from the Ford Foundation allowed us to study our best practices and confirm these beliefs. Experts in child psychology and movement therapy, cultural specialists and theater artists worked together to help define verbal and non-verbal indicators of emotional distress and all agreed on one thing: the observable behavior some students exhibit such as “acting out” and withdrawal are most likely more serious indicators of trauma, such as dissociation or the fight/flight response, which are most effectively addressed in a safe, non-threatening environment. The role play and safe space we create in our work were studied and seen as conducive to behavior change brought about by the combination of artistic and therapeutic means.

A Case for Reading Behavior as an Indication of Trauma

According to research by child trauma experts at Stamford University, “as many as one-third of children living our country’s violent urban neighborhoods have PTSD… Children who survive urban warfare suffer from PTSD, too. The violence, layers of it overlapping year after year, can eventually take up residence in the children’s minds. Like combat veterans, they develop post traumatic stress disorder, the soldier’s sickness” 2(Tucker, 2007). The 2004 Journal of Traumatic Stress documents a study of delinquent adolescents that demonstrated medical indicators of PTSD. The study examined the relationship of dissociative symptoms, which resulted from abuse and neglect, to heart rate, which appears to be an important indicator of reactions to traumatic life events.3 Peter Levine, a highly respected somatic trauma expert and author of the book Waking the Tiger (Levine, 1997) gives examples of life events that without proper treatment result in traumatic symptoms including: the loss of a parent or close family member, physical injuries, sexual, physical and

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3 Ibid.
emotional abuse, including abandonment or even witnessing violence. Unfortunately these are common events for many of the students with whom we work.

Levine’s theories show how the body not only internalizes trauma, but tries to release it. This may explain some of the behaviors students exhibit, including acting out. Levine, who based his findings on years of research on animals’ reactions to trauma, shows that symptoms of trauma stem from a residue of energy that has become frozen and not been resolved or discharged. He explains the confusion that accompanies human response to trauma and sets the stage for what he calls the “Medusa Complex- the drama called trauma”\textsuperscript{4}, which in essence is a locked, frozen state in response to trauma. Levine states, “We may literally freeze in fear, which will result in the creation of traumatic symptoms.” (Levine, 1997) This kind of disassociation is commonly seen in students who seem to “space out” or appear quite disconnected from the classroom experience. On the other hand, it is interesting that Levine describes acting out behavior as an unsuccessful attempt to discharge intense energy and defend against a perceived threat.

Levine’s work and that of other somatic therapists, as well as multicultural experts, can help us interpret the behavior of students who act impulsively and with exaggerated physical reactions to what seem like the smallest incidents or events. Clearly, those who work with students and who may not have experience with trauma need better ways to observe, note and respond to behavior that is itself a response to trauma. At ENACT, we often witness in our students a compulsive desire to replay traumatic events. We see students choose to play out the same roles and violent situations, over and over again, whenever they have an opportunity to create original scene work. For example, they may want to replay the “drive by shooting” in an attempt to negotiate the trauma.

As drama therapists, we must exercise caution in these instances so as to avoid the possibility of retraumatization. By redirecting student energy, offering alternative roles, and empowering students with new

\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
choices that help them release their “frozen” energy, students begin to discharge energy in healthier ways. Studying physical behavior as an expression of internal forces reinforces our belief that the defensive armor (body language) that students use to form their own protection can actually be used to help them develop a conscious awareness of their feelings, which eventually leads to opportunities for transformation. While students’ body armor protects them from being overwhelmed by strong feelings, it also blocks healthy functioning, which includes the positive expression of their feelings.

The Body as an Emotional Storehouse

When the path to awareness is blocked, individuals are less likely to experience healthy social and emotional functioning. When individuals are not in touch with their feelings, they are less likely to be spontaneous in movement and action. In fact, sometimes physical ailments develop in response to repressed feelings. We have heard many times students say they “don’t feel well” or put their heads on their desks and complain of stomach disorders. Ultimately, these students habituate these locked physical patterns and become cut off from their own bodily experience.

Observing body language and understanding its origins is very useful in building self-awareness. At ENACT, our actor-instructors, in the characters they play during scene work, use their own body to portray the masked feelings or defended body armor of our students. We recognize the behavioral problems as signs of unresolved stress and trauma and use theater arts and drama therapy approaches as opportunities to portray the student experience so that we may help them connect to their feelings as a first step of therapeutic intervention.
Resistance

Resistance has been described as “the organized attempt at opposing the processes of becoming aware of the emergence of unconscious forces” (Emunah, 1994). During our work with students, we have observed time and again that resistance is common, especially during adolescence, a very active developmental period. Adolescents will go to extreme measures to protect themselves from shame and other intense feelings.

Any therapeutic or teaching process aimed at increasing self-awareness can trigger heightened resistance. Resistance in adolescents can manifest in any number of ways, including a refusal to participate, highly defensive body language, irritability, and sabotage. In fact, ENACT drama therapists and actor-instructors monitor student resistance to measure how well they are “joining” the group. ENACT workshop leaders are trained to be aware of resistance and student affect level as a way of measuring their effectiveness in aligning with students. ENACT activities are designed to assess and are adjusted according to the readiness and responsiveness of a group. In our view, students’ responses to an activity are a reflection of their ability to tolerate both the emotional and intellectual challenge of the exercise. It is very important not to infantilize group members in any way by choosing an activity that is not appropriate to their intellectual or emotional developmental level or their culture.

Overcoming Resistance: The Story of Tina

When ENACT’s creator, Diana Feldman, first met Tina, she would not say hello or acknowledge her at all. She appeared quite angry and distrustful as demonstrated by her lack of eye contact, vocal tone and disregard of Diana’s presence. Tina was in a special education class as a result of her behavior, but she clearly appeared quite intelligent. She was very resistant to learning and acted out often. In addition, English was her second language, and this added to her frustration. Each day, when Diana entered the room, she said hello, and Tina made a point of turning her back to her and ignoring her. Her body language was her armor. Her arms were always crossed, and her lips clenched tight. “Don’t mess with me” was what she exuded. Diana kept her
distance, respecting Tina’s boundaries. However, every day she invited Tina to participate. Every day, Tina declined.

One day during the scene work, Diana created a character that was a student who was extremely defensive when her teacher asked her to come up and write on the blackboard. This behavior reflected many students in the class, so as not to put Tina on the spot. With exaggerated body language (crossed arms and shutdown emotions), the character refused to do what the teacher asked, saying, “Leave me alone!” Following the scene, Diana asked the class if they knew why this character was acting this way on the outside and how she was feeling on the inside. Tina’s arm went up. She said that the character did not trust anybody, that she had the right to be that way, that the teacher was embarrassing her and that the teacher did not know what the student had been through. Diana agreed with Tina, validating her feelings.

Over the next few days, Diana worked with students on many scenes that explored the idea of trust. One day, Tina volunteered to be part of the scene work. She wanted to do a scene about living in a group home. She played the counselor that kept putting a young woman on the spot, asking her, in front of others, to clean up. In the discussion that followed, Tina revealed that she had been moved from group home to group home and was now back at her birth home taking care of her elderly father. She had come to the United States from another country and never really had a solid living situation. English was not her first language. As she talked about her situation, her body language became more open. Her defenses melted away as she was able to verbalize her feelings. That year ENACT performed one of their plays off-Broadway. We asked Tina if she would like the topic of group homes to be in the show, because we realized that it might heighten awareness for some audience members. We asked if we could use the scene that she created. Tina was delighted. After the play, during our group discussion with the audience, Tina stood up and talked about the difficulties of caring for an elderly parent and living in a group home to an audience of 200 adults. She had found her voice. At the end of the year, Tina said to Diana, “Thank you, this was the best thing that ever happened in my life!” That was unexpected.
Distance, Connection and Catharsis

Recognizing the importance of ensuring that students feel safe and protected, the ENACT method asks instructors to make careful judgment calls on the degree of distance they use in scene work to safely address students’ core feelings. Instructors assess the distance that is required based on the amount of trauma associated with a given situation. Students confirm that the right amount of space for safe emotional connection has been achieved when they begin to feel comfortable naming and talking about their feelings.

Our objective at ENACT is to create and perform scenes for students that will give them the chance to see their feelings and behaviors without judgment or shame and without overwhelming them. In fact, instructors use student resistance as a way to gauge the effectiveness of the distance they employ in a scene. In scene work, we attempt to “join” students as we validate their often hidden feelings. By carefully bringing these feelings to the surface, we create an opportunity for transformation.

ENACT’s drama therapists and actor-instructors work together carefully to construct scenes that are inspired by student experiences, but are also removed from the particulars of any given situation, so as not to risk putting any student on the spot. In the composition of a scene, the drama therapist and actor-instructors carefully examine a given situation to find the “aesthetic distance” that is required to effectively engage students. According to acclaimed sociologist T. J. Scheff, “At aesthetic distance, there is a balance of thought and feeling. There is a deep emotional resonance, but also a feeling of control” (Scheff, 1979). On many occasions we have seen how a safe connection creates a cathartic release. According to somatic body workers, this indicates a release of frozen or blocked energy.

A group that has a similar approach to ENACT is STOP-GAP, a California-based nonprofit theater that uses professional actors and drama therapists to deliver their programs. While their work takes place in more clinical
settings, they make use of the art of theater to help clients ultimately become more self aware. Both ENACT and STOP-GAP recognize that actors (with proper training) can be used as a safe vehicle to stimulate clients’ feelings. What STOP-GAP calls “empathic embodiment” is similar to the technique used by ENACT actors who take on the feelings of the group or client in order to stimulate self-awareness and discussion. ENACT’s specific approach to distancing involves artists creating a specialized kind of parallel scenario to help youth unearth core feelings without exposing or shaming anyone. In a similar way, STOP-GAP never plays out a client’s direct story. Instead, STOP-GAP uses their “Make the Menu” technique to lay out the scene. Both groups make use of the collective group experience to help stimulate self-awareness and offer tools to manage feelings.

A School Shooting

A middle school Principal asked ENACT to visit her school to help address an event that had occurred a few days earlier: a shooting of a neighborhood child in the school parking lot. The students were confused, because it appeared that some parents were telling their children not to come to school without protection, while the school instructed the students not to carry weapons and to report any students who were. Moreover, the students were shutting down and incommunicative when teachers and counselors attempted to talk about the incident.

When drama therapist, Diana Feldman entered the school to meet with the Principal and find out more about the situation, she was told that the Principal was in the auditorium addressing angry parents who were threatening to bring in baseball bats to protect their children, unless the school took more action. Diana met the Principal in the hallway as she was striding towards the auditorium. “The kids are all clammed up,” the Principal said, “they will not discuss the event and many are not showing up for school. Their parents are very angry and scared about the incident.” The Principal had no time to discuss it further; she continued to run down the hall back to the auditorium.
The bell soon rang, and Diana met her first group of students. They were very quiet when she entered the classroom. Diana had to find a way to connect with them, so she explained that she ran a theater group that worked in schools. With her actor-instructor partner, she demonstrated a scene and some theater games, and she asked the students if they would be interested in participating. She made sure to tell them it was optional. She spent this first day simply doing theater games and scene work, explaining that actors need to be in touch with their feelings and see them as a part of their instrument.

The session went well, and Diana knew that the next day she would do a scene that would open up discussion. She needed to construct a scene that would give the students the right distance to feel safe enough to discuss their feelings about the shooting without feeling overwhelmed. That evening, she consulted with a child psychologist to help her hone in on a “proper diagnosis,” so that she could frame the scene around the students’ core feelings. Based on the knowledge that students were receiving mixed messages from parents and teachers, the therapist and Diana concluded that mixed messages were causing a kind of “cognitive dissonance” or a conflicted emotional state that was holding students hostage and keeping them from moving forward. In response to the conflicting messages from teachers and their own parents, students were clamming up. A very skilled and long-time ENACT actor-instructor came up with a scene that spoke to this cognitive dissonance.

The scene would take place at a local Gap store where a student (the actor-instructor) was employed and up for a promotion and a raise. On the particular day that the scene was taking place, the employee was asked by his manager to move some damaged sweaters to a rack at the back of the store. As the employee was following his manager’s directions, a regional supervisor entered the store and gave him a different directive, contradicting the store manager’s order.

In presenting this scene, Diana froze the scene at the moment when the employee was weighing his options. In an inner monologue, the employee talked about his confusion, about not knowing what to do or which manager he should listen to. The students were fully engaged in the scene. In a process of careful facilitation, Diana
asked the students to describe what was going on in the scene and whether or not they felt it was realistic. After agreeing that the scene was indeed realistic, Diana guided the students to talk about situations where they got mixed messages. She asked them how the character was feeling, and they said, “confused.” She asked them what they do when they are confused and feel at odds with different messages.

At this point, they began to describe the recent shooting. The conversation about their parents’ and teachers’ reactions was completely without judgment. The students talked about the pressure they felt in going to school unprotected or even showing up for class at all. They spoke about the pressure they felt in being asked to report anything that seemed suspicious, as if this was the only thing that the teachers wanted them to discuss. Diana asked the students what people do when they don’t know who to listen to or which way to turn. “I don’t speak,” one student said, “when my teachers ask me my opinion, I stay quiet.” This comment opened up the discussion for the rest of the group. They talked about the conflicting messages they were getting from their family and the school, as well as about peer alliances.

As they discussed the incident, one student explained that she gets stomach aches when she is really upset. “The cat was out of the bag” and discussion about how to handle contradictory and “mixed up” feelings ensued. By the end of the facilitation, the students felt validated and the group was able to identify some positive coping strategies, such as naming their feelings of confusion and speaking to a third party. Some students even volunteered to get direct counseling following the session.

ENACT METHOD AND TECHNIQUES

The Role of Actor Instructors and Drama Therapists

ENACT work in the classroom is facilitated by either a drama therapist and an actor-instructor or two actor instructors—a lead actor instructor and a supporting actor instructor—with specialized skill sets. Actor
instructors are trained in the ENACT method by drama therapists, and they have core skills that include: acting, directing, behavior management (including prevention and intervention techniques), group management, the developmental use of theater games, and scene work and facilitation skills. To be most effective, actor instructors must have strong improvisational acting skills, as well as knowledge of the school, neighborhood and cultural make-up of the group with which they are working. In fact, every effort is made when “casting” an ENACT residency to match the cultural background of the actor instructors with the school’s student population. In addition, ideally, actor instructors must be able to play the ages of the students with which they are working. Their versatility, including the ability to play a wide range of characters with a variety of affects, is crucial. Actor instructors must also possess the spontaneity needed to adjust activities on the spot in order to respond to students’ shifting needs and meet them at their level. This type of “meeting” is a first step in the joining process, which helps to preempt or ward off resistance from students.

Before scheduling each residency, ENACT staff conduct a teacher needs assessment, which gives the opportunity to assess the cultural make-up of each class, class dynamics, as well as any other pertinent issues or events that occurred at the school and in the neighborhood. This allows ENACT to select the best team of actor instructors for each residency. At times, if a given set of students is struggling with a particularly challenging situation (such as the school shooting discussed above), ENACT will staff a residency with an actor instructor and a licensed drama therapist, instead of two actor instructors.

Cultural considerations play an important role in every residency. During sessions, ENACT drama therapists and actor instructors continually read students’ verbal, physical and emotional responses in an effort to gauge their level of safety and engagement. In order to effectively assess students’ responses, therapists and instructors must have an appropriate cultural lens through which to view the process. As part of ongoing training, ENACT drama therapists and actor instructors receive training from various professional advisors, including; drama
therapists, child psychologists, movement therapists, conflict resolution specialists and multi-cultural specialists, in order to become more familiar with their students’ cultures.

The ENACT Workshop

On the surface, ENACT’s work in the classroom resembles a typical New York City arts education residency that either teaches an art form or is used to enhance classroom curriculum. However, ENACT’s end goal is different. ENACT uses the art form of drama as a vehicle to help students become more self-aware and to learn better ways to manage their feelings. In the ENACT model, two highly trained ENACT actor-instructors, supervised by drama therapists, engage students in interactive in-class workshops. ENACT classroom residencies are often scheduled during the English Language Arts or Social Studies class periods. Some program design also includes “pull-out sessions,” where students who have been identified as at-risk (for example, those with high absenteeism, those who are chronically late and those living in foster homes) are pulled out of class for special sessions and/or after-school workshops. In addition, when needed to strengthen the mental health component of our program, ENACT offers a more comprehensive wrap-around model. This model places a full-time social worker or drama therapist at the school to offer support to both students and their families. This model has been so successful in addressing the high drop out rate in New York City schools that it was recently included in a New York City Council Bill.

The basic structure of ENACT work in the classroom is similar to that of many creative arts programs. Each session has a warm-up, a main activity, and closure. During the warm-up, we use theater games, metaphor, sound, and movement to introduce the social-emotional theme for the day, which usually grows out of prior assessment in the classroom. We use these exercises to bypass resistance and to help students see themselves and reconnect with their own body. After the warm-up, the main activity is a scene performed by the drama therapist-actor and actor-instructor that explores an issue that is relevant to the entire group. The intention of the scene is to promote self-awareness as a first step toward transformation. During this phase of the session, we
plant a core issue or feeling in a generalized, distanced context as a way of safely exposing it to students. A facilitated discussion and replay of the scene follows. This discussion period helps students become aware of their feelings so that they can ultimately learn positive tools for communication and expression. At the end, closure offers opportunities to use words and gestures to help students integrate the day’s work and what they learned into their bodies and minds. Sometimes, we play additional games to assess the impact of the day’s work and plan for the next lesson.

The Foundation of Protection: The ENACT Creative Container

Creating a sense of safety and support is an essential element of ENACT work and it permeates every aspect of what we do. This sense of safety is especially important for students who have experienced trauma. Since we do not work in a clinical setting, we take extraordinary measures to avoid overwhelming students and to create the best conditions for learning and healing to take place. Many of the school environments in which ENACT works are chaotic, with students banging on doors and running in and out of classrooms, constant interruptions over the school’s public announcement system, students being pulled out of class, and the like. As a result, it often takes time to establish a safe physical and emotional play space that allows for the deeper ENACT self-awareness work to take place.

We build the ENACT “Creative Container” to create a secure and trusting environment that reassures students and gives them the freedom to explore and take creative risks as they learn important social-emotional skills and become more self-aware. From an attachment theory perspective, our creative container offers a safe space that is available and responsive to students needs and that fosters a sense of emotional security.

In ENACT practice, we often work in a circle when possible, because this configuration gives us access to various built-in creative behavioral control elements. We also establish group agreements, which, out of respect for the classroom teacher, sometimes include already-established classroom rules. In some cases, ENACT
instructors will write contracts with the students that list group rules and consequences for breaking them—consequences for rule-breaking clearly are created in order to protect students, not punish them. ENACT instructors will also describe how to use creative directives, such as “freeze” and “focus”, which are terms used on movie sets as creative control techniques. All of these elements contribute to the development of a protected space that everyone in the classroom collaboratively creates. This collective effort proves effective as students become invested in following rules they co-created. These are all elements of the creative container, which includes the establishment of both personal and group responsibility and other ENACT core values, such as trust, compassion and non-judgment.

Just as we draw from the theater world—using professional actors, stage directives, and improvisation to engage students—we also use many concepts and practices from drama therapy to inform and guide our work in ensuring that students feel safe. We employ joining practices: reflecting students’ feelings and behaviors in scene work, which enables us to build trusting, non-judgmental relationships with students. In addition, the use of “distance” in scene work creates the space and safety students need in order to connect with the work at their own level of readiness. Finally, the developmental progression of in-class activities fosters class cohesion, which facilitates the assessment of students’ functioning. All of these drama therapy concepts—joining, distance and working developmentally—help us to create a bridge from the external workshop experience to students’ internal experiences.

The ENACT container is a carefully constructed safe space that provides the optimal conditions for expression and growth. In this safe space, students are supported and validated, while they engage in theatre games and scene work that teach essential social-emotional skills that foster self-awareness. The container is a fundamental principal in our work. It aligns us with our humanistic core values. Providing the students we serve with a safe,

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validating space is crucial, as many of them struggle with emotional and behavioral issues, as well as extremely stressful life circumstances.

A significant number of children that ENACT serves live in foster care settings or have a history of homelessness. In our Attendance Intervention and Drop out Prevention Program (AIDP), which is funded by the United Way of New York, the cohort of students selected for participation have either missed between 30 to 75 days of school or they are: in foster care, homeless or victims of abuse or neglect. Clearly, in the underserved schools we visit, many students struggle to cope with challenging home and community environments, not to mention often violent, chaotic, and overcrowded schools. Whenever we have long-term, comprehensive programs at any of these schools, we strive to include both a social worker and a drama therapist for the emotional safety of the students and the instructors.

Drama therapists and actor-instructors who use the ENACT model are trained to both assess and continually adjust activities in response to student needs. Ultimately, our goal is to help students internalize the concepts we present in our exercises and scene work and then develop their capacity for understanding interpersonal and intrapersonal social-emotional skills.

During the evaluation that was supported by the Ford Foundation, ENACT elected to use an action-based research model. During this process, evaluators observed ENACT practitioners in the process of creating the container. In this active way, evaluators examined and identified our best practices for safely engaging students in our work. The action research team ultimately defined the ENACT container as:

…a safe space that values the human spirit and provides emotional boundaries that neither overwhelm emotions nor distances them, a key factor that can impede the learning process. The container ultimately acts as a bridge, calling on the use of external experience to connect to internal experience, ultimately allowing for self knowledge. Students are regularly given
opportunities for self-reflection and an increase in self-awareness. In this environment, ENACT teaching artists deliver a social-emotional curriculum, whereby children are routinely given chances to express their emotions, make personal connections, learn new skills and modify their behavior.

This evaluation revealed the advantages of creating a safe container in a classroom: the development of group cohesion and trust, which create the optimal conditions for learning. A good container provides a nurturing environment that decreases resistance, creating an avenue for growth and learning.

Warm-Up Games

For adolescents, especially those with behavioral problems, the warm-up period is essential. It sets up the boundaries of the safe, creative space, which develops through the group dynamic. It creates community and introduces and enforces ENACT core values. In the warm-up phase of the workshop, we begin to form the creative container as we assess and address the group’s needs by carefully gauging their physical and verbal responses to activities.

The work of drama therapist David Read Johnson (1982), especially his developmental approach, was influential in the development of ENACT’s warm-up practice. In this phase of the workshop, warm-up begins with all students participating in unison, and then transitions to exploring interpersonal structures before any demands are placed on individual students. Group exercises involve all students simply imitating the leader. This is the safest way to foster group cohesion. Once instructors see that a group is able to complete an exercise in unison and without interruption, they know that they have created a contained environment and that the students are able to move to the next phase of theater games.

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In the next phase, interpersonal games offer students a chance to relate to each other. This step, which occurs near the beginning of the session, gives students the opportunity to build trust without risking feelings of shame. In addition, these exercises do not overwhelm students by placing demands on them that they cannot tolerate. Once instructors see that students can relate well with each other, without making fun of each other and hopefully supporting one another, instructors move to the final phase, which involves the most risk-taking. This is the individual phase, where one student is called upon to demonstrate something for the group.

Overall, the warm-up phase in the ENACT model, like phase one in Renee Emunah’s Integrative Five Phase Model, utilizes interactive techniques and exercises that engage students in a playful effort to build group trust. Throughout our work, ENACT instructors strive to give students a sense of accomplishment. They go to great lengths to guard against shame and ensure that students feel safe. This is the first step in helping students to become aware of their behaviors and change them. Theater games are a great way to instill this sense of accomplishments and safety, which minimizes resistance.

Drama Therapist, Renee Emunah explains that “when the beginning exercises allow group members to express actual feelings, defenses are minimized” (Emunah 1985: 73). Emunah suggests that “with this approach to drama therapy, clients have little to resist because they are allowed act as themselves; in fact they may even be encouraged to exaggerate their rebellious behavior” (Emunah 1985: 73). One of ENACT’s theater games highlights defensive behaviors in a similar manner. In this game, instructors ask students to exaggerate their body language by showing the biggest “attitude” they can. They then ask students to bring their bodies back to a centered, grounded and relaxed position. In this way, highly defended students can become aware of their body language in a playful and safe way. Other games uncover the motivations that underlay defensive behavior. For example, instructors ask students to create tableaus that symbolize resistance. They encourage students to build group and/or individual statues that represent a variety of emotions, such as anger, sadness or fear. Once
created, instructors work with students to find ways to uncover the underlying thoughts, needs and other feelings that precipitated the creation of these statues. Sometimes instructors ask students to interview members of the tableau, asking them what feelings their statues reflect. In this way, students learn to identify and name their own feelings, while becoming aware of similar and multidimensional feelings in others.

Instructors also use themselves as “reflective vessels,” meaning that they attempt to reflect what they perceive the group is feeling. They use metaphor, games, and reflective scene work. For example, if an instructor senses resistance in the room, he or she may employ a call-and-response exercise that externalizes the unspoken feelings of the group. In an exaggerated (distanced) way, the leader reflects what they are picking up from the room. The instructor might say, “I don’t want to be here, it is so nice outside.” The group repeats it. “I’m tired and hungry.” The group repeats it. “I can’t wait for lunch,” and so on. As the instructor senses the group’s resistance diminishing, he or she may say something like, “Well, I’m here anyway so I might as well have fun.” The group repeats it. This exercise reflects and validates participants’ feelings. Once these feelings are expressed and validated, students are ready to proceed with the activities.

Focusing on interpersonal skills, the next step in the process can be challenging, depending on the population. At ENACT, we often work with students who act out a great deal and have poor impulse control. Without structure, they often lose control and break all kinds of boundaries. The instructor must carefully design games that begin with a high level of structure and then “loosen the reins” as the group begins to feel safe and trust develops. In many cases, the initial introduction and the management of these games is the most challenging part for instructors, who must be persistent, strong, and patient. Without a sound container, it is almost impossible to move forward in any kind of productive way. With many groups, the instructor creates a contract with the students to elicit commitment and a sense responsibility in the work.
Since most adolescents fear looking or feeling infantile, especially in front of their peers, they often demonstrate a high degree of resistance. ENACT games are designed to safely redirect resistance. Once the instructor senses that resistance has dissipated, he or she can continue to build interpersonal skills, which include communicating, listening, cooperating, and resolving conflict. Adolescents must feel a sense of progress and accomplishment, and the instructor must artfully design games that both challenge students and allow for achievement. Conversely, games that are developmentally inappropriate may increase student resistance and spur increasingly problematic behavior.

In many ways, the ENACT warm-up is an opportunity to enlist students in building a new kind of community, one they might not have experienced at home or in school. It is a chance to create a supportive, responsible atmosphere that encourages creative expression and self-worth.

In summary, the ENACT warm-up:

- creates a safe, structured container
- addresses resistance
- facilitates the assessment of the group dynamic
- builds interpersonal and individual skills
- instill a sense of accomplishment in students

Main Activity: Scene Work

Specialized scene work and the facilitation that follows it are the main activities in ENACT workshops. These activities make up the longest segment of the workshop (30 minutes). Facilitation usually includes a short period of reflective role play and discussion, a consciousness-raising phase.
ENACT scene work is the springboard for creating opportunities for self-reflection and awareness, which are essential to the process of fostering conscious change in students. In essence, the therapist and co-leader perform “real-life” scenes that are relevant to the group. These scenes are designed to resonate with the group and their life experience. Since we work in city schools, scenes usually focus on issues and conflicts typically seen in urban schools, such as peer pressure, violence, and teacher-student interaction. We usually survey teachers ahead of time to discuss common concerns—in the classroom, the school and the community.

Distancing is important in the ENACT scene work, because it creates a level of emotional safety for the students. In fact, ENACT role play and scene work are designed with a series of protective layers that are peeled away gently, to eventually and carefully expose students’ core feelings. We begin by addressing student behavior, working from the external, the students’ body armor. As the session continues and students seem ready, we gradually begin to explore core feelings that are buried inside, under the armor. In scene work, by creating characters and situations to which students can relate, we attempt to “join” students. We validate their feelings, while increasing their awareness of their own behavior. Through scene work, we also give students a safe way to see that negative behaviors often lead to negative consequences. Students begin to see that type of behavior as self-defeating. Ultimately, students’ defensive layers are peeled away and replaced by a new form of protection: naming one’s feelings.

Through various creative methods, ENACT therapists and teaching artists carefully construct scenes that relate to student experience, but have enough aesthetic distance that they do not “call out” a given situation or put any particular student on the spot. During scene composition, drama therapists and teaching artists carefully approach a given scenario, balancing the need for distance with the need to engage students. If a scene does not have enough distance, we risk overwhelming students, flooding them with the very feelings they have been fighting to avoid. On the other hand, if the scene is too distanced, students will only relate to the scene from “the head up,” from a cognitive place, which will not affect them in a meaningful way. Student responses tend
to be very clear, and we use them to assess if scenes are on target. Once again, the body is a good indicator of connection.

Facilitation follows role play and scene work. This period gives instructors an opportunity to foster self-reflection in the students by asking questions that distance students from the scenes. In fact, instructors begin with questions that are more distanced and cognitive, like those that ask about particular facts and details in the scenes. The instructor then begins to ask less distanced and more affective questions in an attempt to bridge characters’ emotions with those of the students. In each phase, the instructor seeks to create a safe space for reflection. Reflection leads to self-awareness, which triggers a cathartic release of held energy in the body. Outwardly, student response may seem small—a gesture, laughter or even a tear. However, this cathartic release indicates that the instructor has successfully facilitated a student’s personal connection to the theme or core feeling in the scene. This level of self-awareness or connection is our central goal. At ENACT, we believe that removing a block to awareness creates a simultaneous shift or an opening up of perspective that makes true learning possible. As students are given the opportunity to name their feelings in the replay, the last phase of scene work, emotional integration can begin to occur and can be read in the body.

Designing the Scene: Choosing the Context

At ENACT, we develop scenes around core feelings germane to the group or specific issues that emerge from our work with each group of students. Scenes are brief—less than two minutes. In presenting them, the therapist enlists the class in creating a safe container by asking them to say “quiet on the set,” which makes them responsible for their own behavior. Carefully-designed characters in these scenes reflect inner behavior (needs and feelings) and outer behavior (physical defenses). Scene work is powerful, projecting behavior that is engaging, reflective, and affirming. Sara’s story, above, is a powerful example of this. Once again, creating the appropriate distance is key. Often this distance is achieved through characters and/or circumstances that “parallel” students’ experiences.
To ensure that the therapist is in step with the group, she or he may ask the students if the scene seemed realistic and, if not, to say why. This is how the therapist begins to create trust, dialogue, and self-reflection. If she or he handles the discussion well, students feel seen, heard, understood, and respected. This discussion is one of the first ways a therapist can meet students where they are, bringing about self-awareness as thoughts, images, and feeling emerge. ENACT reflective scene work is a creative way to help students move past resistance and work toward behavior change. By enacting familiar situations that feature resistant (aggressive or withdrawn) characters, participants can safely see themselves. Sometimes, they even laugh at their own behavior. In addition, as the teaching artist/therapist verbalizes a character’s underlying thoughts and feelings—saying things like “I am afraid I’ll get in trouble,” or “I am really angry”—underlying feelings are externalized, away from students’ defense mechanisms and in a safe, validating space. Students feel less fear and are able to see and hear what they were defending against.

In summary, ENACT scene work:

- evokes memories and emotions, while validating feelings
- gives students a way to see and explore behaviors
- safely externalizes core, unspoken feelings
- creates opportunities for self-reflection by allowing students to safely explore a situation without judgment
- highlights what students have in common
The Facilitation Phase

The main goal of the facilitation phase is to use cognition to bring about conscious awareness of behaviors, needs, and feelings. The therapist is often aware of one or two specific students he or she wants to reach, but works with the entire group as a way to create group consciousness. After presenting a scene, through question and answer, the therapist gently guides students from a cognitive connection with the scene to a more affective connection to the material and how it relates to the students. Moving back and forth from cognitive and affective connections creates safety by providing cognitive distance from affect. The therapist moves from generalized to more specific questions like, “Does this kind of thing happen? Why?” or “Can you give examples of a similar situation?” and so on. Students have the opportunity to stop and think and to connect with their own experiences and feelings at their own pace and level of readiness. By focusing on more than one student’s story and feelings, the leader avoids turning the session into work that would be appropriate in a clinical setting.

ENACT leaders do not work in a clinical setting where students would be given follow-up to ensure safety and closure. As such, once students make a personal connection to a character, workshop leaders are very careful to focus on the character’s experience, not the students’. The focus is always the character in the scene, encouraging students to come up with solutions and give the character suggestions. This engages students’ intellect, not just their feelings. Triggering cognition is very important for students who have behavior and impulse control problems. It encourages them to think before they act and helps them avoid a quick regression to self-defeating behaviors, which often happens when students get “lost in themselves” or overwhelmed with feelings. The therapist asks students to come up with ideas for the character in the scene, exploring how the character could have more effectively handled the given situation. The therapist then distills these ideas, reframes them, and writes them on the blackboard. This prepares students for the final phase: replaying the scene, using new information and tools.
In summary, the facilitation process:

- helps bring buried feelings to conscious awareness
- validates thoughts, feelings and needs
- helps the workshop leader identify indicators of connection
- creates opportunities for transforming behavior
- allows students to witness real-life scenarios in a supportive environment

The Replay

During replay, students integrate the information they have learned in scene work and facilitation into their bodies and minds. Replay also gives students a chance to be heard, thereby empowering them. Replay occurs after a brainstorming phase, during which students explore how the scene they previously witnessed and discussed could change. Then, one or more students usually volunteer to replace the actor and play the character that was the focus of the scene and discussion. The actor-student is set up to win, because the group discussed suggestions for a successful outcome to the scene in the facilitation phase. These suggestions were written on the board.

As students replay scenes, they practice naming feelings instead of choosing the less effective behavior, the “acting out,” demonstrated in the scene the first time it was played. Here, in this safe environment, students are able to practice making statements like “I feel angry” instead of hitting, for example. In some circumstances, when the therapist is aware that the student has poor impulse control, the therapist may stand behind the student as a coach, monitoring affect and control. The therapist may also decide to employ other drama therapy techniques, such as role-reversal or doubling, both of which offer an empowering individual intervention for the student who has replaced the focus character.
It is amazing to watch students’ behavioral transformations during replay. The most resistant and defensive students, when offered the opportunity to name their feelings, do so with bravery and pride. Often their extreme body language is replaced with an empowered verbal statement. The therapist also coaches students to develop other coping strategies, such as proper breathing and other relaxation techniques that will help students better express themselves, instead of acting out. By the end of the replay, the entire group responds with a round of applause, reinforcing the safe, supportive container that the leader is continually reinforcing.

In summary, the replay:

- allows students to integrate the social-emotional skills they have learned
- gives students an opportunity to learn how to express their feelings and needs
- transforms resistant behavior and creates a demonstrable, positive outcome
- brings student awareness to the mind/body connection
- gives students a new sense of empowerment

The Closure

Closure brings each session to an end, instilling in participants a sense of completion. Closure gathers the emotional energy in the room and ritualizes it through theater games or affirmations, inviting students to use their minds and bodies to “pull in” and ground what they have just learned. Closure reinforces the group bond and leaves students with a sense of accomplishment and excitement. The students prepare to leave the safe container, a space that we hope they will internalize over time.
Special Concerns for the Drama Therapist

The therapist may encounter several problems in a classroom setting. Just as the students want their peers to like them, the therapist may parallel that feeling and seek to be liked. While the therapist should be an ally to students, he or she is not their friend, nor should they pretend to be one. The nature of ENACT’s aesthetic projective work can blur students’ boundaries, so it is crucial for the leader to maintain his/her own boundaries.

In addition, as in any therapeutic situation, counter transference can also occur. Many of the students are skilled at pushing buttons, and the therapist must be careful not to personalize student reactions or be reactive.

In addition to the blurring of boundaries, the precariousness of adolescence that the therapist sees in students often can remind the therapist of his or her own past. The therapist was once that age. Simply being back in a classroom, with its sights, sounds, and especially its smells, can create flashbacks and trigger memories. The therapist may have been teased or picked on as a child, or he or she may have been a bully. These dynamics can be even more challenging when the therapist suspects that a student may have suffered abuse or neglect. This can trigger the therapist’s own fear and rage, driving him or her to want to be the student’s “savior.” The therapist must remember that he or she is only a guide, helping participants to help themselves by transforming blocks that get in the way of authentic expression. The therapist cannot always create miracles. However, in doing this work, we believe that we support the creative potential and the divinity that each person possesses.

In many ways, this also allows us to tap into our own potential.

As drama therapists, we are faced with many challenges. One such challenge lies in the settings in which we do our work. Sometimes we have to ask ourselves, “Do we want to work only in settings that are optimal for drama therapy, or do we want to bring the work where it is desperately needed despite the potential challenges inherent in doing so?” If we are willing to work in environments that are not entirely conducive to our work, like underserved public schools, what are the steps we must take in order to be effective?
At ENACT, we have found that although the public school system is not always the optimal setting for drama therapy work, it is an environment where the application of drama therapy methods and techniques has great impact. If we believe our students are survivors of unrecognized trauma, they do not deserve to be overlooked or punished for their symptoms. One of our challenges at ENACT, then, has been to continually modify our approaches and techniques to meet the growing needs and challenges of the school system at large.

ENACT instructors also face many of the challenges classroom teachers face on a daily basis: small classrooms, large student enrollment, and administrative issues, such as scheduling conflicts and a lack of administrative support. All of these factors create obstacles in our work, especially in building and maintaining a safe container. For example, large numbers of students and highly chaotic classrooms pose a challenge to the establishment of group safety and trust, while also restricting therapists in providing individual attention and focus. As a result, we often spend a great deal of time continually creating and maintaining a safe container within the classroom that is conducive to the work. We also spend time on classroom management and coping with behavior difficulties before we can help individual students deal with their deeper social and emotional concerns and needs. Furthermore, we must consider that the therapeutic solutions that seem appropriate in the classroom setting may not always be viable options in the daily lives of the culturally and economically diverse student populations we serve. While the public school system, with its focus on academics and its high degree of chaos, is certainly not always the best setting for drama therapy work, it is an excellent place to implement drama therapy techniques and to teach a variety of social and emotional skills.

The school system is changing rapidly in response to the growing needs of our children. The rise of school violence is our students crying out. Adolescents need attention in areas other than academics, and schools are desperately looking for solutions.
CASE STUDIES

Creating a Container for Safety and Growth: The Story of John

In 1991, we were working in a public high school’s special education department with at-risk youth known mostly for “acting out.” We were asked to work with a class once a week for a double period. This was to be a full-year program, and we felt that we needed to work toward a culminating project. We planned to develop a performance piece that expressed students’ needs and concerns.

The first day was not much of a challenge. Although students had a difficult time focusing their attention on the exercises for more than a few minutes, they seemed motivated by the process and excited about the goals. We explained that in order to meet the program’s goals we had to set up agreements. We had been told that there was a big problem with absenteeism, so we decided to include regular attendance as one of the criteria for participating in the final production that was to take place at an off-Broadway theater.

On Day two, John entered the room late, armed with a portable music player, a comb, and a lollipop in each hand. He was a very large teenager with an awkward walk and a focus that continually jumped from one thing to the next. Since John had missed the first day, he did not know about our class agreements. He continually interrupted and seemed hyperactive, unable to stand in one place for more than a minute. He was highly reactive. John had a way of upsetting everyone, including the facilitator.

As the year progressed, John continued to push the limits of the class. Each day was a struggle. John had a difficult time relating to other students and broke every rule set by the group. At the same time, he was a wonderful actor and had much to say. We wondered how we could get him to continue using his exceptional acting ability, while teaching him to contain his behavior at the same time. We spent a great deal of time redirecting and channeling his creative energy into the work, but he was still not willing to be a team player.
One day, when John was late, one of the students suggested we kick him out. I knew that John really liked the acting process and felt this would be unfair without discussing it with him first. Just then, John entered the room. We discussed our concerns with him and told him we wanted him to be in the show, but could not continue to work with him this way. “What’s going on?” we asked. John was honest. He explained that he had a really hard time controlling himself and that he would try to do so in the future. He pleaded with us to let him stay. We eventually drafted a contract and hung it on the wall. It included rules about not hitting, not cursing, being respectful, and being on time.

John agreed that after three warnings he, and anyone else who was disruptive, had to sit out of the acting circle until he was ready to participate productively with the group. If he continued to disrupt the class, he would be asked to leave. John did mess up a few times, but reigned in his own behavior and even stepped out of the circle before he was asked. He often apologized to the group and worked diligently on his lack of control. He was learning to take responsibility for his actions and began to see how these actions affected other people. He showed up every day and worked hard on improving his behavior. We continued to acknowledge him by reinforcing his positive attempts and successes. The work with John had a meaningful effect on the entire group as John's negative behavior was something to which each member could relate.

The night of the show, John stood backstage with the group. Everyone was holding hands. He had become an integral part of the group, and was saying a prayer for them all. For his work in the show, he got rounds of applause, and, in the audience discussion that followed, he was remarkable. One woman asked how everyone had worked so well as a group, and John volunteered a response, admitting, “At first it wasn't easy, but we all really tried.” The group laughed. He had come through with shining colors, empowered with new understanding about his behavior.
This case history demonstrates how a contained environment that allows for choice, expression, and creativity can help a student who is labeled “at-risk” gain personal awareness and social skills.

Empathy in the “At-Risk” Classroom: The Story of Sara

Sara was a 16-year-old girl who was placed in a school day-treatment center at a hospital in New York City because of severe emotional problems. ENACT staff were told she almost never spoke. In fact, even when she worked with her psychiatrist, Sara used puppets to communicate. Sara always came to our workshops, but sat in the back, not saying a word. She held her head down, her body was turned into itself, and her eyes shot back and forth very quickly. We rarely saw her smile, but when she did, her entire face lit up. Though she was invited to work with us just like any member of the group, she vehemently refused, although she took responsibility for her behavior by saying the agreed-upon word, “pass,” to indicate that she did not want to participate. She then sat quietly in her chair, cautiously observing the activities of others. Although we always invited Sara to participate, we respected her decision not to work. We assumed that when she was ready she would join us. Little by little, Sara participated in the group theater games and a smile broke out as she became a part of the group. She never participated in the scene work, though she watched intently.

One day, after speaking to the teacher about the students’ needs, we agreed to do a lesson that dealt with abuse. Several of the girls in the group were in abusive relationships. We carefully designed a distanced scene that allowed the group to connect at their own pace and level of safety. The scene was about two old friends, who were going out to the movies. It was a date they had been planning for a long time, because it had been repeatedly called off. Amy's boyfriend, Jimmy, was very possessive and demanded that she be with him every Saturday night. This Saturday, Amy decided to spend the night with her friend Lisa, because she needed to feel more independent from her boyfriend.
Just as the two friends were about to leave, the phone rang, and it was Jimmy. He insisted that Amy drop her plans immediately and go directly to his house. Once again Amy was swayed, afraid Jimmy would leave her. She began to run out of the house. Lisa became furious, saying, “Why do you drop our plans over him? You don’t care about me. He doesn’t respect you anyway—he hits you. Why do you keep doing this?” The quarrel escalated, and the friends could not find resolution. At this point, the scene was frozen.

During the next part of the lesson, we began a question-and-answer session aimed at guiding the students to focus on relationships and feelings of dependency. Although the scene initially was developed to focus on the friends’ relationship, the students quickly chose to tune in on the issue of abuse. As they made personal connections with the characters, they were anxious to name what was going on in the scene.

We stimulated further discussion by asking students what the friend who was being abandoned by Amy should do. Suddenly and unexpectedly, Sara murmured from her chair, “I know, it happened to me.” We could barely hear her. “What?” we asked. “I know,” she announced, in a much louder voice, “it happened to me!”

In order to maintain a safe aesthetic distance for Sara, we immediately refocused the discussion on the characters in the scene. I asked Sara if she wanted to come up and role-play the friend in the scene. She jumped up immediately and said to Amy in a voice that we had never heard from her, “Don’t ever let anyone hit you. Do whatever you have to do, run away, call a hotline, but don't ever let anyone hit you!” Sara’s entire body language had changed as she spoke in an empowered voice. Everyone in the group was surprised and moved, and applauded as Sara began to smile. Students came up and hugged her. Her teacher could not believe it, Sara seemed like a different person. The school counselor was notified and continued to work with Sara.
When doing scene work with cases like Sara’s, the therapist must carefully observe student behavior. When encountering resistance and acting out, the therapist must artfully employ distance as they reflect the scene back to the students, so that they can see themselves without judgment or feelings of shame.

CONCLUSION

Given the urgent need to reach especially resistant, often traumatized youth in inner-city schools—as well as the need to address alarming drop-out rates—schools are reaching out more and more for alternatives like ENACT. The ENACT model offers an engaging approach that compels students to reflect upon their lives and, drawing on their own creativity, learn vital social emotional skills. Through playful drama and drama therapy techniques, students find more productive ways to manage the feelings that often have derailed them in the past.

The ENACT creative container offers students a safe space to develop self-awareness and social awareness along with a host of other important life skills, including relationship and self-management skills. Developing scenes in the classroom that reflect students’ life experiences, the ENACT approach validates students’ feelings, fosters connections, and creates an invaluable, non-judgmental therapeutic alliance among teaching artists and students. Ultimately, facilitation helps students make connections between scenarios in the classroom and their own internal experiences. Within the safe space of the creative container, these connections are the foundation for reflection and growth.

Despite the challenges inherent in working in chaotic school environments that are not conducive to therapeutic growth, the ENACT method creatively externalizes and addresses the unspoken issues that plague students. With these opportunities, students who might otherwise languish have their rightful chance to develop increased self-awareness, growth and change.
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REFERENCES


FURTHER TRAINING

Visit our website at [www.enact.org](http://www.enact.org).