

Playing with identities and transforming shared realities: drama therapy workshops for adolescent immigrants and refugees

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In North America's large multiethnic cities, the percentage of foreign-born children is constantly rising. The profile of these migrants has changed considerably over the past few decades (Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 1995). While in the 1960s, most of them came from Europe, the majority of recently arrived children and adolescents, whether refugees or immigrants, now come from countries in which there is an internationally recognized form of organized violence, due either to a repressive régime responsible for major social tensions or to internal armed conflict.

The drama workshop program described here was designed to facilitate the adjustment of newly arrived teens. It was developed for high schools and follows up on creative expression workshops for the same population in elementary schools. The aim of the program is to make it easier for adolescents to adjust to their new environment through creative group work involving identity issues related to being migrants and members of cultural minorities. The program also seeks to improve intergroup relations in multiethnic schools.

Before describing the workshop program, we will first briefly discuss some of the features specific to migration in adolescence, and in particular, the importance of identity issues at this point in the life cycle. We will then review the drama therapy experiences that inspired our own program. Last, we will describe the various activities in the program, with a qualitative assessment of its effects on the adolescents who took part.

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Adolescence, culture, and immigration

Adolescence is a time of transition between childhood and adulthood, the timing and form of which vary from one culture to another. With the globalization of a certain type of youth culture, traditional forms of passage to maturity sometimes recognized through initiation rituals, or “*rites de passage*,” have become hybridized, incorporating expressions of a variety of origins as a reflection of the strengths and challenges of youth in a particular place and time (Diouf & Collignon, 2001). In this context, young people’s identities are constructed through an interplay of group (ethnic, national, racial, religious, gender, etc.) and personal identities. Two extremes – a lack of identity or sense of belonging, or a focus on a single identity that defines the person as radically different from others – may generate serious personal and group problems (Nathan, 1994). Between these two extremes, the interplay of identities establishes the bounds of the realm of the possible, opening many doors, in the case of dominant identities, and suggesting a range of resistance strategies, in the case of minority identities that are marginalized or excluded (Camino & Krulfeld, 1994; Rousseau, Said, Gagné, & Bibeau, 1998).

Migration, too, raises the identity question in a particularly acute way. That is one of the reasons why migration during adolescence is riskier than at other times of life (Beiser, Dion, Gotowiec, Hyman, & Vu, 1995). For migrant adolescents, the gap between home and the outside world is often widened by their adoption of host country norms, customs, and values, a process called acculturation (Berry, 1991). Depending upon age at migration, ethnic origin, family background, and context of resettlement, migrant youth will adopt different adaptation styles to help them bridge the gaps between the cultural, political, and economic spaces they inhabit (Suárez-Orozco, 1995).

Identity issues are not limited to first-generation migrants, but are passed on, somewhat transformed, from generation to generation. Although the culture gap between migrants and the host society is obvious and forces young people to negotiate between different ways of behaving at home and at school, in the street, or elsewhere, contextual aspects of the migration experience also directly influence the construction of identity: in particular, premigration losses (trauma due to organized violence), and the separation and reunification associated with migration itself (Lashley, 2000; Rousseau, Mekki-Berrada, & Rufagari, 1999). A longitudinal study of young Cambodian refugees in Montreal found that trauma suffered by the family under Pol Pot, just before the birth of the child, was associated with greater self-esteem among adolescents in that group, despite the extremely difficult socioeconomic conditions faced by the refugees in the host country (Rousseau, Drapeau, & Platt, 2000). This paradoxical association seems to be attributable to the strategies people used to maintain their Khmer identity against the attempts of the Khmer Rouge to destroy their values and traditions. It illustrates the complexity of the interactions between young people’s experiences and their personal and collective assertions of identity.

Learning to be part of a minority after migrating and, in particular, experiencing discrimination and social or economic exclusion, also influence identity. A number of authors have reported a negative correlation between group self-esteem and the perception of racism, which suggests that solid group identities could be associated with better intergroup relations (Rahimi, 2000). Strengthening personal and group identity could therefore not only be a way to improve the well-being of adolescents, but could also have a positive influence

on gang problems that are very much tied up with identity issues (Perreault & Bibeau, 2003).

Resolving and coming to terms with these experiences, both pre- and postmigration, depend partially on the identity that they have helped forge. In public – in groups and interpersonally – teens express their various identities both explicitly and implicitly, verbally and nonverbally. Young people's identities are formed through an interplay of their personal stories and the stories they share with or borrow from the groups to which they belong. The possibility of using many different stories and being able to transform them has a protective effect, in that it lets young people reappropriate founding stories while giving them access to a wide range of adaptive strategies to meet the challenges and problems they face (Foxen, 2000).

Dramatic expression, conflicts, and personal and social transformation

Artistic and dramatic outlets are important in adolescence as they can help express and contain the suffering associated with the changes that occur at this stage in life, while channeling teens' strengths and idealism (Emunah, 1985, 1990). Drama has a number of advantages over group discussion therapy: it facilitates the nonverbal expression that is so important to young people who have verbal limitations, and it allows conflicts and explorations of a variety of avenues that might lead to solutions to be acted out in a safe environment (Shuttleworth, 1981). For teenagers, theater is also a place where they can play with metaphors, and through them, step back from personal, family, and group experiences and make them their own (MacCormack, 1997). In a school setting, drama promotes social growth through noncompetitive activities that emphasize shared responsibility and teamwork (McCaslin, 1981). Drama is not just a therapeutic tool; it is first and foremost a very specifically human experience. The ability to change, to represent others, to alter one's state of consciousness, are virtually universal features of otherwise quite different types of theater (Schechner, 1985). The opportunity to express and at the same time assume many different or ambivalent identities is one of the keys to the transformative power of theater. This transformation of consciousness takes place within a ritual framework that imparts a playful nature to it (Myerhoff, 1990). The ritual framework and playful nature of theater make it possible to contain the stories, images, and emotions evoked, preventing them from overwhelming the actors and spectators. Ritual thus becomes at once a form of knowledge, a method of learning, and a way of controlling or influencing events (Brockett, 1977).

Playback theater is a type of improvisational theater that aims to achieve personal and social transformation through sharing a theater experience within a ritual space (Fox, 2000a, 2000b). It creates "a world between worlds," which, by changing the framework of time and space, lets people work with a shared intention based on their awareness of a social and ethical responsibility. This intention can materialize around a specific theme (i.e., racism, migration, inequality) or, more broadly, a commitment to social justice. Playback theater is used in over 30 countries with different age groups in a variety of settings (schools, hospitals, workplaces, community centers). It is inspired by a number of major currents in *théâtre engagé* (politically and socially committed theater). It borrows from Moreno (1947) the desire to reach out to the silenced, the isolated, those who define themselves or are perceived

as different. It has in common with Boal (1979) and Freire (1970) the desire to promote a position of subject for the marginalized and excluded, which can empower them to change themselves and their environment. It also borrows from the philosophy of Turner (1974, 1981), who suggests that theater should provide access to a liminal space in which social structures can be set against other types of organizations that do not obey the same structural laws. The bonds thus formed within the group are, according to him, “antistructural,” because they are essentially undifferentiated, egalitarian, direct, and nonrational. In short, the aim of playback theater is to act out personal stories from contemporary society, shaking up or temporarily abolishing the established structures in order to enable new relationships to emerge within the group (Fox, Muennich Cowell, & Montgomery, 1994). Drama therapists point out, however, that this form of therapy is not harmless, and the ritual framework must be carefully maintained so that the play does not slip into a settling of personal accounts or even intensified group confrontations (Fox, 2000a, 2000b).

Program objectives

The goal of the drama therapy program was to give young immigrants and refugees a chance to reappropriate and share group stories, in order to support the construction of meaning and identity in their personal stories and establish a bridge between the past and present. It was hoped that this would alleviate the distress associated with the losses suffered in migration or the tensions of being a minority in the host society, and attenuate associated interpersonal and intergroup conflicts by addressing the negative perceptions of cultural differences and increasing collective self-esteem.

Building solid, multiple collective identities and exploring them through group theater work can promote: (1) construction of meaning (after trauma and separation); (2) the grieving process (loss of loved ones, country, expectations, or dreams); (3) appreciation of difference and construction of creative resistance (that does not lock them into even wider circles of exclusion); and (4) development of multiple affinities that employ a range of possible strategies.

Description of program

The drama program was developed gradually over a period of 3 years by the Transcultural Psychiatry Team at the Montreal Children’s Hospital, in partnership with the creative arts therapies program at Concordia University and the French-language St. Luc High School in Notre Dame de Grâce, a multiethnic district in Montreal with a high proportion of recently arrived immigrants and refugees. Several pilot projects were implemented for three different client groups identified by the school: welcome classes and post-welcome classes as well as regular classes. Welcome classes are the first step in integrating newly arrived immigrant and refugee children who do not speak French into the Quebec school system. Students who do not meet the educational requirements of the welcome class in the course of the school year move on to a post-welcome class before joining regular classes.

In this drama project, the adolescents’ ages ranged from 12 to 18. All groups were gender mixed, although often unevenly. The students in the welcome and post-welcome classes 12 to 16 students came from all over the world: China, Russia, Romania, Pakistan, Iran,

Iraq, Mexico, South America, and the Caribbean. The regular classes (25 to 30) students included second- and third-generation immigrants as well as adolescents from various ethnic groups who either spoke French before coming to Quebec or learned it while living here. Because of the high ethnic concentration in the neighborhood, very few children were of French-Canadian origin.

The six members of this drama project team, called *Pluriel*, had training in psychology and/or creative arts therapies, as well as in the arts (music, visual arts, theater). All had prior experience working with children and teens and were familiar with theater techniques, improvisation, and therapy involving difficult psychosocial issues. The *Pluriel* team was composed of two men and four women aged 20 to 55 from a variety of cultural backgrounds (African, Latin American, Caribbean, French Quebecer). The *Pluriel* team has worked with 16 groups at this school over the past three years. For each group, the workshop is in part of their regular school day. The teacher is almost always present and participates at will, by commenting or contributing a personal story, for example. The students take part in 10 weekly 75-min sessions.

The program is based on Jonathan Fox's playback theater and Augusto Boal's forum theater in these respects: (1) The workshops aim to create a safe, respectful atmosphere in which any tension can be addressed, with the assurance that it will be contained within the group; (2) Artistic performance is not one of the objectives. Anything expressed remains within the group and is not staged as a show; (3) The structure is the playback form: a play director coordinates and contains the story as it unfolds, while actors and musicians gather the information in order to play the story back to the teller and the group; and (4) As in forum theater, the stories told can be transformed through alternative scenarios developed by the adolescents. Unlike standard playback theater, stories acted out are not only stories experienced directly by the storytellers (thus providing the distance sometimes needed to avoid retraumatization), but also stories that they borrow from their environment (e.g., stories they have heard, read, or seen on television) and that echo part of their life experience emotionally, or represent it metaphorically. These concepts will be explored in greater depth below.

Workshops

All the workshops are organized along the same lines over the 10 weeks, although student involvement and topic complexity often gradually increase as participants become more comfortable with the medium. Each week, the *Pluriel* team members introduce a topic by each relating a brief personal experience. The students are then invited to express their experiences or concerns on the topic using fluid sculptures, rants, pairs, and other reflective techniques, which have been refined by playback and Boal's forum theater. Using sound, movement, and a few words, they rely mostly on images and work with metaphor to reflect the point of view and the feelings of the teller. For example, the pairs technique is used to reflect a person's contradictory feelings, and the rants simultaneously reflect different points of view of the same situation or experience. They can help broaden the perception of a situation by representing a plurality of internal and external voices.

The topics are broad and are presented in an open-ended way to prompt the exploration of ideas and feelings associated with key experiences, such as migration, families,

moving from one culture to another, belonging, and not belonging. For example, participants are encouraged to talk about a situation that makes them feel good or in which prejudice or racism plays a role. Some topics lead to an exploration of power relationships, expectations, and other common constraints on young people. The last workshop deals with expectations of the future, hopes and dreams, and the worries that go along with them.

Once or twice during the program, or when participants seemed to be stuck or reticent to share stories spontaneously, sometimes because of the sensitivity of the topics, Pluriel used a tool called a “story house,” developed by one of its members to address specific themes, such as violence or migration. Each participant writes a three-sentence story on a sheet of paper. The stories may stem from their own experience, or things they have heard about; they may be either very close to or seemingly quite far removed from what they have experienced themselves. The stories are then posted around the room and the participants vote on the ones they wish to see acted out. All of the stories remain posted throughout the session and it is emphasized that those not selected are just as important and meaningful as those that are.

A story told spontaneously or a story written down and selected is then acted out by the team of actors using improvisation and music. Before the story is acted out, details of the story are explored by the play director and the teller is invited to choose the actor to play each character in the story. This process gives tellers the power to decide how and by whom they want to see their stories acted out. Sometimes as early as Week 2, adolescents join in to play with the team. Subsequently, if the storyteller wishes, it can be acted out following alternative scenarios suggested first by the storyteller, then by the rest of the group. The idea is to *alter* the situation to empower the storyteller and the others, either by changing the meaning, building a relationship, or creating an opening or dialogue with others that was missing from the original story. This part of the workshop becomes a collective effort, focusing on co-creating a story or situation where teens look for alternatives to their first reactions and strategies.

It is important to mention the “style” of acting, since the entire workshop is based on improvisation and uses only lengths of fabric and four cubes as props, and no special lighting. One of the team’s goals is to convey the story told while opening up other levels of awareness for participants as well as team members. The use of images and metaphor is essential to achieve this openness. The use of verbal language is limited in order to emphasize sound, movement, and rhythm. Generally, the young people rapidly become familiar with this means of expression and seem to find it stimulating. They use the colorful fabrics very effectively in their improvisations. For example, they may use them as screens and act behind them, roll up a piece of red cloth into a ball, or wave it at arms length in the air, imitating the sound of a police siren.

Finally, the main language used during the workshop is French, which in itself represents the host country culture and the pressure to integrate. To alleviate this constraint slightly, students are encouraged to use their native language and the group follows through translation whenever peers or team members can help by interpreting. It is interesting, however, to note that while some emotions have to be expressed through their mother tongue, the teens often prefer to use a foreign language to create a distance from the emotional experience and decrease its intensity. Switching languages, negotiating between different languages,

and providing circles of support to help with verbal expression played an important role in the workshop process.

Method

The program was assessed three ways. First, the teachers, the other school staff, and the drama workshop team met regularly to evaluate the program over the three years. After each 10-week program, the two or three participating teachers would meet with two people from the Montreal Children's Hospital who were not part of the workshop team. The meetings were led by one of the hospital partners, who first asked about general perceptions of the project's strengths and weaknesses, then probed teachers more systematically for their perceptions of specific activities (exercises, story house, and so on) and, finally, asked for suggestions on improving the workshops. Detailed notes were taken at all the meetings. At end-of-year coordination meetings, guidelines for the project and any necessary changes were decided for the next year. Second, in the last session of each program, students were also asked directly (following the same scheme of questioning) for their comments, criticism, and input for future workshops. Notes were taken by one of the team members. Third, the stories told by the young people in each session were transcribed and the group interactions and dynamics were noted. In the first two years of the program, the drama project team transcribed the stories and the play interactions after each session. In the last two years, an independent observer hired by the hospital took notes using an observation checklist designed for this purpose. We decided against tape recording the sessions because it might be perceived as invasive by families who had in many cases survived persecution and whose immigration status might still be unresolved.

The analysis of the various sessions was performed by members of the Transcultural Psychiatry Team who did not belong to the workshop team; they subsequently discussed their interpretations with the workshop team and incorporated its perspective. The analysis looked at (1) the dominant themes raised by the teenagers unprompted, (2) the recurrent group dynamics in terms of support or tensions, and (3) the influence of any outside traumatic events (the war in Iraq). The form and content of the sessions throughout the course of the Iraq war were analyzed to see to what extent the workshops provided a forum in which the group could work through this experience together.

Results

Teachers' perceptions

On the whole, the teachers greatly appreciated the drama therapy program, which helped them get to know their students better. They reported that the students liked the program and enabled them to talk about what was happening with them and brought them some relief: "It helps me feel better." The teachers also noted positive changes in the students' behavior and self-esteem. Some teachers were surprised to see some usually quiet students express themselves. The teachers pointed out that the ritual aspect of the program gave the

workshops a somewhat sacred character that made the students feel safe there. Most of the students felt at ease in the workshops and realized that they could decide how involved they wanted to be. The teachers also reported that the theater activity strengthened the ties between the children. By comparing their experiences, the students realized they often had similar stories and felt less lonely. It also had the effect of mobilizing some students to take supportive action. For example, a Cambodian girl said that she was living with her mother and stepfather, whom she feared. She also talked about how lonely she had felt since her arrival in Canada. The teacher of that group observed that the students felt concerned about her story and demonstrated more interest in her afterward.

The teachers did mention a few difficulties: practical problems to do with organizing timetables, but also some concerns about language. For instance, they did not encourage the use of street language in class and questioned whether the students should be allowed to use it in dialogue. After some discussion, it was agreed that in the workshops, the teens would be allowed to express their full experience in their own words, as long as the basic values of mutual respect were maintained.

Main topics: everyday life and identity issues

As anticipated, many stories dealt with the challenges of migration, the issues of a multiethnic society, and personal concerns and identity issues of adolescence. The relative balance between the topics tackled and their emotional weight is interesting. The teenagers liked the laughter and relaxation associated with stories that dealt with humorous aspects of everyday dilemmas and used lighter or funny stories to relieve an oppressive atmosphere, sadness, or anxiety brought on by other stories. This allowed them to share unpleasant emotions with their peers without being overwhelmed.

The vast majority of the stories told by the teens were personal experiences in which they had an active role. Sometimes they were witnesses to the story. In a few cases, they had heard the stories from other people or the media. One group of stories was about their life in their homeland and dealt with emotional bonds lost or transformed by migration: trying to maintain ties to grandparents and friends. Some told anecdotes of childhood incidents involving courage or fear: falling out of a tree, jumping into the sea, “saving” a girl. Others were accounts of more formal initiation rites, like the *Quinceañera* (15th birthday celebration for Latin American girls), symbolically analogous to the passages they were facing in the host country, especially the challenge of arrival at adulthood. Many stories were also about the time of migration itself: the grief and uncertainties about those left behind, but also the migration procedural red tape. Another group of stories illustrated life in the host country, everyday life at school (parents unhappy with report cards, pressure from teachers), challenges, and transgressions in relations with peers, often accompanied by an assertion of identity, whether subtle or blatant. Some dealt with love relationships that played out in an unknown space and frequently crossed ethnic, religious or linguistic lines: being in love and not “knowing” the words to say it.

A young Mexican told about being in love with a Muslim girl. He is proud of being Mexican, but does not agree with all aspects of his culture. Unfortunately, he cannot call the girl on the telephone, because her parents will not allow it. He is not religious and says he is not a believer as she is. He finds it hard and sometimes wishes he were back in Mexico,

because at least there, he knew the rules. He was very moved by the playback of his story. He said he got the shivers when he was asked if he would like to change the ending: he imagined leaving for another land with the girl he loves.

A third category of stories described personal or group reactions to international events, especially those that received a great deal of media coverage. Interestingly, the word racism was never used. The teens instead reported how they were stereotyped and hinted at inequalities in their relationships with the majority. A number of stories dealt with the complexity of identity construction for adolescent immigrants and how this process is affected by significant losses and leaving family behind. The young people oscillated between representing an ideal identity that would give them back the place in their family or society that they had lost through migration and grieving their loss.

Anne is Chinese. She is 16. She wanted to play back a difficult episode in her family history. Her niece of about the same age, has agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to a marriage arranged by her family. Anne is opposed to this traditional marriage and would like to help her niece, but she feels powerless because in Canada she has lost any influence she might have had as an aunt. She showed her sadness after the story was played back and the leader asked her if she would like the story to be acted out again with a different ending. She agreed, and changed it so that in China she regained her status as aunt and prevented the marriage. In Anne's story, modernity and tradition clash in a complex way: simultaneously a desire to be free of certain customs (the arranged marriage) and a desire to regain the power that she enjoyed within the family hierarchy and that she lost through migration.

Identities dreamed of, claimed, lost, implicit, are mixed up in complex, complementary relationships. Although their many identity differences separate the adolescents, sharing these complex interactions and an essentially hybrid, Creole identity brings them together. Through the confusion a host of possibilities emerge. The collective nature of this process of negotiating identities was clearly portrayed through a collective story that one of the classes decided to construct and then act out. The story was put together like a puzzle, with each youth adding an element either describing the protagonists or adding to the plot.

Two 16-year-old twin brothers named Johnny and Jianhua live with their family in Montreal. One summer afternoon, their friends Benny and Bo pick them up to go to the pool, where they meet a Chinese girl named Wingyin. She is beautiful, nice and rich. Bo and Jianhua fight for the girl, and Jianhua is killed. Johnny calls the police. The police come and question the boys, who tell them that Jianhua had an accident because he did not know how to swim. The girl cries, but Jianhua is not really dead and he comes back to life. Finally Johnny and Wingyin are happy together and Bo, who lost his love, commits suicide.

Some elements of this story are reminiscent of classical tales of male initiation, in which heroes face adversity, and sometimes even death, in order to be transformed. The ending also echoes the kind of romantic suicide associated both with Romeo and Juliet in the Western world and with love suicide in Chinese and other traditions. The image of the twins represents sameness, which is contradicted both by the names given to the twins (English and Chinese, both beginning with J) and by the different identities of the actors (Russian, Chinese, and Latin American) representing them. The story exposes the risks and the solidarity associated with belonging to a hybrid group. It is particularly interesting to note that while an external agency (the police representing the host country) is called to help, it is subsequently turned away and is not part of the final solution. This story also illustrates

how the sessions can help transform a group dynamic by promoting the appreciation and acceptance of differences. The teacher had reported tensions between Chinese and Russian students, who were ignoring each other in her class. She observed that the tensions between the groups lessened as the sessions went on. Interestingly, in this collective story, the Chinese and Russians pooled their efforts and actively participated in creating the story. A Russian boy was chosen by the class to represent one of the twins and a Chinese to represent the other.

Group dynamics, creative tensions, and transformation

Although the atmosphere of the workshops was usually harmonious, some sessions brought major tensions to the fore, revealing the blind spots of the actors.

A 15-year-old Iranian girl wrote a story for the story house and led a boisterous campaign to have it chosen for playback. Her very dramatic tale was about a Middle Eastern refugee who killed his wife because she was becoming too emancipated. The student did not spare the audience any of the gory details and emphasized the screaming baby who witnessed the crime. The story told how the woman had received her Canadian citizenship the day before being killed and how her extended family never managed to get back the children, whom the court handed over to host society institutions.

The teacher was very disturbed by the story. He felt betrayed and suspected that the melodramatic play was meant to sabotage the workshops. The team, on the other hand, thought that the story, despite its sensationalism, spoke of the institutional violence of the host society and the way it disrupts the lives of immigrant families by imposing a change of roles, but also by taking away from them what they hold most dear—their children. By working together closely, the team and the teacher were able to contain the emotions triggered by the story.

The workshops also provide a space for a transformation process, empowering the tellers through a collective effort to find meaning, possible solutions, or alternative scenarios. In one class, the theme of prejudice and power led students to talk about a delicate situation in which one of their teachers targeted a student. Two weeks in a row, the adolescents told stories portraying their discomfort, helplessness, frustration, and anger regarding this situation. On both occasions, stories were enacted (or played back) by the team and students. Following the second story, the play director opened the story to a Boal transformation, asking the teller and the class to physically represent the two conflicting positions: teacher and students. To metaphorically represent the teacher's power, the adolescents draped a red cloth over the shoulders of the actor playing the teacher, who also climbed up on two cubes to be in a higher position. Three students chosen by the class physically portrayed the collective feeling of helplessness by crouching before the teacher. The director asked the actors representing the students and the teacher to talk about how they felt in their positions, in order to hear about each perspective. The director then suggested that the class try to physically transform the situation. One of the class's ideas was to remove the cubes the teacher had climbed up on. The director asked what the cubes represented. The teens said that they represented authority and realized that it was not possible to remove them. They suggested that the three students who represented the class stand up and move closer together to illustrate their solidarity. Then they suggested that they climb up on two cubes,

to be as high as the teacher. Liking their higher position, the students decided to add a cube so they would be higher than the teacher. The group soon realized that in their attempt to transform the situation and find a solution, they were escalating the conflict and that no true resolution was possible in that way. The student on the third cube said his position was precarious and the students decided to remove the cubes and started to brainstorm about alternative solutions. The classroom teacher who was present during these events at first felt uneasy but then acknowledged that the acting out of the conflict has helped to lessen the tensions between the group and the other teacher. The acknowledgement of the students' experience through the play, the physical representation of the conflict escalation and of the split between the teacher and the students, the space made for both points of view, the use of humor, and the collective effort to find solutions all helped to defuse the situation and to initiate a process of conflict resolution.

To speak or not to speak of war?

In the winter of 2003, the workshops took place during the buildup to the war in Iraq and during the war itself. The students and the team brought up the war either directly or indirectly in a number of sessions. From one session to the next, and within a single session, students alternated between needing to talk directly and indirectly about the war and the emotions it triggered and wishing to get away from it, to change the subject by laughing and acting out light topics. The war period shifted the focus to themes of conflict and powerlessness. A number of stories described complex situations reflecting both a fascination and excitement to do with the battle, and exploration of moral issues. Empathy for those living through the war was expressed explicitly, along with the feeling of relief at being safely out of harm's way.

A girl told how a friend who had trouble concentrating confided that she was worried about her family in Baghdad. She tried to reassure her and help her a bit with her homework, but felt powerless to comfort her.

A story house put together at that time was made up of a wide-ranging collection of stories, including some by Iraqi youths who spoke very directly about the war. These teens had never talked about it before. Apparently writing allowed them to say things while maintaining a certain distance. These stories were not selected by anyone for playback, probably because they spoke too directly of trauma. The group could only stand hearing them to a certain extent.

Well, first I want to say or show how much I love Iraq . . . and the problem is that I've never lived there. Well, I'm much better off outside of Iraq because of the war, but I'd still like to see my relatives again, because I miss them a lot. And at the same time I'm happy because I'm away and far from what is happening there.

Discussion

The drama workshop program was very well received, both by the schools and the students. This positive acceptance probably reflects the fact that the workshops met a specific need for a place and form of expression that allowed certain social tensions – some were

very close to the teens' everyday reality, some not, but all were an integral part of their life experience – to be contained.

First of all, the workshops made the teenagers feel safe. Students and teachers alike emphasized the ritualized aspect of the workshops, which conferred upon the stories shared there a certain sacred character. At a general level, despite the school's initial fears, the workshops managed to maintain an atmosphere of respect, with room for laughter, disagreement and sometimes boredom, but in which everyone was a full subject with his or her own voice. Flexible rules also helped the teens feel safe enough to express their feelings in the workshops. Self-revelation was accepted, but no one was pushed. Metaphor was used to establish distance and symbolic references. The interplay of more serious themes and essentially entertaining stories was possible. This flexibility allowed the group to bounce back within a session or from one session to the next by acting out losses or tensions, almost always in the knowledge that they still had ways out. The issue of safety was sometimes a challenge when confidential and sensitive topics (like violence, war, bullying, or discrimination) were represented through the stories. In those situations, the team's ability to elicit a plurality of voices illustrating the moral complexity of the situations promoted an awareness of the "other" (Apfel & Simon, 2000).

Second, the workshops were places where pluralism in its cultural, social, and political dimensions was represented, explicitly discussed, and appreciated. In the United States, Suárez-Orozco (2000) argues that the hostility in the host society has the effect on immigrant children of "social mirroring," which influences, often in negative ways, their identity construction. After September 11, 2001, and the escalation in international tensions, there has been a global upsurge in discrimination and intercommunity tensions in North America that directly affects the complex process of identity negotiation in immigrant youth. In this context, the usual emphasis on cultural diversity fails to pinpoint the growing power inequalities embedded in social institutions like schools (Ghosh, 2002). In the drama workshops, the variety of ethnic origins of the team members echoed the many different origins of the students, thus reflecting sameness as well as difference. Differences were not reduced to stereotypes and could still call into question each person's values and worldview. In this process, all the participants, through the discovery of their own multiplicity, came to recognize the other within (Dunlop, 1999). This enabled them to think about different identities without resorting to an "us" and "them" dichotomy, but by looking at social inequalities and minority positions from a point of view of social justice and dialogue (Irving & Young, 2002).

Third, the workshops were a shared place where passages and transitions associated with adolescence were acted out. The initiation into adulthood is experienced differently in different cultures, but one of the most important things that the teenagers in the class had in common was the loss of cultural landmarks that would allow them to ritualize the transition. It is interesting to note that the acting out of losses associated with migration goes hand in hand with the representation of the transitions of adolescence. This association echoes the literature, which underscores that adolescence is a time when the losses of immigrant and refugee children are reawakened because of the difficulty of coming to terms with the separations associated with reaching adulthood, among other things (Akhtar, 1995). The host society's position on autonomy and independence often stands in sharp contrast to the values of immigrant families. The process of separation associated with the transition to adulthood becomes all the more difficult if it must take place between two worlds that

make contradictory demands on young people. Adolescents use the workshops to play back the paradoxes and explore possible solutions together. In this respect, it should be pointed out how much the teens appreciated the opportunity to change a story after acting it out. A place to express dreams, this transformation was also, because of its collective nature, an expansion of the realm of the possible. As if the unthinkable, once it no longer seems impossible to someone else, becomes one of a range of available strategies.

Conclusion

Migration is often difficult for adolescents, who must shoulder the dual burden of coming to terms with the many losses associated with migration at a time when they are making the transition from childhood to adulthood. Drama therapy workshops facilitate the adaptation of young immigrants and refugees to their new environment through creative work on identity issues related to migration and status as a cultural minority. A key aspect of the workshops was that they are seen as a safe place for self-expression, where participants feel supported by the team and by the ritual nature of dramatic play. The workshops provide the teens with an opportunity not only to explore a wide range of values, making use of a multiplicity of references, which represent their hybrid world, but also through the playback of the stories to construct meaning and grieve some of the losses associated with the migration journey. Through personal or collective stories they begin to see the overlap between their distinct identities and to question the dichotomy between their host country and home country identities. The workshops also empower the teens by emphasizing the strengths that stem from adversity, fostering creative resistance through a repertoire of diverse strategies, and creating an active network of solidarity among peers.

A number of questions remain unanswered, however. In the medium term, how much do the workshops influence the well-being and adjustment of the teens to their new environment? How can schools realistically incorporate a type of therapy that requires a fairly large team, while at the same time maintaining its specificity? Further research on these issues is necessary before drama workshops can become a tool that lends itself easily to use by multiethnic schools.

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