

Orff-Schulwerk *International*

Volume 1, Issue 2

ISSN 2791-4763 (Online)

Resources for Community Building in Dramatic Play Activities at a Training College for Nursery School Teachers

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Published online: November 2022

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Presentation from the IOSFS Convention 2022

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1. Introduction

At Junior College A, the nursery school training college where the authors work, an increasing number of students have found difficulty with group activities in recent years. This trend can also be seen in the Graduate Project Group (GPG), a dramatic play activity studied by the first author. This phenomenon indicates the need for changes in conventional methods of organizing group activities, including dramatic plays.

This article aims to examine the resources available for building a community through dramatic play activities. To achieve this, we interviewed students enrolled in Junior College A who participated in dramatic play activities.

1.1 Description of the class structure at Junior College A

Junior College A has about 120 students per school year and consist of three classes of 40 students each: AB class, CD class, and EF class. Most of the general classes are held in these class units. Additionally, lectures on GPGs begin in the second semester of the first year. In these lectures, small groups of students do an in-depth study on a certain field of early childhood education and care, depending on the teacher's specialty. There are two types of GPGs: Graduation Report and Graduation Performance. Based on students' preferences, the school assigns students to a GPG.

During the 201X school year, while teaching a class on toddler expression, the first author noticed that some students did not participate in group work. Furthermore, this inactivity was dependent on individual group members, even in expressive activities based on Orff-Schulwerk (OS). Within a GPG participating in dramatic play activities, some students did not speak up in group discussions. As demonstrated by this trend, an increasing number of Junior College A students have been struggling with interpersonal relationships in recent years.

1.2 Details of the GPG of dramatic play activities

In the first author's dramatic play GPG, students write and create a play containing a message for children. This play is presented during the "Children's Festival", an annual event where local children are invited to campus. This event takes place on a Sunday at the end of October. The standard junior college curriculum includes thirty 90-minute GPG seminars each year. In addition to these regularly scheduled seminars, students also practice the play during lunch breaks or after school for the month leading up to the "Children's Festival". The play lasts about 20 minutes, and it is performed twice on the day of the event. The audience includes children and their parents, as well as other students, and parents of the students performing. Table 1 shows the basic schedule of GPG activities.

Table 1: The basic schedule of the GPG

<p>□ First year: Before the second-year students' presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - introductory meeting with the first and the second-year students at the end of the first semester -From the second semester until the senior students' presentation, the junior students participate in practice for the senior students' play. <p>□ First year: After the presentation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Begin dramatic play activities (once a week for 90 minutes) -Decide on the theme and synopsis of the play -Choose the GPG leader and sub-leader at the end of the second semester. <p>□ Second year: First semester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Assign roles in dramatic play activities -Reconsider synopsis and decide on characters -Determine the cast -Conduct activities for each role (script writing, choreography, etc.) -Practice acting and dance. <p>□ Second year: Second semester</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Prepare for the presentation with the junior students -Present the play at the "Children's Festival" (end of October) -Write a short report on dramatic play activities -Assist the junior students in dramatic play activities -Reflect on the presentation in the graduation report at the end of January.

1.3 Issues with GPG dramatic play activities

In recent years, teacher intervention has become essential for students to build community in GPG activities. In 201X, some students began to have difficulty with GPG group activities. The following year, GPG students participated in dramatic play activities but were unable to build relationships among students, and they struggled to proceed with the activities. For this reason, the first author conducted an OS-based movement workshop as an opportunity for students to build community. Furthermore, in the following year (201X+2), some GPG students began saying, "I don't want to do the activities," even before they started. For this reason, the first author facilitated four OS-based workshops prior to the dramatic play activities (Nagaoka & Kitamoto, 2022).

This trend of reluctance to participate could be due to the influence of COVID-19. In 201X+1, Junior College A changed from face-to-face to online instruction. This made it difficult for students to engage in the group work which used to be done in class. In addition, between 201X and 201X+2, overnight events and the "Children's Festival" ceased to be held. Students' internship schedules also had to change, and their timetables became crowded. As a result of these changes, students lacked time to engage in the GPG dramatic play activities as they once had. As a result, the first author had to make significant changes to facilitate group-building.

1.4 Previous research and practical reports about dramatic play activities in OS

There have been many practical studies and presentations on dramatic play activities in OS (Widmer, 2011). For example, Widmer's previous study on *Elemental Music Theatre*

discussed methods that are one of the resources of dramatic play activities (Widmer, 2004 and 2007). Hartmann and Haselbach (2017) also pointed out the importance of “the social dimension” in OS activities. Furthermore, a previous study by Karenz-Knoblich and Wieblitz (2011) highlighted the social aspects of after-school “*Schnurpsenchor*” activities. However, these studies indicated only that the social dimension is an issue that facilitators need to consider when organizing group activities.

However, at Junior College A, participation in GPG dramatic play activities cannot be handled by the facilitator alone, and adjusting only the design of teaching methods is insufficient. We must find solutions by focusing on those resources for community building that students actively use. Furthermore, the existing literature lacks a sufficient discussion of OS activities as community-building resources, or of what constitutes a resource for OS group activities.

1.5 Objective

The purpose of this study is to describe how students use resources to build community in the dramatic play activities. To this end, an interview survey was conducted with GPG students enrolled in 201X regarding the development process of dramatic play activities.

2. Data collection

Table 2: Profiles of participants

Class and Number	Gender	Role in GPG
AB1'	F	
AB2	F	
AB3	M	
CD2	F	
CD3'	F	
CD4	F	sub-leader
CD5	F	
CD6	F	
CD7	F	leader
CD8	F	
CD9	F	

※ Apostrophes indicate that the student has moved from another GPG.

2.1 Participants

The participants comprised 11 of the first author’s GPG students. Of these, there were one male and 10 female participants, and all were enrolled in Junior College A in 201X. There were originally 13 students in the first author's GPG; CD1 and CD10 were absent from this interview.

2.2 Interview procedures

Both authors conducted four interview sessions at Junior College A. In the first session, a group interview was conducted with 11 Participants (Table 2). For the second to fourth sessions, additional interviews were conducted, each with one or two students.

This article focuses on the first interview, conducted on January 15, 201X+2. The interviews took place after students had submitted their short reports.

The first interview was semi-structured, focusing on pre-designed questions. Changes and additions were then made as necessary. This session lasted approximately one hour and 20 minutes.

2.3 Questions for group interviews

The interviews included the following questions regarding the schedule from Table 1.

- What do you think about the preparations for the presentation at the “Children's Festival” that you made with the same grade-students?
- What did you learn from preparing for the presentation at the “Children's Festival” with the same grade-students?
- What do you think about the instruction by your facilitator?
- Is there anything else you want to do in GPG activities?

We added these following questions during certain time periods.

First year: Before the presentation.

- What do you think about the preparations for the presentation at the “Children's Festival” that you made with the senior students of the GPG?
- What did you learn from preparing for the presentation at the “Children's Festival” with the senior students?

Second year: Second semester before the presentation.

- How did you help the junior students to prepare for the presentation at the “Children's Festival”?
- How did the junior students help you to prepare for the presentation at the “Children's Festival”?
- What did you learn from preparing for the presentation at the “Children's Festival” with the senior students?

Second year: Second semester after the presentation.

- What changes have you experienced throughout your college life?
- What do you think about any of your changes?
- What do these GPG members mean to you?

2.4 Ethical considerations

The first author verbally explained the written request to the participants and received their signatures on consent forms before the study. Permission was granted by all participants. This research was approved by the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Education and Research Department of Hamamatsu Gakuin University Junior College.

3. Analysis

3.1 Data analysis procedure

We analyzed interview data using the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (Kinoshita, 2020). The analysis focused on how students used and created resources to build community in their dramatic play activities. The data analysis procedure included the following steps.

- 1) Transcription of recorded data
- 2) Open coding of transcribed data
- 3) Selective coding (categorizing the concepts obtained by open coding)
- 4) Side-by-side comparison and definitions of codes for each concept obtained by selective coding.

3.2 Results

Two episodes are described below. These episodes were derived from the analysis, and they are the basis of considering what resources are available for students to build community. The three students in these episodes are described in Table 3, and they are referred to by the labels given in Table 2. We have included the simple drawings we used in our presentation to illustrate our findings.

Table 3: The three students

□ **CD4**

- She enrolled in junior college by the invitation of a friend and was not interested in working as a nursery school teacher.
- She felt a motivational gap between her and her classmates, and she felt isolated from the class.
- She did not find this GPG interesting.

□ **AB2**

- She had been interested in dramatic play activities since entering the school, and this GPG was her first choice.
- She was concerned about AB3 in class.

□ **AB3**

- He did not feel that he fit in with the group activities in class or with the boys' group.
- In the group activities, he often expressed too much in a conspicuous manner, and he was not accepted by those around him.
- This GPG was his first choice, and he was motivated to participate in dramatic play activities.
- He was not able to obtain a certification as a nursery school teacher.

Episode 1: A shift from feelings of isolation to acceptance, facilitated by ordinary conversation



AB3, who did not fit in with the group activities in class, also felt isolated within the GPG. He left the discussion of creating a play to others, and he did not participate in the conversation.



When casting began, his attitude changed dramatically, and he begged for the role of a witch. He felt that the other students thought he was incompetent, and he wanted to prove them wrong through his performance.



AB2, who was in AB3's class, nurtured him in the GPG. Since they were the only members of this GPG in that class, AB2 felt that she should be "*the one to take care of AB3.*" However, she felt the burden of "*wondering if this would last for two years.*" She was also troubled by the fact that he would not join in the conversation about the dramatic play.



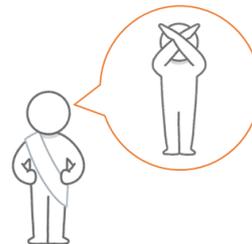
One week before the presentation, AB3's behaviour changed. It began with a conversation about GPG student romances unrelated to GPG activities. This conversation made AB3 feel accepted. His performance, which had been based on "showing off," turned into a performance that was beneficial to all.

Episode 1 reveals that students' relationships with each other were changed by *conversations (gossiping) unrelated to dramatic play activities.* Although overlooked by facilitators, this act was *a community-building resource* for the students within their dramatic play activities. These ordinary conversations transformed AB3's performance from individually "showing off" to being group-oriented.

Episode 2: Recognizing the differences and complementary feelings among group members during presentation practice



CD4 entered the college at the invitation of a friend, and she had no interest in the GPG to which she had been assigned. She did not enjoy the dramatic play activities during her first year.



CD4 felt that she had nothing to offer. To change this, she assumed the role of sub-leader. CD4 spoke up during dramatic play activities out of obligation, but she was not deeply committed and felt uncomfortable. Despite being the sub-leader, she felt helpless and like she did not belong in the GPG.



However, a week before the presentation, a sense of unity between CD4 and those around her began to emerge. Just before the presentation, when AB2 (who entered this GPG at her own request) felt too much pressure, CD4 helped by sharing ideas with her. AB2 looked back on her dramatic play activities and said that even when she was down, someone made up for her loss. She realised that the performance could not have been created if the group had consisted only of members with similar personalities. She was able to recognize the value of the differences among GPG members.

As per college guidelines, the presentation requirement remained fixed. However, the students' awareness changed during the presentation practice sessions. Although it is impossible for the facilitators to know how the students themselves feel about the presentation deadline, it is clear that the students *used the presentation as a community-building resource*. In doing so, they were able to recognise the importance of student differences and their complementary natures. Consequently, these differences were revealed to be a very useful resource for community building.

4. Conclusion

As demonstrated by the episodes, GPG members did not spontaneously move towards community building during dramatic play activities. Rather, they used ordinary conversations and a presentation deadline as resources to engage with other students who had different feelings about the activities. The GPG facilitator could not have anticipated the ordinary conversations generated by the students, nor could they postpone the presentation deadline. However, the dramatic play activities, together with these resources, facilitated emotional connections among the students.

These findings indicate that facilitators need to be "open to the unknown" (Nagaoka & Kitamoto, 2021) within daily routines and regulations, moving beyond their own expectations. Furthermore, they must improvise within the daily regulations, events, and curricula of educational institutions. Previous research has noted the importance of the social dimension in OS (Hartmann & Haselbach 2017, 25; Karenz-Knoblich & Wieblitz, 2011, 222). However, OS has only discussed social dimension resources to the extent that facilitators can anticipate them. In contrast, the findings of this study propose ordinary conversations and presentation deadlines as unanticipated resources for building community in group activities. More discussion of the social dimension in OS activities is needed from the perspective of what facilitators can and cannot anticipate.

[We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the students who participated in this research. This study was funded by the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (C) (Task No. 21K02851). We are grateful to Ms. Yuriko Ishikawa for her assistance in translating this article into English].

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