

## Chapter 13

# THE ENACT METHOD OF EMPLOYING DRAMA THERAPY IN SCHOOLS

DIANA FELDMAN, FARA SUSSMAN JONES, AND EMILIE WARD

### 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 45-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 (Feldman, 1997).

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 percent 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 this situation. 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 awarded 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 11th 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 viewed our program as a unique addition to the arts education field, helped ENACT to hire specialists in education, psychology and the arts. To-

gether, 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, plays were also performed 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 20-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 (1995), 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