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Evaluation of a classroom program of creative expression workshops for refugee and immigrant children

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Objective: This evaluative study assessed the effect of a creative expression program designed to prevent emotional and behavioral problems and to enhance self-esteem in immigrant and refugee children attending multiethnic schools. **Method:** The 12-week program involved 138 children, aged 7 to 13, registered in both integration classes designed for immigrant children and regular classes at two elementary schools. Pretest and posttest data were collected from the children themselves and from their teacher. Teachers used Achenbach's Teacher's Report Form to assess the emotional and behavioral symptoms of their pupils whereas children self-reported their symptoms with the Dominic, a computerized questionnaire. Self-esteem was measured with the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale administered by interviewers to the children. **Results:** At the end of the program, the children in the experimental groups reported lower mean levels of internalizing and externalizing symptoms and higher mean levels of feelings of popularity and satisfaction than the children in the control groups, when controlling for baseline data. In integration classes, the effect on self-esteem was especially notable in boys. The intervention's effect on internalizing and externalizing symptoms was not modified by gender, age or fluency in the mainstream language. **Conclusion:** The study provides some evidence that creative workshops in the classroom can have a beneficial effect on the self-esteem and symptomatology of immigrant and refugee children from various cultures and backgrounds. These quantitative results support previous qualitative analysis showing that the workshops participate in the reconstruction of a meaningful personal world while simultaneously strengthening the link of the child to the group. They also transform the teachers' perceptions of newcomers by placing an emphasis on their strength and their resilience, while not negating their vulnerabilities. **Keywords:** Prevention, art therapy, immigrant and refugee children, mental health.

Play and artistic expression are commonly used in therapeutic and educational settings. Improved self-esteem, expression of emotions, problem solving and conflict resolution are the most frequently mentioned benefits of therapy methods based on creative expression (Schaefer, 1993; Torbert, 1990). Although creative expression workshops are commonly used with children at risk, few programs have undergone impact assessment. Assessment of the preschool version of 'Marvelous Me' showed that at-risk black children from underprivileged neighborhoods developed more positive self-esteem (Ravid & Sullivan-Temple, 1992). This school program consists in 12 sessions involving visual art, singing, reading, puppets and group activities. In the same vein, an evaluative study of art therapy for children from families affected by drug or alcohol abuse found significant gains in competency and a reduction in behavioral problems (Springer, Phillips, Phillips, Canady, & Kerst-Harris, 1992). This 12-session treatment targets children aged 4 to 11 and is based on parental involvement. Both studies confirm that creative expression therapy programs are beneficial to some groups of children at risk. However, assessment of this type of program in other social, economic and cultural settings is necessary in order

to establish its effectiveness with children facing different types of adversity.

In the past few decades, creative expression activities have come to be considered a good way of working with migrant children, helping them construct meaning and identity (Howard, 1991; Elbedour, Bastien, & Center, 1997), and with refugee children or others who have experienced armed conflict (Danev, 1998), allowing them to work through their losses, come to terms with trauma, and reestablish social ties broken by repression (Barudy, 1988; Golub, 1989; Lopez & Saenz, 1992; Lykes & Farina, 1992; Miller & Billings, 1994).

In countries hosting a large number of immigrant and refugee children, schools are well placed to implement prevention and treatment programs using creative activities (Bolton & Spafford, 1998; Hodes, 2000). Tolfree (1996) suggests a number of ways in which schools can meet the psychosocial needs of children affected by war or displacement, especially with programs that provide them with avenues for emotional expression, personal support and opportunities to enhance their understanding of their past experiences. However, setting up a classroom program to prevent psychological distress in newly arrived immigrant and refugee children presents

several challenges. First, the population is heterogeneous, both culturally and in terms of experiences in their homeland and during migration. Furthermore, the gap between school and family is wide, and a program devised by host country therapists or educators could easily become just one more disparate element in the children's two separate worlds (Miller & Billings, 1994). Last, despite many small-scale innovative experiments, little is known, either in theory or in practice, about the types of activity that may work best (Williams & Berry, 1991).

Description of program

The creative expression workshops under study here were designed for immigrant and refugee children as an attempt to bridge the gap between home and school, past and present. They were inspired by various programs for refugee children and children of war that had been described but not formally evaluated (Lopez & Saenz, 1992). Our workshops were progressively developed over a five-year period through a series of pilot projects conducted in Montreal's two main school boards by the Transcultural Psychiatry Unit of the Montreal Children's Hospital.

The first pilot project centered on an activity called 'The Trip', in which children are asked to tell the story of a character of their choice (human or not) who has been through a migration process, including the past (life in the homeland before migration), the trip itself, the arrival in the host country, and the future. The children draw a picture, then talk and write about the character's story at each of the four phases of the migration process (Rousseau & Heusch, 2000).

In the second pilot project, two activities using myths were added to expand the role of metaphor in the representation of the children's experience. In 'Working with Myths,' all the children explore myths belonging to nondominant cultures, which represent the tension and richness of a minority position, although the traditions to which they refer are not necessarily those of the children. In 'Memory Patchwork,' the children bring in myths and stories from their families and communities; these more directly represent the children's identity (Rousseau, Bagilishya, Heusch, & Lacroix, 1999; Rousseau, Lacroix, Bagilishya, & Heusch, 2003).

The three activities of the two pilot projects were combined in the final program. The creative expression workshops program consists of 12 weekly sessions of two hours. They are held during the regular school day, are run by an art therapist and a psychologist in conjunction with the teacher and are composed of three types of activities. The activities always combine verbal and non-verbal means of expression (drawing or painting a picture and telling or writing a story) with moments of personal work and times where the child goes back to his group to listen or present his work. The

complete program has been described in detail elsewhere (Rousseau et al., 2003).

The aims of the workshops were (1) to enable the children to create/re-create a meaningful and coherent world around their pre-migration and migration experience; (2) to foster reciprocal respect of differences in identity and experience so as to promote bonding between children; (3) to bridge the gap between home and school. Taken together, these objectives were expected to help improve the children's self-esteem and prevent emotional and behavioral problems. The evaluative study was designed to test these hypotheses.

Method

The creative expression workshops were held in two elementary schools serving a highly multiethnic population. At the first school, four integration classes were involved in the study. Integration classes are not part of the regular academic curriculum. These classes are attended by immigrant and refugee children and are designed to help them to learn French – the mainstream language in Québec – if it is not their maternal tongue and become familiar with the Québec school system. Children attend these classes for two semesters before joining regular classes. The evaluative study was conducted in the second semester so that the children had already become quite fluent in French. At the second school, four Grade 4 or 5 regular classes were enrolled in the study. Children were not randomly assigned to the experimental or control groups because the workshops were part of the regular school day and the children could not be temporarily switched to another group for the program. In each school, children of two classes received the intervention whereas children from the other two classes acted as control group. A list of teachers volunteering to take part in the study was established with the schools. Assignment of classes to the experimental or control groups was carried out to maximize inter-group similarity in terms of the age of the children and teacher characteristics (previous experience with the program).

Parents signed a consent form in their own language (the form was translated into 18 different languages). The consent form provided information regarding the organization of the workshops and the extent of the child's participation in the evaluative study and guaranteed that data on the child would be kept strictly confidential. Consent was high: 85% (142/167) of children were granted permission by their parents to take part in the study. Children in the experimental group whose parents did not consent to their participation in the study attended the workshops but no data were collected on them and they were not interviewed.

Data regarding the effect of art therapy on the mental health of children were collected from the

children themselves and from their teachers before and after the intervention.

Emotional and behavioral symptoms were assessed with the interactive version of Dominic, a children's self-report consisting of 90 pictures showing a character named Dominic in a variety of situations. In some of the pictures, his behavior is positive, but in most his reactions correspond to symptoms described in DSM-III-R (Valla, Bergeron, & Smolla, 2000; Valla, Bergeron, Bérubé, Gaudet, & St-Georges 1994). The child used the computer mouse to indicate whether or not he or she sometimes acts or feels like Dominic. We computed an Internalizing score by adding up the number of positive answers to the 46 pictures related to phobias, general anxiety, separation anxiety, and depression, and an Externalizing score by adding up the number of positive answers to the 41 pictures related to attention deficit, hyperactivity, conduct, and oppositional disorders. Dominic has been through an extensive development and validation process since it was designed in the early 1980s and has been used with children from various ethnic groups in clinical and research settings in Québec (Valla et al., 2000, 1994) and elsewhere (Murphy, Marelich, & Hoffman, 2000). In this study, Cronbach's alpha ranged from .88 to .94 for Internalizing and Externalizing scores at baseline and Time 2.

Children's internalizing and externalizing symptoms were also reported by the teacher using the Teacher's Report Form (TRF) (Achenbach, 1993). The teachers were given a three-hour training session on the TRF so that they shared a common point of view regarding the symptoms listed and the meaning of the frequency scale (i.e., never, sometimes, often) associated with the symptoms. The TRF has been used extensively in different settings and its cross-cultural validity is well established. This study confirmed the high level of reliability of the TRF, since Cronbach's alpha was between .82 and .96 for Internalizing and Externalizing scores at baseline and Time 2.

The children's self-esteem was assessed with the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (CSCS) administered by interviewers (Piers, 1984). The CSCS was designed to 'find out how boys and girls really feel about themselves' (Piers, 1984: 7). It is made up of a series of dichotomous items describing children's feelings about themselves and about the reactions of others towards them. Two dimensions of self-esteem, namely popularity (12 items) and happiness and satisfaction (10 items), were investigated. The CSCS has been used worldwide in different settings and its validity and reliability are well established (Bracken, Bunch, Keith, & Keith, 2000). In this study, internal consistency was satisfactory, with Cronbach's alpha ranging from .57 to .71 for Popularity and Happiness/Satisfaction scores at baseline and Time 2.

The effects of the creative expression workshops on the children's emotional symptoms and self-esteem were assessed with two series of analyses based on a univariate generalized linear model (GLM). In the first series, the statistical significance of the effect of the program was assessed with *t*-tests for the experimental status coefficient adjusted for the baseline measure of the outcome under study to control for the initial difference between the experimental and the control groups. Age and gender were not controlled for because they were not confounders and did not improve the fit of the model; their inclusion led to an unnecessary loss of degrees of freedom. Specific analyses were conducted for each outcome (i.e., internalizing and externalizing symptoms, feelings of popularity and satisfaction). These analyses were carried out first for the whole sample and then separately for children enrolled in integration and regular classes. Although the interaction term between type of class and experimental status was not statistically significant for any outcome variable, it was felt that stratified analysis might reveal different effect sizes between integration and regular classes because the classes correspond to different learning settings. The fit of each model was checked by residual analysis.

The second series of analyses was based on more complex GLM models in which interaction terms between experimental status and gender, age or fluency in French were tested for statistical significance after controlling for the baseline value of the outcome under study. These analyses were carried out for the whole sample and for each type of class (integration vs. regular), and the fit of each model was checked by residual analysis.

Results

Of the 142 children interviewed at baseline, 4 were lost to follow-up because they had moved to another school during the program. More boys ($n = 81$) than girls ($n = 57$) took part in the study, not because the participation rate was higher for boys, but rather because there were more boys than girls enrolled in the participating classes. The gender ratio was roughly equal to one in the experimental group, but there were almost twice as many boys as girls in the control group (Table 1). The mean age for the whole sample was 9.8 years and it was slightly lower in integration classes (8.9 years) than in regular classes (10.4 years). All children but one were from immigrant families originating in 30 different countries, mostly Asian and South American (Table 1), and the majority of children (68%) were born outside of Canada. Country of birth (i.e., in Canada vs. outside of Canada) did not significantly affect the effect of the intervention and thus was not controlled for in statistical analyses. Most children (77%) in the

Table 1 Demographic characteristics

	Integration classes		Regular classes		Total	
	Experimental	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental	Control
<i>n</i>	26	25	47	40	73	65
Gender						
Boys (%)	54	64	51	68	52	66
Girls (%)	46	36	49	32	48	34
Age						
Mean	9.4	8.4	10.4	10.4	10.0	9.6
Stand. deviation	1.4	2.4	1.1	1.0	1.3	1.9
Origin (%)						
Africa	31	16	9	8	16	11
Asia	27	24	53	35	44	31
Europe	8	4	4	13	6	9
South America ^a	35	56	4	43	34	48
Canada	0	0	0	3	0	2

^aMexico, Central and South America.

Table 2 Mean level of mental-health symptoms and self-esteem indices before and after the intervention

	Integration classes		Regular classes	
	Experimental (<i>n</i> = 26)	Control (<i>n</i> = 25)	Experimental (<i>n</i> = 47)	Control (<i>n</i> = 40)
Self-reported				
Externalizing				
Before	9.65	8.56	7.32	10.00
After	5.54	7.84	5.94	12.85
Internalizing				
Before	17.38	15.88	13.34	15.90
After	11.27	13.24	10.55	15.78
Popularity				
Before	8.62	7.92	8.64	9.23
After	9.69	7.88	9.34	9.15
Satisfaction				
Before	8.35	8.68	8.70	8.38
After	9.42	8.12	8.85	7.88
Teacher's report				
Externalizing				
Before	17.31	8.76	8.11	9.80
After	13.81	9.72	8.91	10.68
Internalizing				
Before	12.23	8.20	7.43	11.15
After	12.96	3.92	8.43	11.23

experimental group attended all 11 workshops and almost all (97%) attended 9 workshops or more.

In the posttest, children in the experimental group reported a significantly lower mean level of mental health symptoms than those in the control group and higher mean levels of feelings of popularity and satisfaction (Tables 2 and 3). The effect of the intervention on self-esteem appeared to be more pronounced in the integration classes than in the regular classes. For instance, after the program, the mean Popularity score for the children in integration classes was 1.65 higher (CI .55 to 2.76) in the experimental group than in the control group, whereas the program seemed to have had no significant effect ($\beta = .41$; CI $-.32$ to 1.15) on the regular classes. Judging by the distribution of residuals,

these models appear to fit the data well, although the highest outcome values tend to show larger residuals.

The Teacher's Report Form provided mixed evidence regarding the effects of the program. On the one hand, the posttest mean level of symptoms according to the TRF was lower in the experimental group than in the control group of the integration classes, and this difference was significant for internalizing symptoms ($\beta = -7.19$; CI -9.82 to -4.56) (Table 3). On the other hand, the mean level of symptoms was almost equal in the experimental and control groups of the regular classes.

The effects of the workshops on externalizing and internalizing symptoms did not vary with gender or age. In the case of self-esteem, the interaction effect of gender was specific to integration classes, whereas the interaction effect of age tended to be more specific to regular classes (Table 4). The mean level of popularity was 2.26 (CI .12 to 4.39) higher and the mean level of satisfaction 1.86 (CI .40 to 3.32) higher among the boys of the experimental group than those in the control group, whereas the workshops had no significant effect for the girls. Overall, the effect of the workshops on self-esteem tended to decrease with the age of the children. However, stratified analyses by type of class suggest that the interaction effect of age is mostly limited to regular classes (Table 4).

Discussion

Implementing school-based programs to promote the mental health of immigrant and refugee children and prevent psychoemotional problems is quite a challenge because of the diversity of ethnic communities and the complexity of the school system. The results of this evaluative study suggest that creative expression workshops have a positive effect on immigrant and refugee children's self-esteem and may decrease their emotional and behavioral symptoms.

Table 3 Effect of creative-expression workshops on mental-health symptoms and self-esteem indices

	Integration classes (<i>n</i> = 51)		Regular classes (<i>n</i> = 87)		Total (<i>N</i> = 138)	
	<i>b</i> ^a	<i>t</i> -test ^b	<i>b</i> ^a	<i>t</i> -test ^b	<i>b</i> ^a	<i>t</i> -test ^b
Self-reported						
Externalizing	-2.96 (1.374)	-2.15 (.036)	-4.63 (1.179)	-3.93 (<.000)	-4.15 (.936)	-4.44 (<.000)
Internalizing	-3.00 (1.730)	-1.73 (.090)	-2.96 (.941)	-3.14 (.002)	-3.13 (.891)	-3.52 (.001)
Popularity	1.65 (.551)	3.00 (.004)	.41 (.371)	1.12 (.268)	.84 (.309)	2.71 (.008)
Satisfaction	1.46 (.119)	3.95 (<.000)	.79 (.338)	2.33 (.022)	1.04 (.254)	4.11 (<.000)
Teacher's report						
Externalizing	-3.20 (2.119)	-1.51 (.138)	-.13 (1.346)	-.09 (.925)	-1.41 (1.138)	-1.24 (.217)
Internalizing	-7.19 (1.307)	5.50 (<.000)	.20 (1.268)	.16 (.874)	-2.22 (.948)	-2.34 (.021)

^aRegression coefficient (standard error in parenthesis) for experimental status (experimental = 1; control = 0) after controlling for baseline value of outcome. ^b*t* statistic (*p* value in parentheses) for test of significance of regression coefficient.

Table 4 Effect of creative-expression workshops on self-esteem, by gender

	Integration classes (<i>n</i> = 51)		Regular classes (<i>n</i> = 87)		Total (<i>N</i> = 138)	
	<i>b</i> ^a	<i>t</i> -test ^b	<i>b</i> ^a	<i>t</i> -test ^b	<i>b</i> ^a	<i>t</i> -test ^b
Popularity						
Gender * group ^{cd}	2.26 (1.060)	2.13 (.039)	.44 (.771)	.57 (.573)	1.11 (.617)	1.79 (.075)
Age * group ^{ce}	-.49 (.306)	-1.59 (.118)	-.68 (.373)	-1.81 (.073)	-.54 (.191)	-2.81 (.006)
Satisfaction						
Gender * group ^{cd}	1.86 (.726)	2.56 (.014)	.33 (.714)	.46 (.649)	.40 (.530)	.75 (.456)
Age * group ^{ce}	-.18 (.226)	-.80 (.427)	-.72 (.331)	-2.183 (.032)	-.34 (.164)	-2.06 (.041)

^aRegression coefficient (standard error in parentheses). ^b*t* statistic (*p* value in parentheses) for test of significance of regression coefficient after controlling for baseline value, age and gender. ^cExperimental = 1; control = 0. Boys = 1; girls = 0. ^dInteraction term between experimental status and gender. ^eInteraction term between experimental status and age.

The findings that creative expression workshops have more influence on boys' self-esteem than on girls' could reflect the gap existing between boys' role models in their country of origin and the models provided by the host society, which may be experienced as a loss of status. The role of the workshops as a bridge between the country of origin and the host country may thus be more noticeable in those elementary school children for whom this gap is more problematic.

In the pilot projects of the workshops, teachers expressed concerns about the possibility of retraumatization or of opening a can of worms that could not be subsequently contained by the school services. This fear was not realized during the evaluative study, although giving the children room to express their creativity and emotions might at first glance appear to temporarily disrupt the school routine. For instance, the teachers' main complaint after the program was that too much water was spilled while the children were painting.

This study has two main limitations, which are linked to the institutional constraints of school-based research. First, because of the relatively small scope of the study and because children could not be switched to another class during school hours for the program, neither teachers nor children were randomly assigned to the experimental or control groups. Thus the confounding effect of variables (not

measured or not measurable) not controlled for by randomization may have affected results. Second, posttest interviews were carried out two weeks after the workshops and longer-term effects could not be estimated because of the difficulty in locating children after they had moved to another class or school.

Despite its limitations, the evaluative study reported here is, to our knowledge, one of the very few quantitative assessments of the effect of creative expression workshops on the mental health of immigrant and refugee children. Attempting to quantify complex transformation processes is no easy task, especially in a transcultural research context, which is already fraught with a number of validity problems (Ager, 2000). However, the information provided by quantitative analysis is a must for mental health professionals, who face the major challenge of looking critically at widespread intervention models.

In multiethnic societies, child psychiatrists are often consulted by schools about migrant and refugee families. The development of solid intervention models appropriate for this population is crucial (Hodes, 2000; Jones, 1998). This study underscores the potentially beneficial role of creative expression programs within the school setting in enhancing the adjustment process of immigrant and refugee children and helping them come to terms with their past experiences.

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