



**Title:** The hybrid dramatherapeutic use of paper airplanes during the time of COVID-19 with a group 5 young people aged 11 to 12

**Name and job title of Case Study Author:** Becky Wilburn, Drama Therapist

**Email :** [beckywilburndramatherapy@gmail.com](mailto:beckywilburndramatherapy@gmail.com)

## **Description**

This case study explores the use of paper airplanes used in a dramatherapy group delivered to five young people (aged 11-12) attending a UK secondary school.

The group of children were put together for dramatherapy in the autumn of 2020 when the schools were returning to in-person teaching following the first lockdown. Due to individual circumstances, some children were still unable to attend school in person and so the sessions were held in a hybrid fashion (i.e. both online and face to face).

As the dramatherapy sessions had to incorporate the children who were in the room as well as those who were on screen, it was important to find ways to cooperate and share with each other in a safe and therapeutic way.

Many different activities and ideas were suggested by the group members. The first one was making and playing with paper airplanes as this was something that was accessible for all. Making and flying paper airplanes provided a creative outlet, which everyone could do, whilst also creating a talking point. In particular, the activity provided humour and allowed the group to bond and build relationships with each other. (Malik, 2021)

## Context

The overall aim of the dramatherapy group was to help a group of Year 7 children (aged 11 and 12 years) to develop peer relationships as they returned to full time education. It is important to note that the children had not had the 'usual' transition to secondary school due to the first COVID-19 lockdown of 2020.

As we know COVID-19 and the subsequent closures of schools had an impact on children's mental health. (Kauhanen, et al., 2022) The school identified children who were at risk of poor wellbeing and would find the transition to secondary school more challenging. The children were selected by the pastoral team at the school based on information from their primary schools. Some had family members who were vulnerable to COVID-19 and others had English as their second language. They wanted the children to begin to build relationships with their peers through the therapeutic process.

The school was a respected state-run school of approximately 900 children. Their enrolment criteria meant that children attended from various parts of the county. Most children who started at the school in year 7 did not attend the same primary school as others in their year group and so building healthy relationships for the students was an important task of the first term.

The group was made up of 5 children, 2 of whom were boys and 3 of whom were girls. A total of 12 dramatherapy sessions were offered to the group. The children had a range of social and economic background demographics. The school's pastoral team had ascertained that these children were more marginalized based on information from their primary schools. One child did not want to attend school because of the risk of passing COVID-19 to her vulnerable mother. Another had parents who were front-line workers and thus, were unable to bring their child regularly into school as the school transportation system wasn't functioning properly. It was for these reasons that the group was required to be hybrid.

Before the group got underway, each child had been assessed individually, with support of the school's pastoral team, to ascertain if they would benefit from a 12 week dramatherapy group. Through discussion with myself and the team around the children we agreed that the objectives of the intervention were -

- social interaction and bonding with peers.
- have a creative outlet for emotional expression
- explore anxiety and stress related to the COVID 19 pandemic

As the children had not met before, they did not know anything about the other group members. Having activities each person could be involved in was of paramount importance, as was being able to do the activities online. In this assessment, it was agreed that each child would have access to paper and pen if they were online and that this would be provided for those who were at school. As such, making paper airplanes as a suggestion during the first dramatherapy session and were deemed an accessible activity for all.

## **Method**

The first session was attended by all children with 3 children being in the room and 2 online. We began with brief introductions of each person, including myself as the therapist. The idea of making a paper airplane was introduced straight away by myself. The group discussed their experiences of making and throwing paper airplanes. I showed the group in the room and those online the basic way to fold a paper airplane. Everyone had a go and showed us how far their plane travelled. This led to a discussion on different ways to fold the paper to improve the distance travelled.

One boy, who was attending the group online, demonstrated to us a different method to fold the paper. We all tried to follow his instructions, and this encouraged clear communication, which could have been difficult due to the hybrid nature of the group. It also led to miscommunication, where some of the planes did not look the same as the one the boy online had created. This made the group laugh and they shared their positive and negative experiences of origami.

The group were beginning to bond and laugh with each other. Developing the session, I suggested we start adding art work or words to the planes they had made. I asked the children to think about parts of their life before the lockdown they would like to keep and what they would like to leave behind and to represent this on their planes. At the end of the session each child agreed to share their plane and artwork with the rest of the group.

## **Outcomes**

At the end of the session, I asked the group what they would like to do with their paper planes. All of the children decided to keep them. One particular boy, who attended the group online, consistently displayed his paper airplane on his shelf behind his desk and it was always on display every time he attended one of our sessions; thinking therapeutically, this may indicate that he valued the sessions. One girl, who had been present in the room during this first session, had managed to throw her plane out through the crack of the external door and it floated into the car park. This became a joke within the group that if there was something that had come to an end, they would suggest that we 'just throw it out of the door'. This became an 'in-joke', and a metaphor within the group. This built common connections and group language, giving the clients a way of bonding (El Bitar, 2022). This creative expression helped to support the groups bonding. Another child had decided to give their paper airplane a name and it became personified by the client. Personification of an object is considered an important part of dramatherapy. (Jones, 2007). During each subsequent session someone in the group would ask how the plane was doing. We subconsciously created an imaginary member of the group. The child would tell us a story about something that had happened during the week that the paper plane had witnessed. This brought great humour and helped the group to bond with someone who was not always able to attend the group in person. Humour in dramatherapy can help the building blocks of a therapeutic relationship (Vávra et al, 2020). This was the case with the dramatherapy group. The imaginary member of the group, the 'in joke' comments, and the airplane character added more substance to the therapeutic relationship. The metaphor and symbolism of them helped the bond the group, create a community language and develop valuable healing during a challenging time. (Mann, 1996).

## **Key learning points**

The lockdown relating to the COVID-19 outbreak has given dramatherapists a new way of working. (Christiana, 2024) . This case study is an example of how hybrid dramatherapy work can be effective. Working with a group of children to build relationships with each other during a vulnerable time and being able to make them feel included when they were both online and face to face is not an easy task. However, using simple creative activities such as paper airplanes can develop initial bonds which, ultimately, bolster the beginning of a relationship.

Through this activity, the group developed their own shared language, relating to their paper airplanes following this session. This included personifying an airplane, and using the experience of throwing one to describe other events which emerged throughout the therapy. Through these shared experiences the group members were able to make each other laugh and communicate with each other in a way that only they understood.

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The school year post lockdown for these young people was made less stressful due to the intervention of this dramatherapy group. They were able to make new friends in their new school even when not meeting face to face.

The client demeanour changed from appearing to be anxious and nervous about this new way of working to engaged and actively participating in activities in both the therapy session and at school. The pastoral team at the school, who referred the children to the group, noticed a marked improvement and enthusiasm for coming into school even during the continuously stressful time of lockdowns and COVID outbreaks.

This case example relates to the practice of dramatherapy and hybrid working. It demonstrates that, embedding creativity into clinical practice, no matter how simple the activity, can be an effective means for relationship building and for, ultimately, reaching therapeutic and clinical goals.

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