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Roleplaying to Develop Self Regulation

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Roleplaying to Develop Self Regulation

An Action Research Report

By Baylen Wagner

Roleplaying to Develop Self-Regulation

Submitted on ()

in fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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Advisor: _____

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Abstract

This action research study investigated the use of child-led play in an after school club as a means to reduce peer conflict and increase cooperation. Prior literature suggests that children behave differently during imaginative play and exhibit greater natural behavior regulation when adult involvement is limited or removed. A small group of child participants, aged 9-14 years, were given materials necessary for a roleplaying game where players take on imaginary characters and cooperatively complete dangerous quests. One child acted as game leader, designing the adventure's challenges and providing rules adjudication. The children attended six game sessions and completed questionnaires after each meeting. I recorded incidents of conflict between children and rated each game tables' self-management of disagreement. The children also provided verbal feedback in large group discussions. This study indicated that child conflict decreased over time while child awareness increased. Additionally, the children enjoyed their participation. The children who acted as game leaders experienced the greatest change in awareness, resulting in higher expectations of their fellow students. This study has convinced me to incorporate more child-led activity in curricular and extracurricular scenarios. The empathy and self-awareness that grew from leadership during free-play proved the children's good use of independence.

Keywords: roleplaying, games, Montessori, elementary, conflict, behavior, leadership

Leadership is a hard goal to define and empower in a pedagogical setting. Teachers strive to lead according to their training as much as possible, but certain times of day or sets of circumstance can push them into faulty habits. When events in school lack infrastructure or precedent, the teacher may begin to feel like a frantic sheep dog. They stand at the center of chaos and try desperately to corral children into some facsimile of peace. They dictate behavior and demand acquiescence instead of understanding from their students. All the while, the children wait to be set free so they can go back to their natural autonomous state.

This was the case in an after-school club I began two years ago. The school club was designed to allow children a time and place to play strategy and storytelling games. The children were enthusiastic and committed to their hobby. My own interest in the pastime was also strong. I believed the games were robust and educational in many ways. They built logical reasoning and communication skills. They demanded attention to detail. Also, many games involved practice with arithmetic. The children rallied around my interest and slowly grew in number. In the third year of the club's existence, the child to adult ratio approached 16 to one. That was a tipping point. It became strenuous for me to manage activity and I realized I was starting to dread club gatherings. The children were full of questions, arguments, and desires for attention. I could not possibly satisfy them all, and so games club began to feel like an exercise in futility. I went away from each gathering with ears ringing and adrenaline coursing through my veins.

The problem was that I could not give every child what they needed. I was one person teaching and running multiple games at multiple tables. Games club had become a two-hour period of chaos. I began to wonder if games belonged at school, and if they might be doing harm to the children's self-regulatory development. The children exhibited very little impulse control and patience during club gatherings. Multiple children would ask for advice or rules

adjudication from me at the same time. Some would wait patiently, but others would interrupt a nearby game if their game was on hold for my attention. Children would argue amongst themselves about rules or events, but in the end required my intervention because there was no established authority at club gatherings aside from my own. It seemed possible that the extracurricular madness of games club might be neutralizing the developing maturity that children showed during regular school hours. Was it time to retire the club?

Yes, and no. It was clearly time to retire the first model of games club, but it was also an opportunity to launch something new. These children, between the ages of nine and 13, needed something different to satisfy their desire for gaming. As students in an independent Montessori school, they came to club gatherings with a background of Montessori pedagogy. I wanted to leverage that method, especially its devotion to children's independence. The Montessori Method touts the benefits of supplying children with freedom that they might exercise decision making skills and discretion (Montessori, 1989.) To host an extracurricular club in-keeping with Montessori philosophy I needed to examine the possibility for self-regulation in the children's free play. I needed to test their ability to lead their own games. I had to hope that it was possible to build a model for club session that supported the children's independence.

The previous model of games club was a social mixer with a diverse selection of games. I would bring card, board, and dice games that the children could select to play. I would teach the necessary rules. I would occasionally offer storytelling games wherein I would be the narrator. These storytelling games were, by far, the most popular type of gaming at club gatherings. These types of games involve heroic play-acting. The players imagine themselves a party of adventurers together on a quest to complete some dangerous task. The narrator provides them with challenges, and dice rolling determines the outcomes of different contests. These

games have been compared to the sociodramatic play children create spontaneously on playgrounds. That activity is commonly referred to as “playing pretend.”

The huge demand for these games at club sessions meant I was overburdened with narrating storytelling games for large groups of children. The focus of this intervention was to examine how storytelling game play could be structured to allow greater independence and self-regulation in the child participants. By designing game club sessions that focused on child-led roleplaying games, I hoped to lift the burden of management from my shoulders. Additionally, I wanted to reduce the level of conflict and argument I was observing in club sessions.

This structure came about as a result of my investigation into previous literature on educational imaginative play. Academic reading supports that sociodramatic play is a proven method for behavior development. It also suggests that child-led play is *more* effective than adult-driven play.

Review of Literature

Sociodramatic and Imaginary Play Skills

Previous studies have examined the structure of sociodramatic play as it relates to childhood development. Most have found that it may be an appropriate intervention for building social and emotional skill sets (Bergen, 2002; Elias & Berk, 2002; Elias & Simpson, 2011; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Sinha, 2012; Viellevoys & Nader-Grobois, 2007; Wolfber & Schuler, 1999; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). For the purposes of this study, it becomes necessary to equate sociodramatic play with imaginative roleplaying activities. This is a logical premise because both activities involve imagined roles and interdependent storytelling. Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) examined the efficacy of roleplaying games as intervention tools with upper elementary children and adolescents. They defined this play as co-constructed narratives where participants

experiment with personal identity and use imagination to understand events in light of shared frameworks. Similarly, sociodramatic play is frequently described as a pretense involving roles, situations, and social interaction among peers (Sinha, 2012). This manner of play appears at approximately age two (Viellevoye & Nadr-Grobois, 2007), and continues through adulthood, as evidenced by the rising popularity of roleplaying games (RPGs) in adult society. Though the content and complexity of sociodramatic/RPGs may change as humans develop, the basic structure of these activities remains equivalent.

At the heart of pretend play is imagination. Imagination is critical to all subjects of education, even the “hard” sciences (e.g. math, physics, chemistry). This is because it “involves our capacity to think of the possible rather than just the actual” (Hadzigeorgiou & Fotinos, 2007, p.16). Storytelling helps humans achieve a more encompassing knowledge of the world. This is especially important for developing children. The grade-school mind is not usually inspired by practical elements of ordinary life. It reaches for the extraordinary, but adults cannot give all children direct experiences with extreme physical or political forces (e.g. the might of a volcano, or the trials of a war effort). They can, however, inspire interest through well-delivered story. With the gift of imagination, children can connect to other times and places. A well-practiced imagination helps children apply knowledge to novel situations, making them capable leaders and scientists (Hadzigeorgiou & Fotinos, 2007).

Roleplaying exercises are also a proven method for skill-building. They draw the ego into new scenarios and test the limits of personal choice. As Elias and Simpson (2011) affirmed, the “organic structure of fantasy” makes sociodramatic play attractive to young people. At the same time, it requires attention to the cooperative choices of the players, which is highly demanding of children's regulatory abilities (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). The practical task of any roleplaying

game is the abstraction of self. The players are asked to juggle multiple roles within the game's context (Rosselet & Stauffer, 20013). They distance themselves from everyday identity and assume a symbolic role. Then they interact verbally with the imagined setting with the aid of their peers. Each child describes the actions taken by the child's character, but does not necessarily take those actions in the child's physical body. A child, for instance, might say that they are flying, but they do not actually have the power to take that action. They may pantomime the activity, or they may simply remember their imagined state and trust that other children remember it as well. All children are agreeing to multiple suspensions of disbelief. The success of the game's pretense depends on the children's ability to subvert the ego to the group consciousness, which proves feasible due to the intrinsic motivation of free play (Sinha, 2012). All children *want* the game to succeed because it is fun, so they work very hard to uphold whatever imaginings are put forward.

Thus, skill sets involved in roleplaying include not only imagination and communication, but also meta-cognitive functions such as self-regulation and impulse control. This is evidenced in different ways. Cemore and Herwig (2005) found a positive correlation between solitary imaginative play in three to five year-olds and behavioral regulation. Their research suggested that even solitary roleplaying builds internal regulation when children pretend a role and feel they must act according to that role. The demand for authenticity in drama improves internal dialogue and thus allows children to delay gratification in other contexts. For instance, a child who pretends to be "grandpa" might inhibit certain physical behaviors in play, reasoning internally that "grandpa" would not stand on his head, eat with his hands, shout when bored etc. The child will inadvertently become adept at practicing that type of restraint. When called upon to exhibit such character, the child has a body of experience to draw from.

A second layer of impulse control was outlined by Elias and Simpson (2011), who asserted that roleplaying requires constraint to the limitations and realities of the world in which the game is set. These external stimulations are direct feedback from the player group and require, according to Viellevoys and Nader-Grosbois (2007), “integrated self-regulation used to attain an identified objective, maintaining attention and motivation during problem-solving” (p.257). Their study also found that linguistic levels during play were indicative of overall self-regulation. In Boston Public Schools, Mardell (2013) introduced and studied storytelling/story acting in kindergarten environments designed at improving literacy and language. He observed increased social and emotional development as collaborative dramatizations took place.

Roleplaying as an Aid to Self-Regulation

In a historical examination of psychological literature, Post, Boyer and Brett (2006) defined self-regulation as being characterized by “high levels of cognitive effort and engagement, and by adaptive and effective use of learning and problem-solving strategies” (p.6). They go on to express how modern usage centers on a child’s potential to initiate, cease, and modulate behaviors. All these concepts align with Sinha’s (2012) study of self-regulation through sociodramatic play. She defined regulatory ability as a multidimensional construct that includes self-discipline and behavior management. The children in her study were tested for behavioral regulation before and after play interventions. Her simple tests suggested that children’s impulse control increased with time spent in unmediated imaginative play. Many activities in a child’s daily schedule require impulse control, but as Cemore and Herwig (2005) explained, true self-regulation is more complex than merely avoiding an action when an adult requests constraint. The behavior must be practiced by the child in a conscientious manner in the absence of authority. As Samalot-Reviera (2014) suggested in her article, a behavior can be

demonstrated and then practiced in different imagined contexts through dramatization. Imagined storytelling may provide the most natural format for the enactment of empathy in children's play and also offer the testing grounds for different ethical character choices (Waite & Rees, 2014).

Consequently, the use of roleplaying as a developmental aid to behavior regulation warrants investigation. Self-regulation is predictive of academic, social, and emotional functioning (Sinha, 2012). Failing to support the development of self-regulation in children could be tragic. Roleplaying games offer children a suitable chance to explore personal identity and awareness of social rules, developing self-concept (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). The imagined socialization of free play has been associated with gains in behavioral regulation, especially in those children with below average impulse control (Elias & Berk, 2002; Sinha 2012). Similarly, Viellevoe and Nader-Grosbois (2007) observed that in children three-six years of age, higher levels of symbolic behavior in a creative context were positively correlated with self-regulation. A study by Elias and Berk (2002) was unique in that it examined longitudinal gains in self-regulatory ability related to chosen free play. Their findings were consistent with previous statements. Increased imaginary interaction resulted in increased self-regulation. The children most in need of enhancing their self-regulatory abilities were those especially sensitive to the benefits of sociodramatic play.

Tolerance and empathy are qualities that indicate self-regulation. Subverting personal desires for the benefit of others demonstrates a matured form of ethical functioning. Roleplaying games have been shown to develop peer empathy and social skills. A study by Wolfberg and Schuler (1999) found integrated imaginary play groups to be an effective intervention for fostering peer interaction between normally developing children and children with autism. They observed that autistic children were capable of comprehending symbolic play with modeled

structures of non-verbal and verbal behavior. Additionally, normally developing children acquired greater sensitivity, tolerance and acceptance of individual differences through play. A recent study used abstract roleplaying game sessions to address asynchronous emotional and social development in gifted children (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). These gifted youth (marked by an IQ of 130 or higher) were identified to be at risk in socio-emotional environments poorly calibrated to their interests and cognitive maturity. Adult play therapists observed the roleplaying sessions to be very fruitful. The social feedback of peers proved a powerful instigator of change in the gifted children's norms of behavior. Adult therapists were present to help those children think about how to transfer new regulatory skills to life outside of the roleplaying game setting. In this way, Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) assert the effectiveness of imaginative play among peers for emotional development.

Other studies have emphasized the importance of pretend play to self-regulatory development (Viellevoye & Nader-Grosbois, 2007; Sinha, 2012). In most cases, positive gains are associated with child-led imaginative play. Sinha (2012) posits that free play among peers, unhindered by the expectations of adults, best supports children's behavioral improvement. This upholds Cemore and Herwig's (2006) findings that children learn the most internal regulation when making decisions in the absence of external authority. As Sinha (2012) explains, "The child's practice of moral decision-making and action with an adult is coercive in nature... child-child interactions allow for the development of the morality of cooperation" (p.33). In another instance, Waite and Rees (2014) examine the Steiner kindergarten approach and find that an intentional lightness of adult involvement during children's play produces favorable results. The children are given the required freedom to test and react to imagined interactions and develop an empathic understanding of others.

Warranted Explorations in Sociodramatic Play

In all of these cases, the development of self-regulation was linked to imaginative social play. However, all interventions, with the exception of Rosselet and Stauffer (2013), were targeted for early-childhood or college-level education environments. There is a body of unexplored age-ranges that warrants investigation. Many previous explorations operate under the assumption that primary school (3-6) is the sole period during which self-regulation abilities develop. Elias and Simpson's (2011) use of roleplaying in a post-secondary school setting suggests that imaginary structures are useful for sociological learning far beyond six years of age. Additionally, it was suggested that research be done on interventions utilizing mixed-age sociodramatic play (Sinha, 2012). The positive gains and improved social dynamics of Wolfberg and Schuler (1999) suggest that more emotionally developed peers may help to structure joint play and help less-developed children participate and grow.

Montessori methodology also argues for imaginative engagement and mixed-aged groupings in elementary-aged children (Montessori, 1989). Unfortunately, written roleplaying games were not made popular as a leisure activity for children and adults until the 1970's, which is outside Montessori's lifetime. However, it is possible to say that Montessori (1989) argues for the inclusion of imagination in standard curricula. She emphasizes the imaginative endowments of the early grade-school child, and explains the inseparable link between his mental and emotional growth. Her examination of the development of children suggests that humans around seven years of age begin their first orientation to moral questions and the judgment of acts (Montessori, 1973). She warns against unfettered fantasy, but argues for the engagement of the child's whole personality in a child-led search for knowledge and experience (Montessori, 1989). Thus, grounded roleplaying, a well structured exercise in personal decision-making and group

dynamic, could be seen as a practical means for exploring subjects, time periods, and ethical dilemmas. Age-appropriate sociodramatic play might therefore prove a powerful tool for children's self-construction in a Montessori environment. It begs investigation, especially at the elementary (6-12 year) age period, which Montessori defines as critically sensitive to abstraction (Montessori, 1973).

Bearing in mind the academic work of previous investigations on roleplaying and self-regulation in children, this study aims to answer one question: What affect will a structure of child-led roleplaying games have on the behavior regulation of child participants in an extracurricular games club? The study focuses on the severity and frequency of conflict between children during the two-hour game session.

Method

In a games club extracurricular setting this study used student input and staff observation to evaluate student behavior from multiple perspectives. The participants included 16 children, ranging in age from 9 to 13 years. The majority of children attended 4th through 6th grade at the time of the study. The games club extracurricular was offered to students at a private Montessori school. Participation was voluntary and based upon student interest. I coordinated gatherings and provided game materials. These materials included twenty-sided dice, custom made character statistic sheets and game master rules guides, pencils, laminated 1-inch grid paper for mapping, cardboard pawns with monster and character art, and (whenever possible) three-dimensional miniatures of characters and creatures requested by student game leaders. (See appendix A for visuals of these documents and materials). The adult facilitator was a faculty member of the school the children attended. The adult was well-acquainted with all child participants prior to the study. Club sessions took place weekly over a period of six weeks.

The structure of roleplaying games used in this intervention mimicked popular roleplaying systems like Dungeons and Dragons. The game was like an acting exercise, where each player at the table took on the role of a self-created imaginary character. The strengths and weaknesses of that character, their equipment and skill sets were recorded on a character sheet in lists and numbers (See appendix A). These statistics allowed for mathematical determinations during the game. For instance, when a player said their character would attempt to climb a brick wall, the game referee (known as a game master or GM) could tell that player to roll a die and add their character's "acrobatics" bonus (recorded on their character sheet). The mathematical result tells the GM and the other players how successful the attempted action was. The GM would describe the result and the story would move forward. In this example, if the player's mathematical result was high enough, the GM might say to the player, "You find good hand-holds in the brick and quickly climb to the top of the outer wall." The judgment of results is completely subjective to the GM's logic. The players agree to abide by their rulings so that the game can function.

Each player was only in control of their character's choices. The GM controlled all other elements of the story, such as monsters, villains, allies, and nature. The players gained information about the imaginary world via the GM. They were responsible for describing the player's surroundings. For instance, the GM might say, "You enter a large abandoned courtyard. There are no stairs and only one door in the wall to your left. In the center of the yard there is a fire pit smoking slightly." The players then know that they could interact with any part of that environment. If the players ask for more information, the GM gives it to them based on what their characters can see, hear, smell, etc. The game is played without turns except when combat

ensues. Then the GM will facilitate a rotating turn order that gives each character about six seconds of action in the story

During this study period, the player's characters were all a part of a noble order of knights. They were sworn to uphold justice and defend the innocent. The players worked cooperatively to achieve certain goals. The GMs provided those goals through an adventure of their design. The GMs also provided opposition in the form of traps, puzzles, monsters, and intellectual debate. The players decided what methods to use to overcome said challenges. This study's intervention was the exclusive use of child leaders in roleplaying. Previous to this intervention the children were invited to play board, card, dice, or roleplaying games during the club. When roleplaying games were hosted, I was usually the GM for the adventure. During this study the club members were asked to play in roleplaying games exclusively, and children game mastered each and every adventure.

Prior to each games club session, I invited two or three children to be GMs in the forthcoming club gathering. The children I chose as GMs were returning members of the club or children who expressed interest in leading a game. The number of GMs chosen was based on predicted attendance. The goal was to prepare one game leader for every three or four players. From week to week, the child GMs were rotated so that no child led a game two weeks in a row. In some cases two children requested to be co-GMs at the same table, and this was allowed, especially when one or both children were new to game mastering.

To prepare child GMs, I explained the duties of that job to each child and helped them design an imaginary scenario that their players could explore. These conversations took place at recess and in passing moments between school work periods. A typical exchange lasted four or five minutes. The GMs were allowed to prepare their storyline in any means they saw fit. They

could write notes, draw maps, ask other GMs for advice, or do none of those things. My guidance was verbal. I would ask leading questions to explore possible directions their story might go if the players make certain choices. I would also advise the child GMs to design game statistics for certain monsters and story characters they planned to include in the adventure. By ‘game statistics’ I mean numbers and descriptions like those shown on the character sheet in appendix A. At the club gatherings themselves, I would introduce the various game narratives (referred to as missions) that the GMs were offering that week. Then I would ask for raised hands of volunteers for each imaginary mission (e.g. Who would like to explore the floating castle and try and discover it’s power source? You will sit at this table. Your GM will be Jared.), As much as possible, I attempted to evenly distribute child ages amongst the game tables.

During each club gathering I observed the behavior of participating children. I did not participate in individual game tables. While the children played, I took field notes on the observable incidents of conflict. A conflict was identified as any interaction between students involving raised voices, hostile words, or strong difference of opinion. The observations included notes on the initiation and resolution of the conflict when applicable. Each note was timed and indicated whether adult intervention took place.

At the end of each session I judged the overall severity of conflict observed at each game table and the observed success of self-management by the group. These were two subjective ratings from 0 to 10. The rating of conflict severity scaled 10 as the greatest intensity to 0 as the least. The rating of self-management scaled from 10 as extensive self management to 0 as none. After rating the table, I noted the most common means of conflict resolution at the table in question. I would make these judgments as each table finished its adventure. The different games would finish naturally at staggered times, giving me a chance to hand out questionnaires

and finish my evaluation before the next table concluded. See Appendix B for a blank sample of my field notes.

The children were asked to complete questionnaires after each game club session (see Appendix C). These questionnaires were designed to measure the children's opinions of the game experience that week. Students were asked multiple choice questions about the overall success of the game session, their personal participation, the frequency of conflict at the table, and the effect that conflict had on the game. The children were not prompted with a specific definition of success. It was a subjective term that they could interpret as they saw fit. The second half the questionnaire allowed open-ended responses to the questions: What was your favorite moment in today's game? What things did you learn in today's game that you would like to apply to everyday life? See Appendix C for a blank sample of the student questionnaires. The children's answers were kept unidentified except by table number, which was assigned at the beginning of the club session.

Additional data was collected in two discussion groups held outside club sessions. The first was a large group discussion held before a club gathering in the middle of the study timeline. All attending children were asked to speak about imaginative games like those used in games club. The questions centered on the dynamic of the game table, and what makes a game successful and fun. See Appendix D for the list of questions I drew from during the discussion. This meeting was audio recorded to ensure accuracy in transcription.

The second discussion group was held after the last game club session and was limited to only GMs. Those children who had facilitated many roleplaying adventures were asked to speak about leadership and game design. Nine children were in attendance, ranging in age from 11 to

14 years. See Appendix E for the list of questions I drew from during the discussion. This meeting was also audio recorded to ensure accuracy.

Data Analysis

The first data set is the children's scaled ratings of each game session. The questionnaires they completed after each session asked four pertinent questions: How do you feel this game session went? How do you feel about your participation as a player in today's game? How much fighting between players did you notice? How did this fighting affect the game? The first two questions were compiled and averaged to find an approximate measure of game success from the child's perspective. The highest score possible was 3, and this represented a subjective rating of "really great." A rating of 0, conversely, represented a rating of "awful." The first session yielded an average of 2.1. The second and third sessions yielded 2.4. The fourth session came in at 2.3, while the fifth and sixth sessions were 2.1 and 1.5, respectively.

The second two questions regarding fighting and its effects were similarly compiled. The children rated the amount of fighting they observed in a range from none (0) to a great deal (3). These answers were averaged for each session and then modified by the fourth question regarding effect. When a child identified fighting, they could qualify that answer in one of three ways: It made things more fun (1). It was not good or bad (0). It made things less fun (-1). These scores were averaged and then subtracted from the respective scaled fighting answers. This served to increase the severity of the fighting score if more children rated it as "making things less fun," or lower the score if more children saw it as "making things more fun." The resulting values for each session were termed **child rated conflict**.

Figure 1 shows game success and child rated conflict graphed on the same vertical axis, with sessions in chronological order as the horizontal plot points.

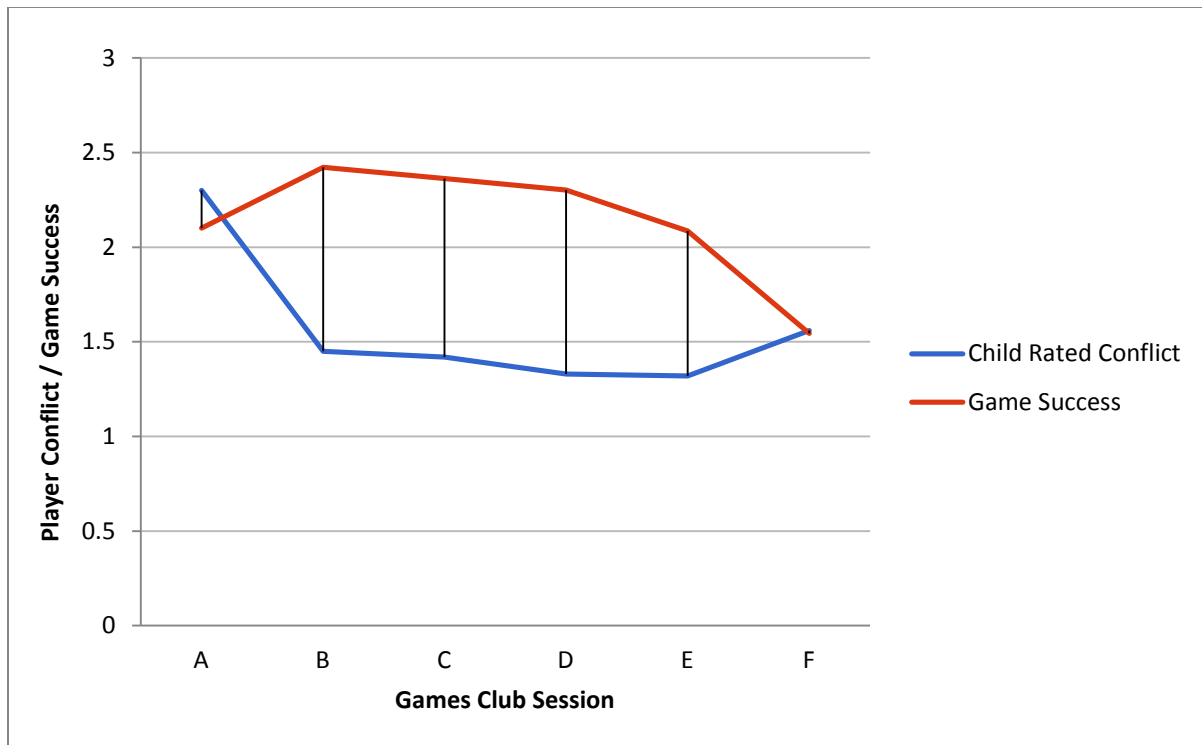


Figure 1. Child Rated Conflict and Child Rated Game success results

In examining the graph we see an inverse relationship between conflict and game success. This could indicate a relationship between the quality of gaming and the intensity of player fighting. More specifically, it could suggest that the children were cognizant of the level of conflict and generally believed it had a negative impact on game play.

My personal observations led to the second data set, an adult scaled rating of the game tables. I rated two qualities for each game table at each session: severity of observable conflict, and overall student self-management. These scores were mathematically transferred to a proportional scale comparable to the children's. Severity could range from 0 (minimum) to 3 (maximum). My ratings of student self-management were used as modifiers. After division, these self-management scores ranged from -1 (none) to +1 (extensive). Because the child questionnaire data did not consistently include individual data for each table, the adult scores per game table were averaged by session for comparison. The self-management score for each

session was subtracted from its respective conflict severity score, thus positive self-management lowered the ending value, and negative self-management raised the ending value. The ending value was termed **adult rated conflict**. The equations below show this mathematical process where AGC stands for average game session conflict (as rated by myself) and AGSS stands for average game session student self-management (also rated by myself).

$$\text{AGC (range 0-10)} * 0.3 \text{ (to create a 0 to 3 range)} = \text{Raw Session Conflict}$$

$$\text{AGSS (range 0-10)} - 5 \text{ (to create neg/positives)} * 0.2 \text{ (to create range -1 to +1)} = \text{Session Self-Management}$$

$$\text{Raw Session Conflict (0 to 3)} - \text{Session Self-Management (-1 to +1)} = \text{Adult Rated Conflict}$$

Figure 2, below, graphs adult rated conflict and child rated conflict on the same vertical axis with chronological sessions as the horizontal plot points.

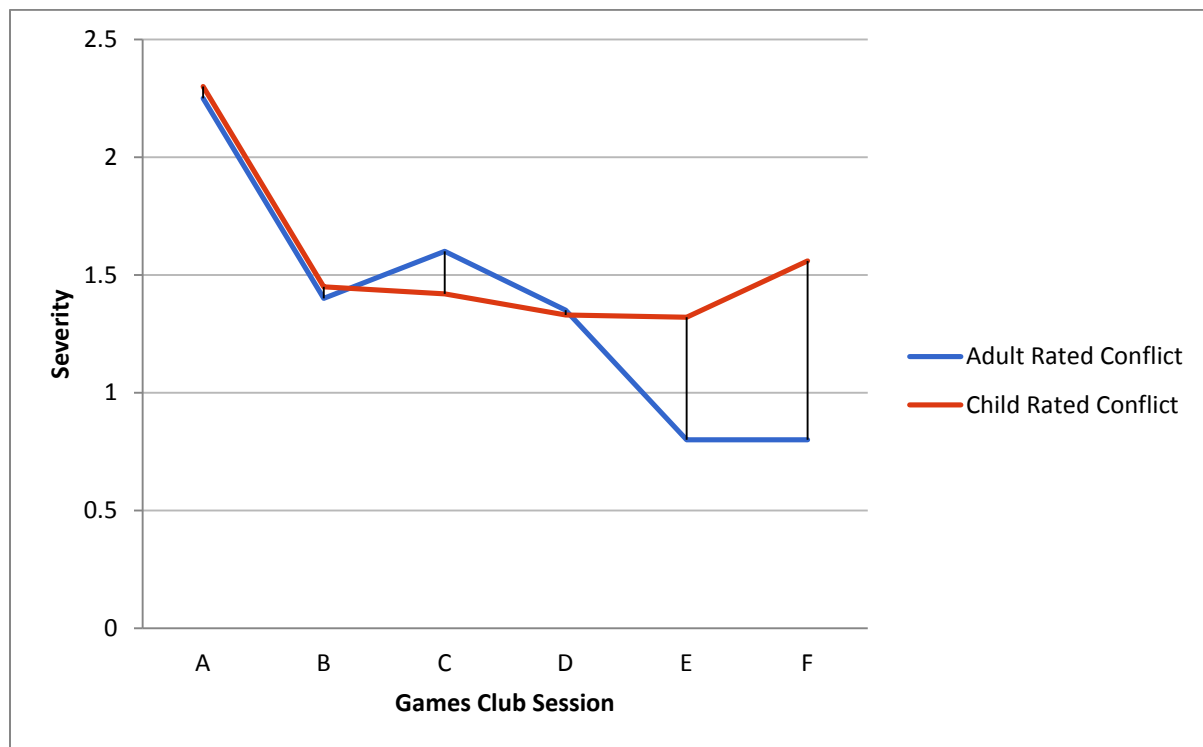


Figure 2. Adult Rated Conflict and Child Rated Conflict results

The graph shows some correlation between adult rated conflict and child rated conflict. The adult rated conflict suggests an overall decrease in conflict over time. The child rated conflict mirrors the adult initially but diverges at session E and moves contrary in session F, making it

hard to prove any strong corroboration. One possible explanation for this lack of agreement is a slow increase in behavioral sensitivity amongst the children. Their individual perceptions of conflict may have changed such that lesser degrees of fighting seemed just as intense as instances in the first game sessions. This idea is supported by the increased number of comments regarding patience and staying calm that appeared in the open-ended portions of the questionnaires. Questions included: What was your favorite moment in today's game? What things did you learn in today's game that you would like to apply to everyday life? The first mention of behavior was in a questionnaire from game session C. It stated, "Don't fight or it will make things less fun." Game session D yielded one questionnaire with a similar response. "Try to stay calm. It makes everything better." In game session E, responses centered on selflessness and friendship. One child wrote, "that it's good to sacrifice something that you really like to help other people," while another advised, "don't be selfish." Game session F had four comments specifically regarding behavior. One child simply wrote, "be kind," while another said, "staying calm works." One child even wrote, "Patience is the ultimate virtue." The majority of questionnaires left these open-ended questions blank or responded with something humorous but non-pertinent, so it is worth noting that those children who chose to respond frequently mentioned behavior. Out of 92 total questionnaires from the children, only 26 papers had serious responses to the second question. Of those 26 with serious responses, 14 involved friendship, respect, and selflessness. The other 12 were varied, with statements ranging from, "I got better at creating riddles," to "everything has a price."

After game session C, the children were gathered to openly discuss gaming as a pastime. Their answers prove the existence of child-sensitivity to conflict and discordant behavior. One

child was quoted as saying, “I think what makes a creative mind game fun is when people don’t scream over other people.” Another child said:

“It’s really annoying when any two players, doesn’t matter if they are in separate games or the same game, and even if one is a GM that makes it worse...they’re just constantly in conflict. One has an issue with the other. It makes it loud. No one else can play or wants to play because those two people are having a disagreement.”

This pattern of responses continued in answers to questions like: When you play imaginative games in a group, what makes those games fun? What makes them less fun? What makes a game successful or unsuccessful? This makes it very clear that the children were, at least in retrospect, cognizant of their behavior and how it affected the game.

Furthermore, it seemed, based on their responses that the structure of a cooperative roleplaying game was preferred to competitive game-play styles. When asked to comment on games “where players are on the same team” the children unanimously agreed that cooperation increased fun. One child said, “If you are on the same team, then usually you have a large goal that you are all trying to get, and you’re fighting to get there rather than fighting each other. It makes the game better.” Another child answered, “If we were in a Hunger Games type game that would just be utter chaos.” This reference to a free-for-all gladiator tournament from a popular novel series shows the child’s sensitivity to disorder and competition in game play. It was apparent, based on child responses, that the children believed cooperative games were superior to competitive ones.

One interesting comparison emerged of its own volition. Though it was not asked, many children chose to self-identify their questionnaires as belonging to GMs. Though, no names were asked for or provided, some children would cross off the word “player” in the second question and write “GM” when they were game mastering in that club session. I decided to utilize this distinction. The ratings given by the self-identified GMs were compiled across all game sessions

and averaged. Then the ratings of all child questionnaires were averaged. The emergent rating of **game success** from GMs was 1.8 out of 3, while the rating from the general student body was 2.1 out of 3. Similarly, the **conflict** rating from GMs came out to 2.3 out of 3, while the general rating was only 1.6. This lower success and higher conflict rating could indicate greater expectations on the part of the GMs, who tended to be more experienced players. It could also indicate a raised level of behavioral awareness/sensitivity in those children who were responsible for leading games. The latter seems plausible when we examine open-ended feedback from the GMs themselves. In a group discussion by seven children, all of whom game mastered multiple times, there were certain themes of agreement. Children described leading a game as a difficult but rewarding experience that often left them feeling drained. They struggled in reconciling player expectations with their own expectations of the game. They described the study timeframe as a period of growth for games club children, both in skill and empathy. They agreed that this growth was due especially to the rising number of children who had led games.

The nine children in the discussion group, who led games multiple times, expressed mixed feelings about this responsibility. Almost all said they enjoyed the experience, but found it challenging. One child said, “I think game mastering is really fun because it gives you a chance to create your own world...however, it can get hectic sometimes.” Other children made noises of agreement. One child added, “You kind of have to think on your feet.” When asked if they felt that the players respected the GM’s time and energy, one child said, “It really depends. As much as it is about you, it is really about [the players] and if they really respect you. You would have a better chance - it would be more likely [to succeed] if you really put a ton of effort into GM-ing.” This statement shows high levels of selflessness and devotion to game success. It

is consistent with other children's' responses during the discussion. Another child answered the same question like this:

"It's a balance, because, I think, in my game master experience, if I feel like the players are not respecting my time and energy, I feel an urge to not respect theirs and say, like, 'Anything you do fails!' But you have to practice patience, because you want to make the game fun for everybody. Sometimes I feel pressure to make sure everybody feels included, and sometimes it seems like just the loudest person playing...gets to do his first move every battle."

I asked the children directly about child behavior during the data collection period, when all games were child-led. Their responses concur with the interpretation of questionnaire averages that suggests children who GM become more sensitive to behavioral conflict.

Regarding the test period, one child said:

"It's gotten worse and it's gotten better. I think it started out when kids don't listen to each other, kids listen to adults. When we first started kids GMing, they didn't respect kids enough, they respected the adults more, but I think we have learned since then. Also, I think it has been good for us to learn how to GM. It's good in many ways."

Another child explained the growth that occurs when a child GMs. He said:

"I also think that kids have definitely gotten louder, but lately I've noticed that the loudness has gone down because more people are GMing. That has lead to more people learning respect, which has lead to more people quieting down when it's not their turn to speak. I think kids are also learning creative skills, which is good. Creative skills are not something you can teach. You have to learn it for yourself."

All other children nodded in agreement with these ideas. So despite a final upward trend in questionnaire conflict ratings from the children, it seems that many children believed social behavior was improving over time. It is possible that, if this study were continued for a greater period of time, a more substantial pattern of ratings would emerge. One child suggested this explicitly when he said,

"I would say that, learning how to game master, people have begun to learn respect and learn how to respect their peers in different situations. I would say we have not reached the height of the place, the perfect point where people will be able to game master

without having their actions be questioned...but I think we are definitely on our way there.”

Two children echoed this sentiment, supporting the theory that child-led play had increased overall social awareness, especially in children who had volunteered to lead games. A child expressed concern for the increased chaos in games club when they explained changes since the study intervention:

If it's changed, I might say it's for the worse. Because sometimes when I'm in charge of stuff with people my own age, it feels like they don't really listen or respect me. Maybe because I'm their age, or younger, or some random factor. Plus there are more people so it gets more hectic. People get riled up. If it's changed, it's kind of gone downhill.

A different child disagreed with them, saying:

Personally I think that it might have got just a little bit better, because, first of all, more of the children have learned how to GM, and beforehand it was just three people including you [adult]. People are learning new skills both in the playing and GMing, but as [they] said it was getting a lot more hectic.

The first child conceded to the second that both points make sense. There was no argument between them. The children seemed to have gained an understanding of the increased energy resulting from higher attendance, but agreed that being a GM and solving problems independently had increased management skills.

I created this study to address feelings of overwhelm resulting from micromanaging the interactions of many children's game play. The study intervention was designed to test whether cooperative, child-led roleplaying games would serve as a learning tool for child self-management. Student written and verbal responses and my personal qualitative ratings suggest that children's self-management skills improved over the course of the study. Children stated a strong preference for cooperative games and said they enjoyed participating in the study. Furthermore, the discrepancy between general child conflict ratings and ratings from child leaders support the idea that leading game play increased behavioral awareness in said leaders.

In summary, this study found that cooperative, child-led game play with mixed-age groups did improve self-management amongst child participants, especially those who experienced participation as a game master. Possible extensions of this study would investigate ways to maximize gains. It might be prudent, for instance, to design this intervention to allow all children an opportunity to be game masters. The time period and data set of this study were also limited. Further studies could observe and track behavior over a longer period of time or with a greater number of participants.

Action Plan

To me, this study emphasized the importance of student independence. The behaviors that I observed and the children's own comments about growing self-control through responsibility have given me reason to further investigate child-led exercises. Before this intervention, games club was quickly becoming an overwhelming burden for me as host. After the intervention I felt a marked decrease in stress each gathering. That alone is reason enough to search for more and better ways to enhance child leadership. Of course, the long-term goal is to foster self-control in the children so that games club is not only safe and fun, but also a powerful developmental aid.

The study showed that children's self-awareness increased when they experienced game mastering. The more children who acquired that experience— one of management and accountability to a group – the more the club exhibited self-regulation. By self-regulation I mean sympathy, selflessness, and calm logical decision making.

The slight discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative data in this study is reasonably explained by the verbal comments of game mastering students. However, it would be prudent for me to keep a close eye on behavioral trends in the club and continue rating overall

conflict as objectively as possible. If my analysis was in error and the children begin to trend towards greater conflict, I must be prepared to reassess and adjust my intervention.

In future games clubs I want to extend this trend and keep asking for feedback from the children about the relative cooperation or conflict they experience in their games. I think the surveys were useful, but group discussions proved to be even more enlightening. I will continue to have students game master games rather than leading games myself. I will also look for ways that the game masters can give feedback to their players in a safe and constructive manner. My role in the club will be an observer and facilitator of ceremonies. Giving non-specific examples of constructive criticism, I will ask each game table to discuss their experience after each session. As with my first intervention, I plan to observe this feedback as objectively as possible and gather the children en masse every few sessions to talk about the overall direction of the club.

My action research project has strengthened my belief in the power of child-led cooperative play. This study did not provide much data regarding the preparedness of game masters. Children volunteered to lead games and no children were turned aside for a lack of preparation for a club session. As a result, game planning varied dramatically from child to child. It might be interesting to require a certain degree of visible, prior work from children who wish to game master. The work might be story-boarding, prose writing, or even artistic visuals. In the positive, requiring this work might raise the caliber of game play substantially. In the negative, it might deter children from volunteering to GM. It is impossible to predict, but I am very curious how raising my expectations of leaders would affect the games club overall. This is one possible follow-up action research topic.

Another other possible research extension I see is to look for more ways that children can be supported to govern themselves. I gave the GMs a great degree of responsibility, but the

authority of their words came from the in-game events that they refereed and narrated. I did not offer them any means of reprimanding players for non-constructive behavior. It is possible that they do not need that type of authority, or that GMs might not apply such authority in an egalitarian manner. However, I think it would be logical to establish with the children a series of club agreements that the GMs are given the power to enforce. Specifically, I imagine framing this such that the GMs are “hosts” of their game table, and if a player is harming the functionality of the game with negative outbursts or refusal to compromise, then the host can ask that player to step away from the table for a time. I think such an intervention would require that all child attendees agree the authority was reasonable. They would also need to decide on their own vocabulary to describe such occurrences. The research that I choose next could provide more insight into the full potential of empowered child leadership.

The final avenue of research that this study inspires would cross-examine the changes in behavior that child leaders exhibited in games club with their regular behavior in the academic school day. It would be interesting to see if other conflict, which does not center on games, changes after intensive, cooperative activities like those in the club. Personally, I plan to frequently repeat the things children said in questionnaires and discussion groups about empathy for leaders. As a future classroom guide, I am excited to share responsibility with my students when they show that type of empathy. If nothing else, this study has encouraged me to raise my expectations of child behavior. I will refuse to herd children or let their activity become completely dependent on my attentions.

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APPENDIX A



Character: _____

Level: _____ Player Name: _____

Description: _____

Strength	<input type="text"/>	Defense	<input type="text"/>	Aura	<input type="text"/>	Wounds	<input type="text"/>
Dexterity	<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>	Speed	<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>
Constitution	<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>
Intelligence	<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>		<input type="text"/>
Wisdom	<input type="text"/>	Mana	<input type="text"/>				<input type="text"/>
Charisma	<input type="text"/>	Max	<input type="text"/>				<input type="text"/>
							<input type="text"/>

DISCIPLINE				Ability Score	TOTAL
Melee Combat	+2	+4	+7	+	=
Ranged Combat	+2	+4	+7	+	=
Spellcasting	+2	+4	+7	+	=
Animal Handling	+2	+4	+7	+	=

SKILLS					
Athletics	+4	=	Medicine	+4	=
Engineering	+4	=	Perception	+4	=
Influence	+4	=	Performance	+4	=
Logic	+4	=	Stealth	+4	=

(Include +4 only if character has training in that skill.)

Spells/Maneuvers

Character Portrait

Languages Spoken

Wealth

Gp

Sp

Cp

Inventory



Game Master's Guide



Death

If a player character reaches her wound maximum, she goes unconscious and begins dying.

Tell that player to remain silent until danger has passed or their character is revived.

Any successful healing spell will revive a character.

Also, allies can attempt first-aid with a Medicine check. The difficulty for the check is: 10 + the number of rounds the player has been dying

(When the difficulty reaches 20, that character has died.)

Spellcasting

When a player tells you their character will use magic:

- Ask her to identify the target or targets.
- Ask her to describe the effects of the spell.
- Ask her to describe the duration (time).

- Tell her how much mana the spell will cost.
- Allow her to alter her description.

- Finalize the cost.
- Tell the character to record the mana spent.
- Ask her to make a spellcasting check.

- Compare this check to the target's Defense or make a mental ability score die check to resist (if applicable).

- Tell the players what happens.

BE DESCRIPTIVE!



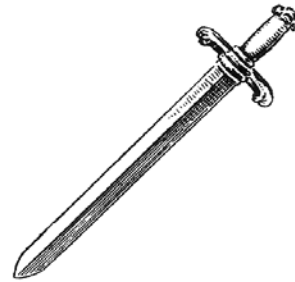


Game Master's Guide



Combat

- Decide who gets to act on the first round.
- Surprised players and enemies do not get to act right away.
- Ask each player involved what they will try and do this round.
 - Decide what the enemies and NPCs will try and do.
- Tell the players to make the appropriate skill, discipline, or ability checks.
 - Roll for the NPCs and enemies you control.
 - Compare results of competing checks.
- Tell the players what happens.
 - Go to the next round.
 - Repeat until the action slows.





Game Master's Guide



Disciplines

Melee Combat

(Attack something up close)

Uses Strength

Ranged Combat

(Shoot something far away)

Uses Dexterity

Spell-casting

(Summon detect magic)

Uses Int, Wis, or Cha

Animal Handling

(Command or befriend animals)

Uses Charisma

Skills

Athletics (Str or Dex) – Run, jump, climb

Engineering (Int) – Pick locks, disarm traps

Influence (Cha) – Persuade people or trick them

Lore (Int) – Remember historical or magical knowledge

Medicine (Wis or Int) – Give first aid or make remedies

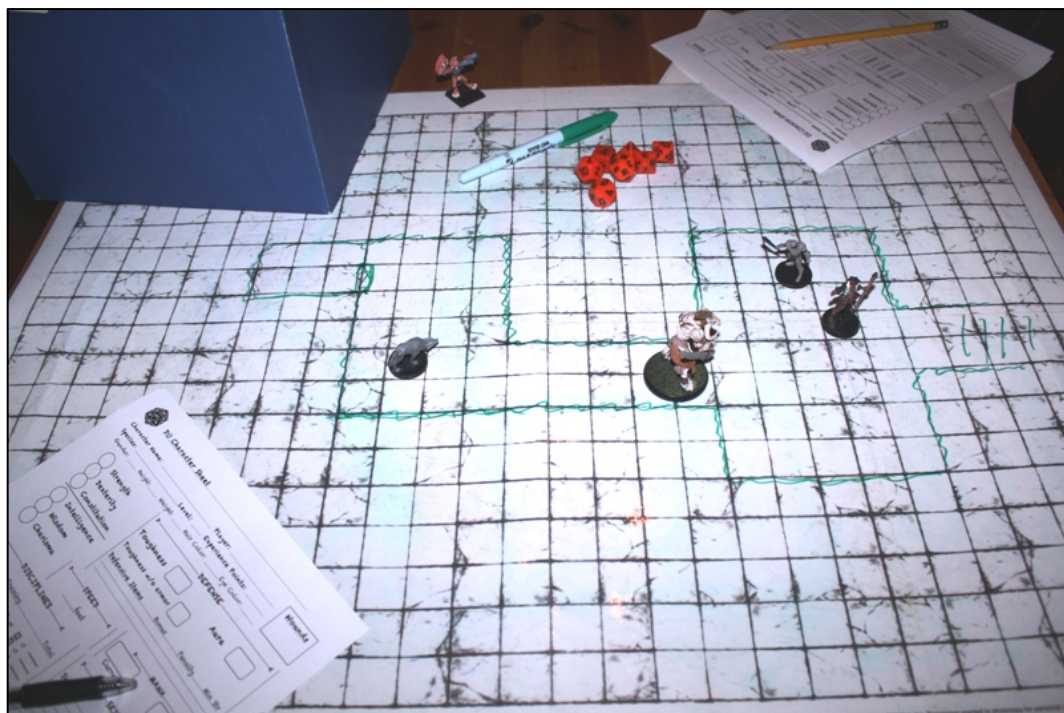
Performance (Cha) – Inspire, discourage, or entertain

Scouting (Wis) – Notice things around you, follow tracks

Stealth (Dex) – Move quietly or find a hiding spot

If chances are good – give the player advantage.

If chances are slim – give the player disadvantage.



APPENDIX B

Club Session Log

Date: _____

Incidents of Conflict Involving Raised Voices or Personal Insult:

[illegible]

Game Table 1:

Severity of observable conflict this session (scaled 0-10, where 0 means none and 10 means extreme):

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Most common means of conflict resolution:

_____ GM/Player grade levels:_____

Overall student self-management observed (scaled 0-10, where 0 means none and 10 means extensive):

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	----

Game Table 2:

Severity of observable conflict this session (scaled 0-10, where 0 means none and 10 means extreme):

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Most common means of conflict resolution:

GM/Player grade levels:_____

Overall student self-management observed (scaled 0-10, where 0 means none and 10 means extensive):

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Game Table 3:

Severity of observable conflict this session (scaled 0-10, where 0 means none and 10 means extreme):

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Most common means of conflict resolution:

GM/Player grade levels:_____

Overall student self-management observed (scaled 0-10, where 0 means none and 10 means extensive):

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

APPENDIX C

Game Table _____ Today's Date _____

How do you feel this game session went? (Check one.)

- ☐ Really great
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Alright
- ☐ Could have been better
- ☐ Awful

How do you feel about your participation as a player in today's game? (Check one.)

- ☐ Really great
- ☐ Good
- ☐ Alright
- ☐ Could have been better
- ☐ Awful

How much fighting between players did you notice? (Check one.)

- ☐ A great deal
- ☐ Some
- ☐ A tiny bit
- ☐ None

How did this fighting affect the game? (Check one.)

- ☐ It made things more fun.
- ☐ It was not good or bad.
- ☐ It made things less fun.
- ☐ There was no fighting.

What was your favorite moment in today's game?

What things did you learn in today's game that you would like to apply to everyday life?

How "real" did today's adventure feel to you? (Ignoring the magical parts.)

- ☐ Very real
- ☐ Somewhat real
- ☐ Not real at all

APPENDIX D

Group Discussion Guiding Questions

- 1) When you play imaginative games in a group, what makes that game fun?
- 2) When you play those same games, what makes the game less fun?
- 3) What makes the game successful? What makes the game unsuccessful?
- 4) What do you think of games where the players are on the same “team?”
- 5) Is it challenging to work together? Why?
- 6) Do you feel you behave differently when you participate in role-playing games? How so?
- 7) Can you describe your favorite role-playing moments? What makes them your favorite?
- 8) Most of the time, do you think you role-play characters that are similar or different from your real self?
- 9) When do you think about your role-playing game experiences outside of Games Club?
- 10) How do you feel about role-playing in general? How useful do you think it is?

Child responses that need clarification will be encouraged with:

Could you say more about that?

Could you explain what you mean by _____?

APPENDIX E

Student Game Leader Discussion Questions

- Did you enjoy leading a game table? Why or why not?
- Did you feel that the players respected your time and energy?
- What was most challenging about being in charge of the game?
- What was fun about being a game master?
- What did you learn from your work before, during, and after the game?
- What would you do differently the next time you game master?
- What were some of the feelings you experienced during the game?
- Do you think that games club children's behavior changed during this period of student-run-games? How did it change?