The use of 'play' with a group of young new arrival students in Hong Kong

Francis Wing-lin Lee[1] and Richel Chen Li[2]

Abstract: *The use of groups and the concept of 'Play' to work with students with different problems and needs is a common practice in the school setting. 'Play' implies the use of games and activities. 'Play' is primarily used with children of pre-school age; it is seldom used with adolescents, who are believed to be more rational. Through the use of 'Play', different concepts, principles, attitudes and types of behaviour can be consciously or unconsciously induced. This paper introduces the operation of a group that has employed 'Play' in a school setting in Hong Kong with some young new arrivals (YNAs) from mainland China. This group has three objectives: (1) the enhancement of its members' self-understanding, (2) the enlargement of their social circle and (3) the teaching of social and communication skills. Through comparison with a control group, it was found that the use of 'Play' in this group was effective in achieving the objectives. It is recommended that groups and the concept of 'Play' be used to help YNAs adjust to a new environment.*

Key words: play; groupwork; young new arrivals

1. Associate Professor
2. Administrator in a manufacturing enterprise

Addresses for correspondence: *Francis Wing-lin Lee, Dept of Social Work and Social Administration, The University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam, Hong Kong. fwllee@hkucc*

Introduction

Different activities and games are used in running groups for adolescents, but all of them possess the elements of 'Play'. 'Play' is primarily used with children of pre-school age; it is seldom consciously employed when working with adolescents, who are believed to be more rational (O'Connor, 2000; Wilson and Ryan, 2005). However, through 'Play', different concepts, principles, attitudes and types of behaviour can be consciously or unconsciously induced. This paper introduces the operation of a group in a school setting that has employed 'Play' with some young new arrivals (YNAs) who came to Hong Kong from mainland China. The objectives of this group are three-fold: (1) to enhance the self-understanding of the group members, (2) to enlarge their social circle and (3) to teach them social and communication skills. It was found that the use of 'Play' in this group was effective. The more conscious employment of related concepts and techniques is recommended when running groups for young people.

With the rapid changes in the political and economic situations on the mainland after 1945, many mainlanders fled to Hong Kong. Migrants, legal or illegal, from mainland China had swelled the population of Hong Kong to 2,360,000 by 1949.

From 1974 onward, the 'Touch-base Policy' (which meant that illegal migrants could acquire permanent residency in Hong Kong if they escaped arrest and reached the urban areas of the territory) was implemented by the Government to replace the practice of discretion. On 23rd October 1980, the Hong Kong Government, which was still under British rule, abolished this policy. An agreement was reached between the Hong Kong Government and the Chinese Government to limit the issuance of one-way permits (OWPs) to mainland residents to 150 each day. With an OWP, people from mainland China could become legal residents of Hong Kong. In addition to OWP, limited numbers of two-way permits (TWPs) (which allow their holders to come to Hong Kong for the purpose of visiting families or businesses, but require them to return to China upon expiry of the permits) have also been issued. In July 1995, it was revised that 45 of the daily 150 OWP quota were for children and youngsters (aged 0-20). After the handover of sovereignty from Britain to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in July 1997, the number for children and young people was increased to 60, where it remains today.

Before 1998, schooling was provided by the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) of the Hong Kong Government to YNAs below 15. The Government has partnered with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to facilitate the integration of new arrivals from the mainland into Hong Kong society. As part of this partnership, District Offices and NGOs together provide services and activities for new arrivals, such as familiarisation courses, employment seminars, language classes, experience sharing groups and visits.

The Social Welfare Department and the Immigration Department also provide post-migration enquiry and information services. Family education and parental education programmes, orientation programmes, language classes, employment- related training, mutual help/support groups and volunteer groups, short-term counselling, and outreach and referral services for those who came to Hong Kong from the mainland less than one year ago are also provided.

Service needs of young new arrivals

A study conducted by the Working Party on New Arrivals of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service and the Social Science Department of Lingnan College in 1984 is the earliest systematic investigation of the living conditions of Chinese new arrivals in Hong Kong. Of the 830 respondents to this study, 53.3% reported that their children had had to enrol in grades one to two years lower than in the mainland when they first attended school in Hong Kong and that they experienced difficulties in learning the language subjects (HKCSS and Lingnan College, 1984).

In 1995, the Boys & Girls Clubs Association of Hong Kong (BGCA of HK) conducted a study that carried out in-depth interviews with 10 YNAs under the age of 16. The study summarised the difficulties they faced (for example, self-understanding, establishing a social circle and communication skills) and also the problems they had in adapting to school, in their social lives with their family and in handling emotion. They also encountered difficulties in language mastery and in writing standardised Chinese characters. They lived in pseudo-single parent families (families with either the father or mother still living on the mainland) and experienced substantial levels of stress from economy, social life, academic development and discrimination (BGCA of HK,

1995). Similar findings were also reported by a Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups study (HKFYG, 1995). In 1996, the BGCA of HK published another study that focused on the adjustment of YNAs that were Primary Four to Secondary Three students. In this study, there were 229 respondents from 13 schools. It was revealed that nearly 40% of them had had to wait at least two months before admission to school, and nearly 25% had had to wait for even four months or more. About 70% and 20% of them, respectively, expressed difficulties in learning English and in establishing close peer relationships. Again, the pseudo-single parent family phenomenon was commonly found, as one of their parents was either still living on the mainland or had been waiting for an OWP to Hong Kong for a long time (BGCA of HK, 1996).

Another study concluded that the level of adjustment amongst YNAs, for example, enlarging their social circle, was correlated with their difficulties in learning English, speaking Cantonese and using standardised Chinese characters (Chan et al., 1996). In 1999, the Commission on Youth commissioned a survey on the support system of YNAs (aged 15 to 24) from the mainland (Ho, 1999). This was the first study with a large sample size (1,512) that attempted to understand the adjustment experience of YNAs. Some of the major findings of this study are as follows.

- The most common difficulty experienced by YNAs was locating a school placement (58%).
- YNAs lacked school information (43%).
- Amongst the unemployed, the major problem encountered in the job-hunting process was an inability to speak English (64%).
- YNAs lacked the necessary job-hunting skills (51%).
- In the 20-24 age category, the unemployment (11.9%) and under-employment (2.4%) rates were higher than those of the general labour force in the same age category.
- The major difficulties in making new friends stemmed from a lack of initiative (44%), a limited social circle (43.6%), being discriminated against and an inability to speak Cantonese fluently (15.6%).
- The informants considered their family's financial condition to be poor (31.1%).

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service conducted two studies

concerning new arrivals in 2000 and 2002, respectively. The results, which were released in January 2003, revealed that there had been a substantial increase in negative impressions of the new arrival students by local students, and, at the same time, that there had been a drop in positive impressions of local students by new arrival students. These factors, again, adversely affect the desire of YNAs to enlarge their social circles. In 2000, 20% of local students had friends who had arrived from the mainland, but in 2002, only 9.1% of them had (HKCSS, 2003). This suggests that YNAs find it difficult to adjust to the social life of Hong Kong, and that social harmony and cohesion between locals and new arrivals from the mainland should be promoted.

A more recent study on the service needs of YNAs (Lee and Chen, 2005) has identified 10 areas of concern. They include: (1) schooling and employment, (2) family life, (3) school support, (4) peer support, (5) self-image, (6) adaptation, (7) language mastery, (8) use of leisure time, (9) experience in receiving social services and the fulfilment of needs, and (10) experience in Triad and other criminal activities.

'Play': A Purposeful intervention

There are several concepts or conceptual assumptions included in 'Play' (the use of games for intervention purposes) (O'Connor, 2000; Timberlake and Cutler, 2001; Wilson and Ryan, 2005), and the achievement of personal growth and development have been mentioned as its functions (http//wwwl.a4pt.org/ps.playtherapy.cfm). The following are some of the conceptions of 'Play' that have been discussed.

Games, metaphors, fairy tales and storytelling

Bettelheim (1975), Erickson (Zeig, 1980) and Peseschkian (1986) have utilised games, metaphors, fairy tales and fables as means of therapeutic intervention in 'Play'. The stories used are possible methods of 'treatments' for the listeners as they absorb lessons from them and integrate them into their lives (Peseschkian, 1986). They may unconsciously borrow the skills and the solutions used by the metaphor protagonist to overcome their problems (Marvasti, 1997). The application of a 'therapeutic metaphor' via storytelling in 'Play'

produces therapeutic results. Stories or games involve the complex interweaving of observations, learning and intuitions that transfer important messages to recipients (Mills and Crowley, 1986). Stories or metaphors can change learning from abstract and theoretical concepts to vivid and imaginative modes of thought (Marvasti, 1997).

Social skills teaching

Elias and Clabby (1992, p.7) stated that the teaching of social skills can enhance 'bond linking personal, social, affective, and cognitive development'. Social skills teaching/ learning could help children and young people to replace aggressive or withdrawn behaviour with more appropriate responses and learn interpersonal skills to enhance communication with peers and parents. Social skills training is an effective form of treatment that helps to equip children and young people for healthy social development, and it has been mentioned that the use of 'Play' can facilitate the actualisation of this treatment (Elias and Clabby, 1992; Gresham and Elliott, 1990; Guevremont, 1990; LeCroy, 1994). Gresham and Elliott (1990) identified five clusters of effective social behaviour: cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy and self-control. Guevremont (1990) identified four clusters of social skills: social entry skills, conversational skills, conflict-resolution and problem-solving skills, and anger-control skills. It has been stated that the use of 'Play' is a good means of teaching social skills (Marvasti, 1997; O'Connor, 2000). Games are a particularly effective way to teach social skills in a group setting. By utilising the group setting, social skills are demonstrated through social interactions and behaviour in the social milieu, and the group is the setting in which observing and learning take place. Feedback and encouragement are obtained when the skills are practised; motivation for interaction with peers is enhanced; and the opportunity to practise skills with a variety of people is provided (LeCroy, 1994). In addition, it has been pointed out that activities that employ the concepts of 'Play' can help to establish group rapport and leadership (Short, 1997).

The study

This study is based on a group run in a secondary school that admits many YNA students from mainland China. The person responsible was an MSW student at the University of Hong Kong who had her social work training placement in the school. The concepts of 'Play' were employed in running the group. The group was formed through promotional efforts and self enrolment. It was composed of nine YNA students (YNA1-YNA9) (four males [all in S.1] and five females [1 in S.1 and 4 in S.3]). The group had seven sessions in total, and each session lasted for an hour. Although several YNA needs were identified, as mentioned in previous studies, to be realistic in terms of the time limit, the aims of the group had to be specific. With reference to the needs identified, the group had three main objectives: (1) to enhance the self-understanding of the members; (2) to help them enlarge their social circle; and (3) to teach them social and communication skills. To examine whether differences existed in different aspects after the members had participated in the group, a pre-test and post-test questionnaire design (see Appendix) was used. Using the same questionnaire, a control group with nine members, who were randomly drawn from non-enrolled YNA students who had also recently come to Hong Kong, was also formed. The responses of the control group were compared with those of the experimental group. It was assumed that without the group (intervention), the situation of the YNAs in both groups – experimental and control – would have been more or less the same. Therefore, any differences found between the two groups would be due to the intervention. Members of the experimental group were also invited to attend individual interviews when the group had ended to explore their opinions and feelings of the group content.

Group contents

The group content was as follows.

Session 1: Introduction and Ice Breaking

Objectives
1. To help the students understand the group content
2. To achieve some common agreements (contracts) on group attendance
3. To help the students remember the names of the other group members

4.   To build up basic friendship amongst the group members

Contents
• Warm up game: Throw the dolls
• Game: Secret angel
• Setting of group regulations
• Mini-talk
• Tea party

Session 2: Who Am I?

Objectives
1. To help the students know more about themselves
2. To create an identity of "myself"
3. To help them know the strengths and weaknesses of their personalities
4. To help them know how to improve themselves

Contents
• Warm up game: Touch the shoulders
• Game: Speak out my name
• Personality test
• Mini-talk

Session3: My Friend

Objectives
1. To help members further their knowledge of others
2. To build up basic friendship among the group members
3. To help them find a friend within the group

Contents
• Game 1: Blow the wind
• Game 2: Count the numbers
• Game 3: "Water Melon" – body poster game
• Game 4: High building (for cooperation)

Session 4: Understanding Others

Objectives
1. To help the members learn how to understand others (including friends, parents, teachers, etc.)
2. To help them work out conflicts amongst the members
3. To help them overcome the conflict stage in the group

Contents
• Game 1: Give me a hug
• Game 2: Look at the mirror
• Game 3: You are my mirror

- Game 4: Paper cutting
- Game 5: Story: 'Ham & Eggs'
- Mini-talk

Session 5: My Partner

Objectives
1. To help them learn more about the other group members (other than their classmates)
2. To train up their spirit of cooperation
3. To help them understand how to work with others

Contents
- Game 1: M & M
- Game 2: Story: 'Tiramisu'
- Game 3: We can make a whole
- Mini-talk

Session 6: Absolute Trust

Objectives
1. To help the group members become more familiar with others
2. To give them a chance to know the members that they are not familiar with
3. To build up their trust to help them support each other in later sessions

Contents
- Game 1: Heart in a circle
- Game 2: Christmas present
- Game 3: Trust fall
- Mini-talk

Session 7: Intimacy

Objectives
1. To help the group members become more familiar with others
2. To build up group intimacy

Contents
- Game 1: Human knot
- Game 2: Click the numbers
- Mini-talk
- Tea party

Effectiveness of using 'play' in the group

Enhancing self-understanding

One of the objectives of the group was to enhance the self-understanding of the members. In the pre-test and post-test questionnaire, members were asked to give scores (full mark: 100) to the following statements.

'I understand my strengths very clearly.' (Strength)
'I understand my shortcomings very clearly.' (Short)
'I know what I am going to do in the future.' (Future)
'I clearly know what my interests are.' (Interest)
'I am so confident that I believe I can do things very well.' (Confidence)

Table 1
Pre- and post-test scores of experimental group on 'self-understanding'

Member		Strength	Short	Future	Interest	Confidence
1	Pre-test	90	100	90	100	80
	Post-test	50	50	30	50	40
2	Pre-test	30	50	50	60	20
	Post-test	50	40	40	70	70
3	Pre-test	80	80	60	100	80
	Post-test	78	30	40	90	100
4	Pre-test	70	80	100	50	10
	Post-test	90	90	80	90	90
5	Pre-test	50	70	50	50	50
	Post-test	90	90	90	90	90
6	Pre-test	50	50	50	50	90
	Post-test	90	90	80	80	70
7	Pre-test	50	50	80	60	70
	Post-test	100	80	100	100	100
8	Pre-test	75	75	75	75	80
	Post-test	60	70	80	100	90
9	Pre-test	90	90	99	90	90
	Post-test	80	70	90	90	80
Mean	Pre-test	*65.00*	71.67	72.67	*70.56*	*55.33*
	Post-test	*76.44*	67.78	70.00	*84.44*	*81.11*
Standard Deviation	Pre-test	20.91	18.37	20.92	21.28	34.29
	Post-test	18.68	22.79	25.98	15.90	19.00

Table 2
Test Scores of control group on 'self-understanding'

Member	Strength	Short	Future	Interest	Confidence
1	100	50	60	100	50
2	30	80	80	80	20
3	25	90	99	50	90
4	80	90	60	70	99
5	90	50	10	90	70
6	50	80	50	50	50
7	50	50	80	100	30
8	50	75	60	75	50
9	100	100	50	100	70
Mean	63.89	73.89	61.00	79.44	58.78
Std. Devtn.	29.13	19.33	25.03	20.07	26.00

Referring to the statement concerning the understanding of their strengths, the mean score of the post-test amongst the members in the experimental group was 76.44, whilst the mean score of the pre-test was 65.00. The increase in the mean score of the post-test indicates that group members generally knew more about their strengths after participating in the games and activities of the group. The mean score of this item for the control group was 63.89, which is far less than that of the post-test score of the experimental group.

Concerning members' understanding of their interests, the pre-test mean score of the experimental group was 70.56, and the post-test mean score was 84.44. The mean score of the control group was 79.44. These mean scores once again prove the effectiveness of the group in enhancing the self-understanding of its members.

As revealed by the related mean scores, the confidence of the members was also enhanced. Their mean score on confidence in the pre-test was 55.33, but the related post-test mean score increased to 81.11. This shows that the members were more confident about themselves after participating in the group. By comparison, the mean score of the control group was only 58.78, which is much lower than that of the post-test for the experimental group.

The storytelling technique was the aspect of 'Play' used in this group to enhance the self-understanding of the members. The following is an example.

Story: Ham and Eggs (in Session 4)

There were two animals, a chicken and a pig, walking one morning. They saw someone eating 'ham and eggs'. The chicken was happy about it and said 'I could give them one egg every day, and it would be an honour.' However, the pig was sad because he thought that 'people will take a leg from me/my friends'. They had different points of view towards the same issue.

After they were told the story, the group members were led to understand its meaning, that is, that different persons will have different points of view about the same thing. Some questions were raised, for example, 'What do ham and eggs mean to the chicken? What about the pig?' and 'If you were the chicken, what would be your feelings? What if you were the pig?' They answered these questions and then came to the conclusion that 'different people think differently on the same issue, and they also are'. This story helped to enhance their self-understanding and self-acceptance. The following verbatim quotes of some of the participants interviewed further illustrate the effectiveness of using the storytelling technique in the group to enhance self-understanding.

'Tiramisu' (the story told) is a story that can help me to reflect on my attitudes and behaviour towards my most valued friends. I have become more aware of how I should treat them. (YNA2)

Although the story 'Ham and Eggs' was not a great story, it did teach us that different people have different points of view about the same thing. I also have my own point of view on things. (YNA3)

'Ham and Eggs' is a good story. It points out that different people have different perceptions of the same issues, like the chicken and the pig. My friends and I are different people, so we do have different views about the same things. (YNA5)

I like the story 'Tiramisu'. It taught me that you can do anything for your best friend. And I will do the same too. (YNA7)

Enlarging social circle

In the pre- and post-tests, the members were asked the number of good friends they had at school. The results are shown opposite in tables 3 to 5.

The mean score of 'having good friends at school' in the pre-test was 3.11 (Table 3), which means that the average number of good friends the participants had at school was three to five. The mean score in the post-test was 4.22 (Table 4), which indicates that the average number of good friends they had at school had increased to six to 10. We could also see that in the control group, the mean score of the number of good friends at school is 2.67 (that is, one to two friends) (Table 5), which is less than that of the experimental group. These results show that members of the experimental group had more friends than did members of the control group after participating in the group.

The introduction of different games and activities in different sessions of the group broke down the defences and walls amongst the members, allowing them to play the games and become involved in the activities following the instructions of the leader. This unconscious breaking down of the psychological barriers amongst the members was the intended effect of 'Play'.

The following verbatim statements made by the members during the individual interviews illustrate the use of games and activities in the group, which helped them to enlarge their social circles.

Although I didn't come every time, I felt happy and relaxed when I attended the group and played the games and activities. Before, I would not play with people even though I was familiar with them, but in this group, I could play with my classmates happily, even those I was not familiar with. (YNA1)

Happy and relaxed. I felt very stressed because of the heavy study load. The group was a very good place that let me relax by playing games and activities, and I didn't need to think of anything else. I could also play with those who were in more senior forms. Now I can talk to them and ask them things I do not know. (YNA3)

I enjoyed playing with the members in the group. Now even after the group, we still chat and play together after school. (YNA6)

Table 3
Pre-test answers of experimental group on 'number of good friends at school'

Value	Frequency	Percentage
1 (No Friends)	0	0.0
2 (1-2 Friends)	2	22.2
3 (3-5 Friends)	5	55.6
4 (6-10 Friends)	1	11.1
5 (More than 10 Friends)	1	11.1
TOTAL	9	100.0

(Mean Score: 3.11. Standard Deviation: 0.93)

Table 4
Post-test answers of experimental group on 'number of good friends at school'

Value	Frequency	Percentage
1 (No Friends)	0	0.0
2 (1-2 Friends)	0	0.0
3 (3-5 Friends)	1	11.1
4 (6-10 Friends)	5	55.6
5 (More than 10 Friends)	3	33.3
TOTAL	9	100.0

(Mean Score: 4.22. Standard Deviation: 0.67)

Table 5
Answers of control group on 'number of good friends at school'

Value	Frequency	Percentage
1 (No Friends)	2	22.2
2 (1-2 Friends)	2	22.2
3 (3-5 Friends)	3	33.3
4 (6-10 Friends)	1	11.1
5 (More than 10 Friends)	1	11.1
TOTAL	9	100.0

(Mean Score: 2.67   Standard Deviation: 1.32)

I think it was a good chance to play with some members that I didn't know before. Even though we are in the same class, there was no chance for us to play and talk, not to mention those from different forms and different classes. (YNA8)

Learning of social and communication skills

In the pre- and post-test questionnaire, members were asked to give scores (full mark: 100) to the following statements.

'I express my opinions after listening to others' ideas.' (Listen)
'I make eye contact with others during conversations.' (Respect)
'I appreciate others when we have the same opinions.' (Appreciate)
'I ask others to repeat what they said if I am not sure whether I got their ideas exactly.' (Repeat)
'I express my opinions and feelings calmly if we have different ideas.' (Express)

One of the objectives of the group was to teach members some social and communication skills. As revealed by the data in Tables 6 and 7, this objective was achieved.

The mean scores for 'Listening Skills' in the pre- and post-tests were 76.56 and 90.33, respectively (Table 6). These indicate that the experimental group members made great improvements in learning listening skills after participating in the group. The effectiveness of the group in teaching listening skills is further substantiated when we note that the related mean score of the members in the control group was 66.67 (Table 7), which is much lower than that in the post-test of the experimental group.

To respect others is another social and communication skill to be learned. The related mean scores of pre-test and post-test are respectively 78.89 and 87.78 (Table 6) that confirmed the effectiveness of the Group in teaching "Respect" as a social and communication skill. They were aware of respecting others during communication. The mean score of the control group is 65.56 (Table 7) which is lower than that in the post-test of the experimental group.

Learning to appreciate the opinions of others and to calmly express a different opinion can be taught in social and communication skills training. The pre- and post-test mean scores of the experimental group members on 'Appreciation' were 82.67 and 86.00, respectively (Table 6),

Table 6
Pre- and post-test scores of experimental group on 'social and communication skills learning'

Member		Listen	Respect	Appreciate	Repeat	Express
1	Pre-test	90	80	80	80	80
	Post-test	90	90	90	70	90
2	Pre-test	80	80	80	100	90
	Post-test	85	90	80	95	90
3	Pre-test	80	100	80	80	100
	Post-test	98	50	69	80	80
4	Pre-test	70	30	90	100	70
	Post-test	100	100	85	90	90
5	Pre-test	80	80	60	90	80
	Post-test	90	90	90	90	90
6	Pre-test	50	90	80	90	50
	Post-test	90	70	90	70	90
7	Pre-test	60	80	90	80	80
	Post-test	100	100	70	70	90
8	Pre-test	80	80	85	90	90
	Post-test	90	100	100	60	90
9	Pre-test	99	90	99	90	90
	Post-test	70	100	100	90	90
Mean	Pre-test	*76.56*	*78.89*	*82.67*	*89.89*	*81.11*
	Post-test	*90.33*	*87.78*	*86.00*	*79.44*	*88.89*
Standard Deviation	Pre-test	14.81	19.65	10.74	8.52	14.53
	Post-test	9.27	18.16	11.30	12.36	3.33

Table 7: Test scores of control group on 'social and communication skills learning'

Member	Listen	Respect	Appreciate	Repeat	Express
1	75	80	100	65	75
2	60	30	80	80	50
3	50	30	10	100	100
4	20	10	70	30	60
5	90	100	70	70	70
6	70	60	50	80	80
7	50	80	70	80	75
8	85	100	100	100	90
9	100	100	70	70	70
Mean	*66.67*	*65.56*	*68.89*	*75.00*	*74.44*
Standard Deviation	24.62	34.68	27.13	20.92	14.88

and that of the control group was 68.89 (Table 7). These scores indicate that the group was effective in teaching 'Appreciation' to the members. The pre- and post-test mean scores of the members on 'Calm Expression of Different Opinions' in the experimental group were 81.11 and 88.89, respectively (Table 6), and that of the control group was 74.44 (Table 7). These scores again reveal that the group was effective in teaching 'Expression' to the members.

These achievements were due to the use of games and activities in the group. This is called 'Theraplay' (Jernberg, 1979) which is interactive short-term play therapy. It consists of attachment, empathic behaviour, interactive play, interpersonal eye and body contact and touch. The main objective of Theraplay is to strengthen the self-esteem and self-confidence of the participants and build a feeling of self-efficacy while improving their social competence and willingness to interact with others (Franke, 1999).

The following verbatim statements from the group members show the effect of using the techniques of 'Play' in the group.

I was afraid of having physical contact with the opposite sex, but participating in the games/activities in the group, e.g., Trust Fall and Human Knot, required me to do so. And I gradually came to accept that physical contact. (YNA4)

I was afraid to look into the eyes of others when I talked to them. But joining in the games of the group led me to do that. (YNA8)

I think I have learnt some social skills through the group. Some skills had been mentioned before, but they were forgotten quickly. The group reminded me of a lot of things and principles. In addition, I thought it was a good chance to meet some younger members. I could practise some social skills with them. It was so much fun to play and chat with some boys from Form1. They were really funny. (YNA9)

Group process

One may wonder what group dynamics were involved in the group process and how these facilitated the effectiveness of the group. In fact, different types of group dynamics, such as communication, roles, attractiveness, and decision-making, which facilitated member

exchanges and interaction were observed in the group process. It has been noted that group dynamics, if handled appropriately, can help groups to achieve their goals (Forsyth, 2006; Hess and Philippot, 2007). The following verbatim statements illustrate how the group achieved its effectiveness.

> *I found the group atmosphere comfortable, which encouraged me to communicate with other members about how I think. And surprisingly, they did not attack me, and that's why I was a bit verbal in the group. (YNA 3)*

> *I was a shy person before, but in the group, I could express myself openly and was accepted. I gained more self-understanding of my strengths and weaknesses through interaction with other members. (YNA 4)*

> *I seldom voiced my opinions in front of other people. But in this group, I could raise my ideas about things, and I learned to handle opposing opinions calmly. (YNA7)*

Limitations

There are limitations in this study.

1. This is the first time that 'Play' has been consciously applied to running an adolescent group, and although it has been proved to be effective, it is still in the exploratory stage. Similar studies should be carried out before firm conclusions can be reached.
2. As a pilot study, this group was in operation for rather a short period of time – seven sessions of one hour each. Therefore, the lasting effects of the group are in doubt. A longer group duration, for example, 10 sessions of two hours each, is recommended.

Conclusion

Although the group sessions were not long, even after only seven sessions, the members showed improvement in the following areas: self-understanding, social circle enlargement, and learned social and communication skills. This is supported by the pre- and post-test

measurements and by the individual interviews with the participants after the group finished. As revealed by the verbatim statements of the members, the use of 'Play' proved to be effective in achieving the group objectives. The members became more self-accepting and confident.

The ability to learn through play is the main belief of 'Play' (O'Connor, 2000; Timberlake and Cutler, 2001; Wilson and Ryan, 2005). Young people learn from seeing, touching and smelling, and they can learn from winning and losing. Games and activities were the primary types of play used in running the group, and they were proved to be very effective.

The group members were YNAs who had been in Hong Kong for less than one year. They felt lonely at school and in society because these were new environments for them. Most of them felt shy and had few friends at school. To help other YNAs cope during this difficult time, it would be good to organise some groups for them so that they have more opportunities to meet others who are in a similar situation. This will also help them to enlarge their social network. Although adolescents are considered to be more rational, and 'Play' is considered more suitable for younger children, it is believed that we are all children at heart. The use of 'Play' should be promoted as a means of running groups for YNAs facing different difficulties and problems so that they can internalise appropriate attitudes and types of behaviour to face/handle their new environment.

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Appendix

Welcome to the Group! To help us know you better, please complete the following questions. Thank you!

1. How many good friends do you have in the school?
_____ 1. No friends
_____ 2. 1~2 friends
_____ 3. 3~5 friends
_____ 4. 6~10 friends
_____ 5. 10 or more friends

2. If '100' is the full mark, how many marks will you give yourself for the following statements?
I understand my strengths very clearly.   _____
I understand my short comings very clearly.   _____
I know what I am going to do in the future.   _____
I clearly know what my interests are.   _____
I am so confident that I believe I can do things very well.   _____

3. If '100' is the full mark, how many marks will you give yourself for the following statements?
I express my opinions after listening to others' ideas.   _____
I make eye contact with others during conversations.   _____
I appreciate others when we have the same opinions.   _____
I ask others to repeat what they said if I am not sure whether
I got their ideas exactly.   _____
I express my opinions and feelings in calml
 if we have different ideas.   _____

- End -