Teaching drama differently in Sri Lankan secondary schools

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ABSTRACT

Arts subjects such as drama provide an effective context for developing 21st century skills, yet drama teaching in Sri Lanka is still mainly delivery through traditional, lecture-based methods. This article presents evaluation results of a drama-based intervention program that was designed specifically to develop junior secondary school students’ creative thinking capacity and adaptability skills in the Sri Lankan context. The participants were 128 students aged 11-12 years in Year 7 drama classes. The program was implemented over twelve consecutive weeks in weekly two-hour sessions by regular drama teachers who had been trained in a process drama teaching approach. Results evidenced a positive effect emerging from the intervention: creativity and adaptability test scores of the students in the intervention group increased significantly compared to those of the students in the control and active control groups. This paper identifies implications of these findings for Sri Lankan drama teaching and learning and beyond.

KEYWORDS

Adaptability; creative thinking; intervention; process drama techniques; sri Lanka

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, drama is taught by teachers standing in front of classes of students, talking and writing on the board notes that students are required to copy into their books (Irugalbandara 2019). There is no performative aspect to this drama experience and no creativity or adaptability goals. This didactic pedagogical approach is focused only on knowledge transmission and is perceived by teachers as the key to success in the exams that students sit. In Sri Lanka, dancing, drama, music and art subjects are referenced under the umbrella term of ‘Aesthetic Education’. These subjects are integrated into one overarching subject, called ‘play and leisure’ at the primary level of education and is compulsory. By the time students are in junior secondary level, they can select art, dancing, music or drama as a separate subject, but it is only offered as an elective. The same trend continues at senior secondary level, when students are encouraged to specialise in subjects which provide openings for further study for subjects that will be of benefit to them in tertiary education. In spite of the importance of aesthetic education being recognised in Sri Lanka in 1972, nearly 50 years ago (Ginige, 2002), and that by 1977, the Ministry of Education had included drama in the curriculum of a General Certificate of Advance Level, as this paper reports, drama is still not widely taught in ways that serve students’ needs for the 21st century.

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There are problems with Sri Lankan teaching recruitment, deployment and promotion of all teachers including drama teachers (The National Education Commission 2014, 2014). A teaching qualification is not an essential requirement for recruitment as a teacher, as teacher education is a complex and often incoherent system. Often the government recruits unemployed graduates of other qualifications as drama teachers with no form of pre-service teacher education. These graduates are appointed to fill vacancies, but they may lack subject specific knowledge of any kind of drama (Abayasekara and Arunatilake 2018; World; Bank 2017). The World Bank (2011a) specifically identified drama instruction as problematic because ‘most of the time schools have given more priority to core subjects’ (World Bank 2011a, p. 15).

In Sri Lanka, the National Institution of Education is the premier institution for developing and distributing teachers’ instructional, that is curriculum, guides. Unfortunately, these instructional guides, including those for aesthetic subjects, do not always align with the latest research. Sri Lanka has a long history of folk drama, and this tradition has resulted in the drama syllabus focusing principally on folk drama rather than any other dramatic styles. In addition, drama teachers devote considerable time to teaching the history, and performance, of folk drama with a limited focus on practice or theory or process drama. There is no desire among drama teachers to assist students in building self-confidence, encouraging creativity and critical thinking skills. Teachers do not engage students in creative problem-solving or decision-making skills or support the development of emotional intelligence and empathy. Instead, the teachers’ focus is on notetaking for written examinations which, if students are successful, improves the schools’ standing in league tables.

This traditional approach to teaching and learning is ingrained in the Sri Lankan drama education system. While it has served Sri Lanka well for basic educational needs, it cannot develop the types of 21st century skills the country needs moving forward. The teacher-centred pedagogy focused on examinations of the content taught in the overloaded syllabus means there is a lack of opportunity for the students to engage with best practice in drama pedagogy.

This didactic, transmission model of drama teaching, – was designed for a different era, with different objectives and a different understanding of students’ needs. It is no longer fit for purpose for the development of skills such as creativity and adaptability which are now acknowledged as essential elements of education in the 21st-century (McKeown 2012; Simonton 2003). Adherence to traditional teaching methods may significantly affect Sri Lankan students’ ability to engage and compete in a global skills and employment market. Didactic teaching only will not develop life skills required by young people in their lives outside of work – skills such as creative thinking, problem solving, lifelong learning and reasoning, and the ability to plan, review and apply their knowledge (Abayasekara and Arunatilake 2018; The National Education Commission 2014; UNESCO 2014; World; Bank 2017; World Bank 2011a, 2011b).

It has been shown in Western countries that a process drama approach to teaching drama brings clear benefits in terms of students’ development in critical thinking, creativity and adaptability (Ewing 2018); the skills that Sri Lankan students need to engage and compete in an increasingly globalised world. Process drama is not performative drama. It does not have a script, does not conclude in a final performance, and does not have an external audience. The teacher and students collaboratively create an imagined world in which they are required to respond to challenges, situations and events through dramatic improvisation (Bowell and
Heap 2017). Through the diversity of roles on offer and through the story creation process itself process drama transforms a class into a dynamic learning community; one in which students are more likely to think critically, to express themselves creatively, and to respect diverse opinions; a classroom which fosters imagination, creativity and adaptability (Ewing 2018). The approach requires flexibility, as students work in groups; and it includes elements such as improvisation, storytelling and the hot seat technique, which have been found to support the development of students’ creative thinking and adaptability skills (Dunn 2016; O’Toole and Dunn 2015).

Research with various levels of methodological rigour in a range of contexts in different countries has identified benefits of process drama for the development of creativity and adaptability. For example, Lin (2012) conducted an intervention in Taiwan, over ten weeks, with twenty drama lessons involving storytelling and role play techniques for 67 children (11–12 years) in two different schools. The study found that students’ creative abilities, playfulness, innovation, flexibility, and in-depth learning increased. However, there was no control group in this study which therefore precludes a conclusion that it was only the intervention which influenced the results. Furthermore, in that study there was no measurement of fidelity, acceptability or feasibility which again lessens the reliability of the results. Another study, conducted in Hong-Kong, with 2846 students across a five year period (2008–2013), compared changes between the experimental group (N = 1857) and the control group (N = 989) from three levels of school (kindergarten, primary and secondary) before and after an intervention using process drama techniques (Hui et al. 2015). The study found that drama-based approaches and the introduction of playfulness in the classroom environment enhanced students’ creativity. However, the study did not include an active control group which therefore did not control for the ‘experimental’ effect where the results could have been attributed to any novelty and not the intervention. This study also did not report on the fidelity, acceptability and feasibility of the intervention which lessens the reliability of the results.

Other studies have also provided evidence that engaging students with practical, experiential drama experience improves the development of adaptability characteristics such as motivation, engagement and flexibility. A study by Martin et al. (2013a), for example, involved a longitudinal study with Australian students in Grades 5 to 11, and then again one year later when the students were in Grades 6 to 12. This study found that activity and experientially based drama activities significantly predicted increases in adaptive motivation, academic buoyancy, and classroom participation. However, this study did not specify which drama-based activities were used (Martin et al. 2013a). There have been no specific studies found that provide evidence that a process drama experience can enhance creative thinking and adaptability skills in secondary school students in a context such as Sri Lanka.

This lack of research to examine whether process drama would be efficacious, feasible and acceptable to teachers and students in the Sri Lankan context generated the study reported on in this paper. There is a unique characteristic of the project: while most drama education research uses a qualitative methodology to answer research questions, this study used a non-randomised control design. This methodology was chosen as it was hypothesised that the Sri Lankan Education Department would be more convinced of, and responsive to, the value of teaching drama differently if a quantitative approach was used.
Method

Participants

The sample consisted of 145 students (Grade 7, ages 11–12 years old) and six drama teachers from three government schools in Sri Lanka. The schools were purposefully selected from districts in the Western province, Colombo, Gampaha, and Kalutara, with the criteria that there were drama classes available, that the teachers were willing to participate in the study and intervention, and that the two teachers who claimed they knew process drama techniques (even though at a later stage it was found that they did not know these techniques) and were willing to attend a workshop and follow a process drama manual were available. In addition, the schools were geographically close enough to conduct the study but separated enough for participants not to be able to communicate with each other. All the schools were in a similar socio-economic environment. The intervention group in each school consisted of two single-sex classes, one class of 25 girls and one class of 37 boys. The active control group consisted of two single-sex classes, one class of 12 girls and one class of 24 boys. The control group consisted of two single-sex classes, one class of 20 girls and one class of 27 boys. One hundred and fifty students completed the pre-test before the intervention, and 128 students completed the post-test. Some students were absent for either the pre- or post-tests, and so 22 students’ results were eliminated.

Measures

Modified Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (Torrance 1974)

The study used a modified Torrance Test of Creative Thinking measure (Torrance 1974). The Verbal test consisted of three items with written answers: ‘product improvement’, ‘just suppose’ and ‘unusual uses’. The answers were scored on fluency, flexibility and originality (1 mark for 1–2 ideas; 2 marks for 3 or more suggestions relevant to the stimulus). The Figural test consisted of two items: ‘picture completion’ and ‘repeated figures of diamonds’. These two items were scored on 5 criteria: (1) fluency (1 mark for 1–3 ideas [unfinished/unrelated or similar idea] and 2 marks for more than 4 different ideas); (2) elaboration (1 mark for elaboration either inside or outside figure and 2 marks for elaboration inside and outside figure); (3) the abstractness of titles (1 mark for literal and 2 marks for abstract); (4) resistance to premature closure (1 mark for images connected, no real story; and (5) 2 marks for well thought out idea that connects all the shapes). A rubric from the manual was created for scoring, with two markers scoring independently with an inter-rater agreement of 0.90. The items used to develop this modified Torrance Test of Creative Thinking measure were freely available online, and were used because of financial constraints, access restrictions to the original test, and the lack of norms for Sri Lanka in the original test.

Adaptability Scale (Martin et al. 2013b)

The Adaptability Scale is a 9-item scale with a response scale of seven points response types fixed with a phrase (1- strongly disagree, to 7- strongly agree). For example, ‘I am able to adjust my thinking or expectations to assist me in a new situation if necessary’; ‘To
assist me in a new situation, I am able to change the way I do things if necessary’; and ‘To help me through new or difficult situations, I am able to draw on positive feelings and emotions’. The Adaptability Scale was validated via empirical techniques such as exploratory factor analysis (EFA), confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and reliability analysis by the author of the test (Martin et al. 2013b). Other research projects involving diverse populations have confirmed evidence of the reliability and validity of the scale (Martin et al. 2012, 2013a, 2015). In the present study, Cronbach’s alpha for the scale for the pre-test was .85, and for the post-test, .92.

**Procedure**

Ethics was approved by an Australian University Human Research Ethics Committee. There were six classes involved in the study, two intervention classes, two controls and two active-controls. Teachers in the two intervention classes in each school used a manual of lessons prepared by the first author. The first author’s career started with a Bachelor of Arts in Aesthetic and Cultural studies in Sri Lanka. She has more than 17 years’ professional experience in teaching aesthetic education at university level. During her PhD, she participated in drama instruction sessions conducted by the Creative Industry Faculty (QUT) for undergraduate and graduate students. In addition, she observed some drama lessons in public schools in Brisbane, Queensland. These experiences provided the impetus for the content that was included in the teaching manual.

All lessons in the manual were taken from the Sri Lankan teachers’ guide for the second term of drama teaching. However, they were innovative in that the lessons included a considerable focus on creative processes: imagining, expressing, responding and performing. The lessons relied on improvisation, hot-seat and storytelling techniques so that, unlike in regular Sri Lankan drama classes, students worked together in small groups and teachers were asked to observe students’ practice. The intention throughout was to support students in developing flexibility, to be able to respond effectively to problems and changes in the theme of ‘creativity for everyday life’, which encourage creativity as a means of social and personal empowerment. The manual approached all lessons from a pre-text which took the form of oral stories, pictures, video clips, or pieces of music for short scenarios and these connected to explore an imaginary world filled with characters, contexts and situations.

The intervention took place during twelve consecutive teaching weeks of a weekly timetabled two-hour process drama lesson, with the first and the last weeks used to conduct the pre- and post- surveys. To ensure the fidelity of the program, 40 classroom observations were conducted by the first author to ascertain if the intervention teachers conducted the program faithfully. Acceptability of the program by both teachers and students was determined from 20 semi-structured interviews with the intervention teachers, one in each school, and two student focus groups, one from each school. The feasibility of the program was assessed by classroom observations, teacher interviews and student focus groups.

To control for an experimental effect, two Grade 7 classes in the Kalutara district were selected as the active-control group. The active control groups, like the control groups, had two drama lessons per week lasting for two hours each lesson. Both classes received a combination of traditional teacher-centred teaching and a practical activity that involved making props linked to their lessons. Ten classroom observation were made,
although no data were recorded on these visits as they were to maintain fidelity for the teacher, to make sure that the props and sets were made, and for the active-control groups to be observed in a manner similar to the intervention groups, to control for any experimental effect, that is to control for doing anything different in the drama class which could affect their creativity and adaptability, but which was not process drama.

Two Grade 7 classes from the Gampaha district were selected as the control group. These students were exposed to a traditional teacher-centred approach in their regular drama lessons, and no change was made to their teachers’ programs to compare what effects the intervention of process drama might have on creativity and adaptability compared with lessons as usual and lessons as usual but with something a little different that was not process drama.

Data Analysis
A 2 × 3 × 2 mixed-design ANOVA (a statistical procedure which compares different groups’ scores to see if they are significantly different) was conducted, with time (pre and post) and a within-subject factor, condition (intervention, active-control, and control) as a between-subject factor, and gender (male and female) as a between-subject factor. According to Levene’s test, there was a breach to the homogeneity of variances assumption (p < .05), suggesting error variances were not evenly distributed across the different groups at pre- and post-intervention test scores. To control for this, the alpha level for determining statistical significance was reduced (p < .025).

Results
There was a significant increase in pre- to post- total verbal creativity scores for the intervention group based on the Torrance tests (Wilks’ Lambda = .4, F(1,122) = 182.63, p < .001), and no increase for the active control group (Wilks’ Lambda = .98, F (2, 122) = 2.26, p = .136) or the control group (Wilks’ Lambda = 1, F (1, 122) = .62, p = .432). This finding suggests a positive impact of the program on verbal creativity development. There was a significant increase in pre- to post- total figural creativity for the intervention group (Wilks’ Lambda = .646, F (1,122) = 66.78, p < .001.), and the active control group (Wilks’ Lambda = .939, F(1,122) = 7.93, p = .006), suggesting a strong impact of the drama-based intervention program on figural creativity development for both groups of students. Combining both the TTCT Verbal and Figural tests, it was found there was a significant main effect of time and group, and there was a significant interaction between time and group and group and gender.

For the adaptability scores on Martin’s adaptability scale, the interaction between time and group within each group revealed a significant difference between total pre- and post-test scores in the intervention group (Wilks’ Lambda = .63, F (1,122) = 71.64, p < .001). There was an increase in scores in the active control group (Wilks’ Lambda = .76, F (1,122) = 39.43, p < .001), and no difference in the control group (Wilks’ Lambda = .99, F(1,122) = 1.03, p = .312).

Results for intervention fidelity, acceptability and feasibility
The classroom observations showed that all lessons from the manual were taught in the two intervention classes, that the active control group faithfully made the drama props
in addition to listening to lectures and note taking, and that there were no changes in the control school, thus ensuring the fidelity of the intervention. Data which were collected from the intervention teachers showed good teacher acceptability in terms of using process drama techniques, as was the case with the students. The students identified many reasons why they liked the intervention: they felt more relaxed in their learning, they liked the reduced teacher intervention, they enjoyed developing participation skills, confidence, collaboration, problem solving, and they were very motivated. However, there were challenges around the feasibility of the program as teachers reported problems with preparation time, pressure to teach to the examination system, and lack of space in classrooms. Students reported that pressure from parents and a culture based on teaching for the examination were the main barriers for their creative expressions.

**Discussion**

The findings of the study show that it is possible to use quantitative methods to assess the issue of creativity in a drama class, and to ascertain and suggest to governmental authorities that the use of non-traditional, non-didactic and more engaging methods are appropriate in schools. They also show that the students’ scores in creativity and adaptability in the intervention group increased. These findings align with those of other studies in the Western world (cf., Burke and Williams 2008; Freeman et al. 2003; Garaigordobil 2006; Hui et al. 2015; Lin 2012; Martin et al. 2013a; Stinson 2009). Interestingly, the creativity scores of the active control group were higher than those of the control group. This finding suggests the importance of including an active control group, and not just a control group, as the experimental effect of simply doing something different or additional appears to have impacted on students’ skills development, although not to the same degree as the process drama intervention. In addition to the purely experimental effect, this result could also have been due to the fact that making props and designing theatre sets provides students with creative opportunities to use various materials and design techniques that engage and extend their creative, imaginative, manipulative and performative skills (Kemple 2017; Muffatti 2018). The students in both the intervention and the active control groups also increased their adaptability scores.

Two other beneficial outcomes of this intervention were that it seemed to increase both student motivation and interaction between students. During the focus group interviews, students reported feeling highly motivated by the active and practical nature of the experience, compared to their usual experience as passive listeners. Importantly, they valued their experience and the advantages they believed resulted from their participation in the intervention. The students’ positive commentaries support the case for the implementation of more creative learning experience in drama classrooms, and for customising learners’ involvement in order to assist them to reach their potential.

Findings from the teacher interviews, focus groups, and classroom observations also indicated that experience of process drama was associated with greater positive behavioural and cognitive engagement by students. Of particular note was the *hot-seat* technique, which both teachers and students mentioned as a positive experience. Students believed that the technique provided space for them to explore a range of different skills and to feel empowered through talking with their peers; this was similar
feedback to that provided by students in Australia (Bowell and Heap 2017). The teachers also reported that students were more engaged, appeared to enjoy the lessons, and were enthusiastic about group collaboration. These were important and positive outcomes, as teachers have often identified the importance of effective peer relationships and friendship (e.g., Scales 2010) and of the provision of opportunities for positive peer interactions (e.g., Kellough and Kellough 2008). The classroom observations also provided evidence of students being more motivated through the level of collaboration and interaction which characterises process drama, as compared to their usual drama classes where they rarely interact or work together. These combined data suggest that the techniques of process drama are not only appropriate for Sri Lankan classrooms, they are highly desirable, allowing students to experience more active and creative learning experience.

A significant difficulty related to some intervention teachers’ knowledge of process drama. While claiming to know what process drama was and its techniques, it became clear the teachers did not know anything about it, or had misunderstood the terminology. During the pre-intervention workshop it became clear there was confusion between process drama and drama processes. The teachers who were chosen by the Director of Drama Education to implement the intervention did not really know about process drama.

This realisation highlighted the first difficulty of a study such as this one, that of cultural and linguistic differences in transferring concepts from different cultures and languages. In Australia, process drama is used to describe work where, ‘the participants, together with the teacher (facilitator) constitute the theatrical ensemble and engage in drama to make meaning for themselves’ (Bowell and Heap 2001, p. 59); In Sri Lanka, teachers understood the term to mean a process for teaching drama, including planning, implementation, evaluation and revision (Irugalbandara 2020). In this situation, the researcher provided a half-day preparation for teaching the intervention manual and process drama techniques for the intervention teachers themselves.

The second observation which highlights a major challenge associated with the implementation of process drama in Sri Lankan classrooms was the clear evidence of lack of preparation by teachers for their drama lessons. Lesson planning is universally acknowledged as an important aspect of effective teaching; every teacher in Sri Lanka is expected to prepare complete lesson plans which specify the planned cognitive, affective and psycho-motor domains of development which are to be supported in each lesson (Ministry of Education 2013). Yet the teachers in this study reported that they did not prepare lesson plans for drama, as they felt it took up too much of their time. The literature has established that teachers on the whole spend significant time planning lessons, and that while the process is challenging (Boikutso 2010), it lies at the heart of effective teaching (Reed and Michaud 2010). It is every bit as important in the creative arts context as in other curriculum areas; careful thought and design is needed to create learning experiences that help students to understand the concept of aesthetic value, to implicitly connect learning experience to their own social, imaginative and personal lives, to create character and mood, and to develop their cognitive capacity.

Another constraint identified by teachers themselves was the examination structure which dominates teaching in Sri Lanka. The students also mentioned it, commenting that their teachers’ and parents’ primary concern was not on developing creativity or communication skills, but on acquiring content knowledge and examination skills to enhance their scores. Parents’ high expectations of their children’s academic, examination-framed, achievement
clearly impacts on teachers’ practice. There is a clear need for changes in this dimension of the Sri Lankan educational system (Irugalbandara and Campbell 2020).

Lack of space is another identified constraint in the Sri Lankan drama classroom. The arrangement of classroom space does not lend itself to practical drama work, being designed for the presentation of lecture-style note-taking lessons. Most of the teachers in this study reported using corridor space, isolated corners of the school, even parts of the playground for practical work. A noisy environment combined with a lack of appropriate space negatively affect a meaningful drama experience. Effective teaching is perceived as being improved in classrooms where order is maintained; and the level of classroom noise is a major issue related to classroom order (Grebennikov and Wiggins 2006). One common reason for classroom noise in Sri Lanka is that classrooms are overcrowded. There are too many students for the room capacity. While researchers have demonstrated that students’ creativity is enhanced when they work in a moderate-noise environment, it has been shown that extreme noise is detrimental to learning (Chiang and Lai 2008; DiSarno et al. 2002; Massonnié et al. 2019). Drama Australia (Sallis 2009) suggests that schools limit drama class sizes to no more than 25 students. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Sri Lanka, where there are typically more than forty students in a drama class.

Limitations

Two main limitations of this study were that the two instruments used (the modified TTCT and the Adaptability scale) were new in the Sri Lankan context, so there were no norms with which to compare results; however, the scales were suitable for between-group comparisons; and that both measures were self-report measures; however, for comparison purposes, this was not problematic as each group was compared with their own scores pre- and post- the intervention.

Additionally, the six participating schools were all located in the Western province of Sri Lanka. The study’s findings might not be generalisable to schools located in the other eight provinces, as there are substantial differences in learning outcomes in secondary education in terms of province, gender, income, and location (World Bank 2017). It would also be useful to repeat this intervention in other grades, to examine if a process drama approach has a similar effect on creative thinking and adaptability outside of the junior secondary years.

Conclusion

This study has provided evidence of the effectiveness of process drama techniques for developing students’ creative thinking and adaptability skills. To date it is the only experimental research study to focus on the issue of creative thinking and adaptability to have been conducted in Sri Lankan schools. The research outcomes offer a number of implications for policymakers, school administration teams, as well as for teachers themselves. Sri Lankan policymakers (Ministry of Education/National Institute of Education) could consider developing evidence-based interventions such as the one described in this paper to support more effective ways of teaching skills such as creative thinking and adaptability to junior secondary school students. School principals play a leading role in promoting effective and high-performing schools; it is they who take the lead in creating a school climate capable of providing freedom for teachers to work productively and
innovatively. They are ultimately responsible for the physical environment, including technology, teaching and learning resources, instruments and spaces that support effective learning. These considerations are equally important for the specific context of drama education. To make the kind of changes suggested in this project requires appropriate upskilling of drama teachers, who for the most part are only familiar with the traditional transmission model of teaching. Consideration of student and teacher feedback from the study, and of the researcher’s observations, clearly identifies the need to provide more effective infrastructure and space for teaching drama, and to provide space, time and support for teachers as they develop an expanded, more current pedagogical knowledge base, and adopt more innovative approaches – such as process drama.

Overall, the study has provided insight to current teaching practices in Sri Lanka and highlighted the need for institutional and professional development support for teachers to make some important pedagogical shifts in their practice, in order to strengthen their knowledge of more current student-centred approaches to teaching and learning and to make key shifts in perspective. Such shifts involve re-conceptualising the nature, intention and potential of drama education, and developing an improved aesthetic sense and pedagogical orientation. There is a need for further research in this domain; for additional studies to investigate the effect of different approaches to drama education across a variety of Sri Lankan drama classroom contexts, in order to gain further insight into the complexity and potential of aesthetic education and drama experience in the context of current and future economic and social demands. Change is challenging. Teachers are most comfortable doing what they know best how to do; and support and guidance will be needed to help navigate new considerations of the complex relationship between learning, social interaction, and student engagement in relation to creative thinking and adaptability skills development. Finally, this intervention is internationally significant, because it may be the first process drama intervention for the development of the general creative adaptability skills. There have been no specific studies, specifically quantitative experimental design studies that have provided evidence that process drama experience can enhance adaptability skills in secondary school students. Similar studies could be replicated to further extend the evidence base for such work.

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