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A Qualitative Examination of Social Skills Training Participants in a Role-Playing Game

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By

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Chairperson: Sanford Portnoy, Ph.D.

Abstract

Research has shown that the development of adequate social skills is a primary part of development. Some children, however, benefit from a therapeutic environment in which they can establish and practice social skills. While there are many interventions currently used to aid in the development of social skills, research has shown that several concerns plague typical interventions. Early feedback suggests that Guild Chronicles is a promising new social skills intervention that represents an emerging category of psychotherapy interventions based around role-playing games. Guild Chronicles is a collaborative game in which participants work together in a social environment to battle monsters, solve problems, and overcome challenges. This study used a qualitative, phenomenological approach to develop a nuanced picture of the experiences of those participating in Guild Chronicles. Eight students, ages 10 and 11, and their teachers participated in individual semi-structured interviews, and the transcripts were analyzed using an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach to organize the data into overarching concepts and themes. The results suggest that Guild Chronicles is an engaging, flexible and supportive environment that helps participants develop social connections and social skills. The students' teachers reported that they, too, noticed the

development of greater social skills in their students. The hope is that Guild Chronicles represents an exciting and promising new approach to social skills interventions based around role-playing games.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The world in which we live places a great deal of importance on social interactions and, as a result, social skills and social competence are essential parts of functioning. Social skills are the behaviors that are considered necessary to perform social tasks. When people have inadequate social skills, they often avoid being around people. This feeds into a cycle of increased anxiety, decreased social interaction, and continued skills deficits (White et al., 2013). Children who have difficulty with social interactions often face neglect, rejection, bullying, and delinquency (Green et al., 2013). For this reason, addressing concerns about social skills during childhood is very important for overall development.

There are many interventions that are currently used to address social skills concerns. However, many of the interventions have significant limitations that hinder their ability to effectively develop social skills in the participants. One relatively new category of social skills interventions is role-playing games (RPGs). RPGs appear to have value, as they seem to address some of the issues that are revealed in the literature about typical social skills interventions. The hope is that RPGs structure interventions in a way that allows participants to develop social skills in an engaging environment that promotes greater awareness and development of social competence. Although RPGs have long been popular among children, the use in the context of psychotherapy is relatively new. Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) recommend that, "role-playing games deserve more attention, both from researchers and clinical practitioners, because they

encourage change while improving young clients' social and emotional development" (p. 173).

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of 10-to 14-year old children in gauging a newer type of RPG as an intervention that is used directly in the psychotherapy process. The intervention, Guild Chronicles, is currently being used in several settings. One setting is in the Wayland, MA school system, where many of the participants have specific social goals that are supposed to be addressed by their participation in the game. It is a group intervention that is loosely based on the game *Dungeons & Dragons*, and asks students to work together to cooperatively solve puzzles and problems in order to move forward in the game. The Guild Chronicles description is as follows:

Guild Chronicles invites players to imagine themselves as heroes in an interactive story with fantasy themes. Participants must work together to overcome challenges and will explore situations, themes, and story elements that allow them to practice their developing skills. Through playing the game group members develop effective communication and collaboration skills, perspective taking, active listening, and flexibility. Also, direct teaching and discussions are incorporated allowing for skills to generalize outside of the group setting. Guild Chronicles groups focus on improving social competency, increasing self-awareness and learning stress management skills by playing a highly engaging fantasy game. (Mass General Hospital for Children, 2015)

The choice has been made to use this particular game because it shows promise in addressing social skills needs and is representative of role-playing games used in the psychotherapy context. The study will explore the experiences of the student participants. In addition, the study will explore how the children's parents and teachers feel about the intervention, and whether they perceive any changes in social skills in their child.

This study will be conducted at the Claypit Hill Elementary School in Wayland, MA. A qualitative, phenomenological approach will be used during this study to develop an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the experiences of those impacted by this intervention. A series of semi-structured interviews with different stakeholders will be carried out and analyzed. Specifically, the study will focus on interviews with eight to ten students who participate in the Guild Chronicles intervention. All of the student participants will have a social skills goal as part of their inclusion in the intervention. In addition, semi-structured interviews will be conducted with their teachers. It is hoped that interviewing both participants and their teachers, who see them interacting with their peers every day, will allow for a greater understanding of how the intervention is experienced and the impact that it has on the students' lives and those around them. The transcripts will be analyzed to discover themes, and an interpretation of those themes will be offered in light of their developmental significance.

This project intends to begin to address the current gap in knowledge about RPGs in psychotherapy. The literature review for this study will begin by outlining the relevant research on social skills, including defining social skills in general and examining social skills deficits. The literature makes it is clear that the development of adequate social skills is a major task of childhood, and can have significant effects on many aspects of life. As such, the impact that poor social skills can have on a child's development will be presented.

Next, interventions that are currently used to address poor social skills will be explored. Overall, many social skills interventions have been successful (Dirks et al., 2007). However, there are several significant limitations seen across the interventions.

These limitations, including limited investment, limited generalizability to settings outside the therapy office, and inappropriate focus of the interventions, will be reviewed. The literature review also includes a look at role-playing games in general and more specifically in the context of psychotherapy. Finally, the literature review will conclude with a description of Guild Chronicles, a new intervention that is used to address poor social skills.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The formation and expansion of social skills is a central part of development, and social skills deficits can have a significant impact on current and future functioning. This chapter will focus on the importance of social skills and the interventions that are used to address poor social skills. First, social skills will be examined in general. Interventions that are currently used will be reviewed, including the strengths and limitations of the interventions. The chapter also includes a look at role-playing games in general and in the context of psychotherapy. The section will conclude with a description of Guild Chronicles, a new intervention used to address poor social skills.

Social Skills

The concept of social skills is complex due to the fact that there is no clear definition of social skills, and poor social skills often look different from one child to the next. Still, it is important to consider the factors that impact social skills so that one can better assess interventions aimed at addressing social skills deficits. This section will begin with a description of the concept of social skills. Second, some of the social skills deficits that are most commonly seen will be examined. A theory about assessing social competence will be presented next. Finally, the impact of poor social skills will be explored.

Defining Social Skills

There is no general consensus on what behaviors actually make up "social skills" and the definitions vary depending upon the theoretical orientation and the population being studied (Walton & Ingersoll, 2013). Generally, social competence requires a

combination of cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills (Green et al., 2013). As a result, children with poor social skills present in a wide variety of ways, and the symptoms impact them at varying degrees (Czermainski et al., 2015).

Social competence has been defined as, "the ability to produce desired effects on others in social situations" (LeCroy, 1987, p. 440). As Dirks, Treat and Weersing (2007) indicated, social competence and social skills are not identical concepts. Social competence implies that a person's actions meet an external standard of behavior, and that they are able to complete social tasks appropriately. Social skills are the actual behaviors that are considered necessary to perform the social tasks. These include both verbal skills and nonverbal skills, such as eye contact and smiling (Walton & Ingersoll, 2013). At the most basic level, social skills allow people to effectively share space with others (Winner, 2008).

Though children display a wide variety of psychopathology, Dirks et al.'s (2007) review of the literature found that, among youth, psychopathology is often "strongly characterized by difficulty managing interpersonal challenges and behaving "competently"" (p. 328). These impairments may manifest in a variety of ways including communicating with others, establishing and maintaining appropriate friendships, assessing and integrating social information from their surroundings, taking the perspective of others, and sharing enjoyment (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007).

Social Skills Deficits

Children with poor social skills may present in a variety of ways. Children may have weak social skills in one particular area, or they may have a range of challenges. In addition, the level of impairment can vary greatly. Those with significant problems may

be diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). However, many children have poor social skills without meeting the threshold for an ASD diagnosis. This section will focus on a variety of social skills deficits that may be seen in children with ASD or children with weak social skills who do not carry an ASD diagnosis.

One of the basic characteristics of poor social skills is relational difficulties. The ability to relate to others is generally necessary for effectively building relationships with peers. Taking the perspective of others, and understanding that others have their own thoughts, intentions, desires and feelings, is an important facet of relational skills. This is referred to as theory of mind, and it develops naturally in neurologically typical children who are not on the autism spectrum (Schuler, 2003; Anderson & Morris, 2006; Crooke, Hendrix, & Rachman, 2008). However, children with ASD often struggle with this skill, and it may take longer for them to accurately read cues and understand the perspective of others (Winner, 2008).

The use of language allows children to connect with others by asking and answering questions, share information, bond over commonalities, and advocate for themselves, among other functions (Winner, 2008). Language skills may be lacking in children with ASD, which can have a significant impact on their social functioning (Landa & Goldberg, 2005). Initiating and maintaining interactions with those around them may be difficult without the skilled language production of their peers. In addition, even if children develop some social language skills, it can be difficult to generalize these developments to different settings and conversations partners (Schuler, 2003).

In addition, many children, especially those with ASD, have issues with executive functioning (Landa & Goldberg, 2005). Executive functioning processes involve skills

such as including problem solving, cognitive flexibility, monitoring, coping with new situations, and reasoning (Czermainski et al., 2015; Anderson & Morris, 2006). As a result, children may have difficulty with social interactions that require them to use skills like inhibition, flexibility and planning. Executive dysfunction also makes it harder to, "hold in mind critical elements in discourse while formulating the gist of what is being heard and preparing to make inferences based on given information" (Landa & Goldberg, 2005, p. 559). As children get older and their social world becomes increasingly complex, they have more trouble managing shifting situations or understanding different meanings of words.

Assessing Social Competence

The wide range of ways that poor social skills presents in children complicates the process of assessing social competence. In their article, Dirks et al. (2007) condensed different theoretical models and identified four main areas that impact social competence: child, behavior, situation, and judge. More precisely, "knowing something about the child of interest, the situation in which the behavior was enacted, the behavior that was selected, and the person evaluating the behavior would explain the greatest amount of variability in a child's social functioning" (Dirks et al., 2007, p. 331). Dirks et al. (2007) reviewed four theories about social competence that fall in line with these four factors.

First, the trait theory views social skills as a personal characteristic that is located within the child. According to this model, social skills are part of a person's underlying makeup, and are generally consistent for the lifespan. This model has been criticized for a number of reasons. It is nearly impossible to assess this aspect of a person's disposition without measuring how skilled their social interactions are. As a result, evaluations

measure skilled behavior rather than the true trait. Assessments based on this model have not been well supported empirically, and have not been found to accurately predict how socially competent a person is in a natural social context.

The second theory, the social skills model, focuses on whether behavior itself is appropriate or inappropriate for a situation. For example, if a person is trying to achieve a goal, appropriate behavior may include being assertive, while aggression would be considered inappropriate behavior. This model may have more utility than the trait model in the real world since getting others to perceive a person as socially competent is typically based on observable behavior. However, it also has some limitations because behavior can be seen differently at different times, and relies heavily on the researcher's value judgment of behaviors. A researcher's designation of the most important social behavior may be different from person to person and from one context to the next.

The trait and social skills models generally do not incorporate context into their conceptualizations. However, the concept of social competence has shifted as it is understood to be more contextually bound. The third factor, situation, begins to recognize the significance of a person's situation in judging how socially competent they appear. When examining social skills, one's ability to assess interpersonal situations and then use one's resources to produce appropriate positive outcomes for that context is important (Winner, 2001). According to this approach that focuses on the importance of context, social competence "results from an interaction with the situation in which a person is acting... Competence can be thought of as an emergent property resulting from the appropriate matching of behavior and situation" (Dirks et al., 2007, pp. 329-330). However, this contextual nature of social competence makes it difficult to measure. As a

result, researchers are typically able to get a better assessment of social competence if they study a specific situation, rather than attempting to gauge overall social competence.

The final model, judge, takes into account how the person evaluating the behavior impacts how the child is seen. When judging a person's behavior, the evaluator has to define a set of behaviors that they deem most important and telling. Evaluators could base their standards on everything from peer or parental standards to society standards. Dirks et al. (2007) pointed out the wide range of behaviors that could be designated as most important by evaluators including eye contact, tone of voice, peer cooperation, and adherence to legal laws. For example, a child's behavior may be seen as appropriate by their peers while adults view the behavior as inappropriate. In addition, the repercussions of different evaluations can vary greatly. A child acting aggressively on the playground may be seen as frustrating by his or her peers while the teachers decide it is grounds for suspension.

Currently, research has not shown that any one of these factors is the most appropriate conceptualization of social competence. However, most major models "described in the literature are nested within this full four-factor model; that is, they include a subset of the possible predictors and interaction terms" (Dirks et al., 2007, p. 331). Although it makes assessments more complicated, the integration of all four factors, child, behavior, situation, and judge, seems to provide a better definition of social competence. The evolution of the concept of social competence to include context and judge speaks to how vital it is that children can assess situations and meet the social standards of the people and places around them.

The Impact of Poor Social Skills

No matter which definition of social skills is used, or which social skills are least developed, poor social skills can impact children in a variety of ways. Connecting with others is difficult when children do not have the skills necessary to meet standards of behavior. Even when children do have the skills, they may have trouble when they are unsure about how and when to employ the skills. Some peers may find those with poor social skills to be unappealing friends. This may be for a number of reasons. It may be difficult for children with poor social skills to use appropriate language when interacting with their peers, which can be off-putting or confusing for others. In addition, they may seem insensitive or unaware of others' thoughts and feelings. Many of the executive functioning issues discussed previously, such as flexibility and problem solving, can also have a significant impact on a child's ability to remain socially engaged with others.

In addition, children with poor social skills can experience isolation and rejection, which makes them more vulnerable to problematic externalizing and internalizing behavior in the future (January, Casey, & Paulson, 2011). Externalizing behavior may include aggression and acting out in class, and internalizing behavior may include symptoms of depression and isolating. Social skills are often a vital ingredient in establishing and maintaining friendships, which is a major task of childhood.

These skills definitely impact the ability of children to connect with their peers, but social skills deficits can also have significant negative impacts on educational achievement (Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Winner, 2008). Research has shown a strong link between social skills and academic achievement. Often, cognitive skills or family background are considered good predictors of academic competence. However, the

social competence of a first grader is an even better predictor of future academic success (Raver & Knitzer, 2002). Some children have strong cognitive ability and low social skills. These children may struggle in the classroom, and underperform academically, due to the importance of social skills (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012).

Children with strong social skills, including the ability to maintain positive relationships with others and follow rules, are better able to benefit from academic instruction (Gresham, 2015). Cooperation and self-control are competencies that are especially important when it comes to being successful in school (Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2003). Both of these skills, according to elementary school teachers, are more important than assertion skills (Meier, DiPerna, & Oster, 2006; Lane, Givner & Pierson, 2004).

A study by Lane, Stanton-Chapman, Jamison and Phillips (2007) determined specific social skills that preschool teachers and parents had identified as necessary for success. According to teachers, the three most critical skills were following teachers' directions, controlling their temper in conflict situations with adults, and controlling their temper in conflict situations with peers. The parents identified the same three skills, in addition to attending to instructions, putting away toys or other household property, following household rules, ending disagreements with parents calmly, and speaking an appropriate tone of voice. Several authors noted that teachers and parents often fail to adequately convey to the children which social skills and behaviors are most important to adequate social functioning, in their eyes. This makes it difficult for children to meet the expectations of the adults around them (Lane, Stanton-Chapman, Jamison, & Phillips, 2007; Meier, DiPerna & Oster, 2006).

In addition, these issues can lead to further problems with functioning as children grow up (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). When children lag behind their typically developing peers in terms of social competence, they miss social learning opportunities. This has a lasting impact and can put children at risk for developing more issues later in life (Parker, Rubin, Price, & DeRosier, 1995). The negative impact of low social skills can also persist after school by making it more difficult to secure successful employment as an adult (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). The ongoing identification of specific social skills that are most vital to functioning will help guide the development of effective social skills training programs.

Social Skills Interventions

Although the development of social skills is vital to a child's growth, it is rare that social skills are directly taught in schools in the general classroom (Meier, DiPerna, & Oster, 2006; Baumgart, Filler, & Askvig, 1991). Rather, children typically receive social skills interventions in small pull-out groups from their general education classroom, or they participate in interventions outside of school. Interventions often focus on social skills acquisition by teaching children specific skills, such as initiating contact with peers or making eye contact with others. Other interventions try to help children better understand how to conceptualize social skills in the hopes that thinking about social skills more accurately will help them know when and how to use certain behaviors.

Studies report varying outcomes in terms of how effective the interventions truly are. Overall, some meta-analyses of social skills interventions conclude that the interventions are effective to some degree as the participants show improvement on post-tests, when compared to control groups. Specifically, interventions helped improve

social interactions and peer acceptance, and helped decrease aggressive behavior (Dirks et al., 2007). However, other meta-analyses showed a wide range of results, including many that were highly ineffectual (Bellini et al., 2007; Gresham, 2015). This section will review interventions that are currently used, as well as some of the factors that make them less effective than one would hope.

Review of Existing Interventions

Social skills interventions have historically taken many different forms. Typically, social skills programs use interventions such as modeling, role-playing, coaching, structured teaching, and praising (LeCroy, 1987; Walton & Ingersoll, 2013). Group interventions are popular because they allow children to practice social skills in an inherently social context. One significant benefit of teaching social skills in a group format is that it allows the professional leader to prompt all of the group members to respond in appropriate ways to situations that may arise during group. This immediate intervention and practice allows for increased confidence and expansion of skills (Muller, 2010). Groups provide students with a safe space to practice social competency skills, and learn to connect their actions to social consequences (LeCroy, 1987). Effective social skills groups require a delicate balance, however, and may be influenced by many factors, including number of participants, level of social ability, developmental age, and gender (Muller, 2010). Common approaches, including rehearsal interventions, playbased interventions, cognitive-based interventions and integrated interventions are reviewed below.

Rehearsal interventions. One main component of social skills training has included the rehearsing of hypothetical real-life situations. This allows school

psychologists to present children with social scenarios and then have them practice reacting. In this context, the psychologist is able to provide the student with immediate feedback and guidance in an attempt to shape the child's behavior towards being increasingly prosocial. However, research that assesses social competency based on these hypothetical role-plays has been criticized for its limited external validity (Dirks et al., 2007). The natural environment in which social interactions take place is very different from the lab or the school psychologist's office.

Murdock and Hobbs (2011) examined an intervention that combined play and role-playing, called Picture Me Playing. It aimed to help students with ASD to better understand the usual sequence of typical play in an effort to increase their pretend play skills. The intervention presented groups of typically developing children and children with ASD with stories depicting a typical imaginative play session. The children were asked to act out situations, first with significant direction from the instructor and then, as children developed a greater understanding of play and play dialogue, they were given less instruction. The study found encouraging results, including increased play dialogue among the children with ASD so that they no longer adhered so strictly to play scripts and were better able to play with their peers.

Another form of social skills training is video modeling, which involves having children watch instructional videos of peer models demonstrating appropriate behaviors (Walton & Ingersoll, 2013; Green et al., 2013). Video self-modeling, an offshoot of video modeling, involves individuals watching themselves successfully performing a behavior on video and then practicing the targeted behavior. This is done in an attempt to

increase self-efficacy ad replace memories of unsuccessful or inappropriate behavior with new memories of adaptive behavior.

One example of a video rehearsal intervention was carried out by Green et. al. (2013). The researchers completed a study with four preschool-aged male participants to see if watching instructional videos would increase their initiation of social contact. The boys were shown videos of children successfully performing social acts such as initiating play and taking turns with other children. The hope was that the peers would then positively reinforce the child and increase the frequency of the social behavior. Though the study included only four participants, parents and teachers reported improved social behavior after the use of this video modeling intervention.

Several other studies focused on video modeling have been conducted (D'Ateno, P., Mangiapanello, K., & Taylor, B. A., 2003; Bellini, Akullian, & Hopf, 2007; Victor, H., Little, S., & Akin-Little, A., 2011; Nikopoulos, C., & Keenan, M., 2003; Wilson, K. P., 2013). While some outcomes have been mixed, the results have, overall, been relatively positive and have suggested that this may be an effective social skills intervention technique. Many of the studies found that the participants' social skills developed quickly after they began the intervention. It is a relatively easy intervention to implement since it does not require the investment of significant time or materials. Unfortunately, the studies generally have a very small number of participants, from one to seven participants, which makes results hard to generalize.

Play-based interventions. Play is often an inherently engaging activity for children and several interventions aim to capitalize on this interest. Play can help with the development of a variety of the skills necessary for interaction, including cognitive,

affective, and social development (O'Neill, Rajendran, & Halperin, 2012). Play can also help with the development of communication skills, which helps facilitate social interaction. Some studies have indicated that "play based interventions may contribute to the development of reciprocity and non-verbal communication skills" as they provide children with positive experiences that set the groundwork for language development using skills such as gestures and vocalizations (Schuler, 2003, p. 456).

O'Neill, Rajendran, and Halperin (2012) proposed that treatment should go beyond interactions between child and therapist and should help address social, affective and cognitive deficits. To accomplish this, they had children engage in play with peers, siblings and parents using popular children's games like Simon Says and hopscotch. They worked with children with ADHD, and focused on the benefits that playing games can have on cooperation, turn-taking ability, flexibility, compromise, and perspective taking. By pairing children with more knowledgeable and skilled peers and adults, the children received support until they were able to do tasks on their own. For example, parents were encouraged to set clear rules and limits during play with their children, while also keeping the game enjoyable. Early results suggested that the intervention improved the relationship between the parent and child, improved the child's emotion regulation skills, and helped increase the child's patience. Based on the researchers' results and a review of the literature, they concluded that, "play-based interventions offer an exciting direction for the development of novel approaches for working with preschoolers with ADHD" (p. 1166).

Similarly, Stermac and Josefowitz (1985) described the use of a monopoly-like board game called the Social Skills Board Game to address social skills issues in

chronically institutionalized adolescents. This preliminary study focused on seven adolescents, all of whom had some basic social skills deficits and low cognitive functioning. The game was designed as an easy, inexpensive and fun way to work with the adolescents, and it was played twice a week for fourteen weeks. As players moved their pieces around a board, they were asked to follow instructions to earn points. The game prompted players to engage in role-plays designed to help develop social skills. For example, the participants worked on making eye contact, smiling at others, eliminating behaviors like inappropriate touching, and speaking at an appropriate volume. The group format allowed the leader and other participants to give each other feedback about their actions and encourage participation. The researchers assessed the children's performance on six different role-play situations before and after the treatment. Results revealed a significant increase in social skills. However, it was difficult to tell if the game format contributed significantly to their social skills development, or if the role-playing and group interactions were the most helpful intervention component.

LeGoff (2004) designed a study that utilized play as part of an effort to make social skills training more effective for children with ASD. He did this by centering the approach around the use of LEGOs, which he hoped would tap into the natural interests of the children. In both social skills groups of children and individual meetings with a therapist, LEGOs were used to practice social skills such as, "collaborative work, division of labor, sharing, turn-taking, cued eye-contact and gaze-following, emphasis on verbal and nonverbal communications, and taking advantage of natural opportunities for practicing social support" (LeGoff, 2004, p. 559). For example, in one case, participants were given a LEGO set to assemble as a team. Dividing the task in a way that

necessitated joint and interactive tasks provided a platform for their social interactions. As time went on, the participants were able to tackle increasingly difficult tasks that had less structure and required more problem solving and conflict-resolution. Overall, the study found that the participants demonstrated significant gains in social competence in the group, and teachers reported that they showed improvements in both confidence and sociability outside of the group. This study demonstrated the power that interest on the part of the child can have in increasing participation and efficacy.

Cognitive-based interventions. Some interventions have been criticized for focusing too much on skills acquisition and not enough on the cognitive aspects of social competence. These social cognitive tasks include, "interpreting verbal/nonverbal actions/intentions, understanding social reciprocity, and adjusting verbal/nonverbal behavior according to social cues" (Crooke, Hendrix, & Rachman, 2008, p. 582).

Without these cognitive skills, even children who have some social skills may not know how to use them appropriately. As a result, social thinking curriculums are also becoming common. These address the cognitive part of social interactions and help participants think in more socially adaptive ways (Anderson & Morris, 2006).

Winner's (2008) Social Thinking curriculum aims to teach social thinking to students. It uses cognitive behavioral strategies to coach children with social processing disabilities to think differently when it comes to social situations. The goal of the curriculum is to help those with weak social skills, "develop a deeper understanding of social relations and social communication while also learning to decode and encode related social skills" (Winner, 2008, p. 1). Children are taught what social skills are and how they work, but also why they are needed in certain situations. For instance, the

curriculum teaches children about which behaviors are "expected" and "unexpected" in different contexts, and helps the children learn to think about how to best approach social situations.

A study done by Crooke, Hendrix and Rachman (2008) reviewed the effectiveness of the Social Thinking intervention among six boys between the ages of 9 and 11 who were diagnosed with High Functioning ASD. The approach focused on increasing the boys' level of understanding that other have their own thoughts separate from their own, and that they can impact others' thoughts about them. They learned that expected behavior generally causes others to regard them in a positive way, while unexpected behavior may make others think of them more negatively. The data collected was based on the frequency of expected and unexpected behaviors during both semi-structured time and unstructured time during the group meetings. Expected behavior included on-topic remarks, initiating contact with others, sustaining contact with others, and looking at their peers. Unexpected behavior included rude remarks, perseveration on personal interests, off-topic comments, talking to oneself, atypical sounds, atypical movements, and atypical object use.

The results showed a significant change after the eight-week program was implemented. After learning how to think about their behavior and the impact of their behavior on others, the boys performed positive and expected social behavior more consistently. Overall, they also performed unexpected behaviors less frequently. Although the study had a small number of participants, the results were encouraging. Rather than results based on the subjects' performance on a specific task, they were observed in "real time" interactions, and the hope was that this provided a more accurate

evaluation of their social performance. This type of cognitive intervention takes the stance that teaching children to think socially will help them act socially, both in therapy and outside of therapy. The shift away from teaching "skills" and toward "thinking about the why behind using the skills" is significant (Crooke et al., 2008, p. 557).

Integrated interventions. Groups that integrate peers with strong social skills with those without strong social skills are another common form of intervention (Walton & Ingersoll, 2013; Schuler, 2003). The approach includes educating typically developing peers about how to interact with children with less effective social skills in order to increase the social interactions between the groups. A review of 42 peer-mediated intervention studies found that they could be a versatile and effective approach. The study also found that the positive interactions between typically developing peers and those with ASD increased (Chan, et al., 2009). However, other research has shown little benefit of involving peers as reinforcement agents (Desbiens & Royer, 2003).

Dirks et. al. (2007) cited Fast Track as one program that works on multiple levels, including with different intervention groups. As described by Bierman et al. (2010), the intervention was put in place in four school systems that were deemed high risk based on poverty and crime: Durham, NC; Nashville, TN; Seattle, WA; and rural central PA. Beginning in first grade and continuing until tenth grade, an age-appropriate universal intervention was put in place for entire classrooms to help develop emotional concepts, social understanding and self-control. The lessons were generally presented didactically, followed by discussion and role-playing activities so that the students could practice the skills. Students who were identified as high-risk received more intensive interventions. These interventions included, social-skills interventions in small groups, and academic

tutoring. In addition, the parents of the students received training and home visits focused on parenting skills and social competence (Bierman et al., 2010). The intervention was designed in this way for several reasons. First, the hope was that the universal intervention would foster an atmosphere that would better support the new skills of the children receiving the selective intervention. In addition, the universal intervention focused on improving the experiences for all of the children both by promoting their own social and emotional learning and by creating a calmer classroom atmosphere in general.

The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group (2010) evaluated the effects of the Fast Track program. 891 total children participated in the study, 445 of which took part in the intervention and 446 who were part of the control group. Initial studies by the same group focused on the first few years of the intervention only. The results suggested that the program had a significant impact on both individuals' behavior and social skills, and on general classroom functioning. By the time the children were in the fourth and fifth grades, the results showed significant but modest effect on social skills, and no significant impact on school functioning. However, results were less promising by the time the children reached the end of middle school. According to their teachers, the Fast Track participants no longer had a significant advantage over the control students regarding social skills and social competence. Surprisingly, the Fast Track children were also more involved with deviant peers, defined as those who were more often in trouble with teachers and police, and more involved with substance use. Although the researchers were unsure about why this association with deviant peers, they wondered if

it had to do with the intervention staff's active reinforcement of all social interactions, including interactions with students who had antisocial behavior histories.

During the study, "great effort was expended to offer a coherent array of services across 10 years to each family in the intervention condition, starting with the beginning of elementary school" (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2010, p. 600). Though this program showed some promising results for younger children, it is time and labor intensive. This makes it difficult and costly to implement widely, which may be an unrealistic approach for many communities. In addition, further research is needed to expand upon their findings, as the assessment of social skills was based solely on teacher ratings.

Impressions of existing interventions. Social skills interventions take many different approaches to helping children develop the ability navigate this social world more effectively. Some interventions, such as video modeling, are relatively easy to implement, while other interventions, such as Fast Track, are massive undertakings that attempt to address both individual and systemic issues. Overall, it seems that social skills interventions attempt to reach children early. The studies examined tended to include preschool- to middle school-aged children. This approach is in line with the research, which emphasizes the importance of early intervention. Research seems to suggest that, "without early intervention, emotional, social, and behavioral problems... in young children are key risk factors or "red flags" that mark the beginning of escalating academic problems, grade retention, school drop out, and antisocial behavior" (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004, p. 96-97. This age group seems to allow for early intervention that can

address problems before they further intensify, while also making sure children are old enough to engage in the interventions tasks.

Limitations of Existing Interventions

In general, many social skills interventions have been successful (Dirks et al., 2007). However, there are several significant limitations. Specifically, they have limited buy-in from students, the progress does not consistently generalize to contexts outside of the therapy room, and it can be difficult to find the correct focus for the intervention.

Limited investment. A frequent complication with social skills intervention has to do with low levels of investment on the part of the child. This may be due to a lack of need to satisfy the people around them or a lack of interest in the material (LeGoff, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2012). This issue has been raised specifically in literature focused on children with ASD. As a result, typical interventions, "which utilized peer instruction and peer modeling, have had little impact, or worse, result in robotic attempts at imitation. Even on a one-to-one basis it is often difficult to sustain motivation to persist with learning tasks that they do not find inherently interesting" (LeGoff, 2004, p. 558). Some of the play-based interventions discussed previously that utilize naturally interesting activities such as LEGOs, Simon Says and board games attempt to address this difficulty.

Limited generalizability. Given the link between social competence and situational factors, training programs should teach children to assess the situations they are in so that they can better match their behavior to the environmental needs (Dirks et. al., 2007). However, the difficulty of helping children generalize the social skills they learn during interventions has long been one of the main problems with social skills

curriculums. Often, intervention participants develop skills in the therapy room and can implement them when prompted. However, they still have trouble utilizing their newly learned skills to establish and maintain relationships by initiating contact with other children or playing with classmates on the playground (LeGoff, 2004; Winner, 2008; Crooke, Hendrix, & Rachman, 2008).

Children with high functioning autism often have trouble generalizing skills that they learn from one setting to another, which makes schools a good place for interventions to take place in order to improve social performance in schools (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Unfortunately, a meta-analysis conducted by Bellini et al. (2007) found that, "school-based social skills interventions are minimally effective for children with ASD. Specifically, social skills interventions produced low treatment effects and low generalization effects across participants, settings, and play stimuli" (p. 159). Similarly, LeGoff (2004) found that autistic children in schools were learning to respond appropriately during role-plays and could be prompted by teaches in some instances, but generalizability to other contexts and in the absence of prompting remained an issue.

Some studies have found that classroom-based interventions are more effective in terms of generalizability and maintenance than interventions that involve pulling a child from their classroom (Bellini et al., 2007; Gresham, Sugai, & Horner, 2001). For this reason, many interventions have focused on teaching children social skills in natural classroom environments in the hopes that it would help them actually develop and use the skills in the moment. In addition, the presence of peer models in the classroom increases the effectiveness of social skills teaching (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012). Another concern about generalizability is the frequent lack of continuity in social skills practice after

children leave the group. Muller (2010) pointed out that caregivers need to have an understanding of what happens within the group so that they can encourage their children to practice the skills outside of the group, too.

Inappropriate focus. Often, an intervention is used with a child no matter what their specific social skills deficits they have. However, it is much more effective to target interventions to each child. By designing interventions that teach children the specific skills they are missing, they are more likely to build skills and improve functioning (Greham, Sugai & Horner, 2001; Bienert and Schneider, 1995; Quinn, Kavale, Mathur, Rutherford, & Forness, 1999).

Role-Playing Games

Role-playing games (RPGs) have been a popular hobby for quite some time, and they are only just starting to be studied as a psychotherapy tool. This section of the literature review will include information about RPGs in general, as well a specific RGP called *Dungeons & Dragons*. The use of RPGs in the context of psychotherapy will be examined, including examples of the use of RPGs in psychotherapy, advantages to this approach, and the therapist role in RPGs. Finally, a new RPG, Guild Chronicles, will be discussed.

Defining Role-Playing Games

Enfield (2007) described role-playing games as, "face-to-face or virtual (Internet) experiential activities in which players take on the roles of specific predetermined or self-created characters who embark on either pre-scripted or spontaneous adventures that are controlled by the game players" (p. 227). There is no one, common definition of RPGs (Hitchens & Drachen, 2008; Enfield, 2007). Rather, RPGs come in many different

forms. Some are fairly simple, while others are elaborate. Some RPGs can be completed in a day, while others last for extended periods of time. Essentially, an RPG is recreational pastime during which people design and play as characters that travel around imaginary worlds (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). The characters work collaboratively to explore the imaginary worlds and defend against outside attacks.

Currently, there are several different forms of RPGs. The original RPGs were "pen-and-paper" or "table-top" versions that started in the 1970's. Dungeons & Dragons is the classic example of the "pen-and-paper" RPG, and it is the RPG that most other "pen-and-paper" RPGs are based on. There are also live-action role-playing games, which have significantly more players, and the participants enact their characters in real-life settings. Online gaming is a growing segment of RPGs, and can be played by single players or many. Massively multi-player online games allow large numbers of participants to play together in an online forum. This literature review will focus specifically on "pen-and-paper" RPGs, which is the form of RPG that is most often used in the context of psychotherapy.

During "pen-and-paper" RPGs, the players do not act out their characters. Rather, the participants usually play in the same room and verbally describe what their characters do and say. The collaborative nature of the game allows the story to twist and turn in relation to the interactions of the players and characters (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Hitchens & Drachen, 2008). Typically, there is a game master who has the course of a game in mind, and helps manage the game and lead the characters (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). In addition, the game master can manipulate the game trajectory and the rules governing the characters and the action (Hitchens & Drachen, 2008). Throughout the

game, each player uses a character sheet to keep track of their character's statistics and position (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013).

Dungeons & Dragons

Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) will be examined in greater detail as it is often considered to be the oldest example of a role-playing game (Hitchens & Drachen, 2008). Zayas and Lewis (1986) presented the game as one characterized by,

Hypothetical situations of adventure, magic, and fantasy that required members to work together, each within a particular role and with specific qualities and skills, in accomplishing the group's tasks. The game offered opportunities for assuming imaginary identities and roles in an age-appropriate manner that would enhance group members social interaction... the notion of the group as a reciprocal helping system is essential with children learning to participate in the broader social world of extrafamilial groups. (p. 54)

These elements are some of the things that appeal most strongly to the stereotypical consumer: preadolescent boys (Enfield, 2007.) Like most RPGs, there are character classes to choose from, including fighter, wizard, cleric, rogue, and ranger. The different characters have sets of strengths, which may include strength, intelligence, dexterity and wisdom. Each of these characters is equally valuable in its own way and, thus, is necessary for a successful collaborative game (Zayas & Lewis, 1986). Players can engage in ongoing fantasy play, which is both fun and developmentally important. D&D, "encourages free fantasy as there is no board or movable pieces to provide inhibitions to imagination. Players are encouraged to *become* their characters in the course of the game, which is to say, to become their own fantasies" (Blackmon, 1994 629).

RPGs in Psychotherapy

The use of role-playing games in the context of psychotherapy is a relatively new intervention direction, and there has been very little research done on RPGs used by

therapists (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). When used in this context, it is essential that the RPG is well matched to the client. Factors that should be taken into account include age, gender, developmental level, interests, ability to engage with metaphors, number of players, aggression level, and treatment goals and needs (Enfield, 2007).

Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) concluded that RPGs present four important possibilities for development. First, they help children try on different identities in order to integrate parts of themselves in a safe way. Second, RPGs promote emotional development because the game provides a safe space for suppressed emotions to be expressed and managed. Third, the game allows players to see aspects of themselves, both positive and negative, as external objects. Finally, the interactive nature of the game encourages interpersonal competency and social skills development.

Betz (2011) reviewed lessons that fantasy RPGs can teach participants. First, he concluded that they teach players the importance of working as a team. Diversity among team members in terms of strengths and weaknesses is important as players learn to use their abilities to improve team performance. At the same time, team members should share values and the vision for their mission. Preparation, planning, information gathering, and risk-management are also important lessons. Finally, the belief that players can advance their skills is vital. These lessons are important for any RPG participant to learn, but they are especially important in the context of psychotherapy.

There are a limited number of instances in which the literature includes the use of an RPG as an intervention. The vast majority of those cited in the literature use Dungeons & Dragons as the basis for the intervention. Some intervention leaders played the game in its original form, while others made adjustments to make it more appropriate for their group. Zayas and Lewis (1986) discussed the use of *Dungeons & Dragons* as part of an after-school program in New York City. It included eight boys, all ages 8 and 9, who were referred for socialization goals including teamwork, ability to work with others and social skills development. The author found that the boys were increasingly able to address and discuss social interactions within the game and in personal experiences outside of the game.

Enfield (2007) described the use of an RPG with a therapy group of 9- to 11-year old boys. The RPG was similar to *Dungeons & Dragons* in some ways, but it was made significantly simpler by eliminating some of the character design elements and the more complex rules. The four boys presented with a variety of concerns including ADHD, PTSD, impulsivity, and aggression. The game was structured around the joint task of rescuing a princess. The group leader facilitated interactions that required teamwork, cooperation, and organization. The group met once a week for two consecutive school semesters. Reports from home and school revealed promising outcomes including increased social functioning and communication, and decreased impulsivity and detention sentences.

Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) described the use of another *Dungeons & Dragons*-like intervention with a group of gifted children. The participants were between the ages of 8 and 16, and were broken into groups of six to 12 participants based on chronological age, developmental level, and familiarity with RPGs. The groups met for several hours for three consecutive days, over a long weekend. The counselor kept observation notes for each child about their strengths, weaknesses, and progress on group and individual goals. The authors described one of the participants in detail. Matthew, a 15-year-old

boy, took part in four of the RPG weekend workshops while also attending individual therapy. Matthew was in treatment to address low self-esteem, social and behavior problems, aggression, and academic failure. The counselors noted that all of these presenting issues came out over the course of the RPG weekends, which allowed the counselors to work with him on his social and emotional issues. Over the course of his treatment, Matthew developed a greater awareness of his behavioral and interaction patterns. He learned to react more appropriately to events that made him upset. He also connected with the other participants because of improved communication and cooperation skills, as well as an improved ability to regulate his emotions. In addition, some of Matthew's newly acquired skills seemed to transfer to the classroom, which resulted in fewer social and academic problems.

Blackmon (1994) described his treatment of a 19-year-old male, Fred, with depression. After experiencing difficulty establishing a relationship with Fred, Blackmon (1994) encouraged Fred to bring summaries of the *Dungeons & Dragons* games he played with friends to their sessions. Their discussions about the game characters allowed them to discuss emotional content in a displaced and less threatening way. This structure facilitated the treatment for six months, at which time Fred was able to directly discuss his feelings with Blackmon. Fred later reflected that their initial bond over the game gave him a sense of self-worth and helped him experience and master a wider range of emotions.

Some literature, however, warned against the potential negative impacts of RPGs.

Ascherman (1993) reviewed his observations of the growing popularity of RPGs on an inpatient treatment unit for males ages 15 to 18 after several patients started playing in

their free time. The author reported that the game overtook the patients' treatment as they became overly engrossed in the violent fantasy world. The relationships between the patients and the staff deteriorated as both became paranoid due to the normalization of the idea of violence. The powerful game players became more influential than the treatment providers and individual treatment was negatively impacted. He felt that, "the game became recognized as a force disruptive to a functional treatment environment and contrary to the treatment needs of individual patients" (p. 338). The author noted that this reinforcement of problematic issues was most evident in patients with severe narcissistic personality traits. This speaks to the strong need for therapists to use the game to facilitate growth and address the treatment needs of individuals. In addition, the therapist should ensure that the participants are suitable candidates for this approach, and that the game content remains developmentally appropriate.

Advantages of RPGs in Psychotherapy

A review of the literature about RPGs in psychotherapy reveals a number of strengths and advantages over more traditional interventions. When compared with other games, the narrative content of RPGs makes them particularly engaging. The fantasy elements are fun and keep the intervention exciting and full of adventure (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Enfield, 2007). Children are naturally interested in fantasy, and a combination of real life experiences and fantasy helps aid social development (Zayas & Lewis, 1986). In addition, RPGs tend to provide players with many choices and alternatives throughout the game, making them more enjoyable than games that incorporate less of these narrative points (Moser & Fang, 2015).

The high level of engagement is especially important for older children who may have lost interest in some other interventions. Preadolescents often still have a strong desire to play, but may feel too old (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). PRGs are a more socially acceptable way to play while also engaging in therapy (Enfield, 2007). An RPG, "perfectly synchronizes with this tumultuous developmental phase; this is a time when adolescents experiment and exchange their old lifestyles for new, unfamiliar ones in order to find out who they are and what they want" (Raghuraman, 2000, p. 37).

Another strength of RPG interventions revealed in the literature is the ability to express and address both conscious and unconscious issues (Enfield, 2007). The game provides a way for participants and, in turn, the therapist, to work with unconscious material that may not emerge in other forms of therapy (Blackmon, 1994). This is especially helpful for participants who have a harder time engaging in talk therapy. The use of play can make it easier to attend to both verbal and nonverbal issues (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) found that, "the opportunity to address both verbal and nonverbal behaviors with children and adolescents who can more fully engage on cognitive levels with the fantasy of RPGs is an advantage" (p. 176).

Addressing delicate unconscious or nonverbal material in therapy can feel difficult, but the structure of the RPG can provide a less intimidating space for this to take place. Fantasy is a non-threatening context for experimenting with new skills, ways of interacting, and senses of self. Therapists can provide feedback about the players, as well as their characters, as a way to bring up issues in a less intimidating manner (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). It may feel frightening for participants to experiment with new ways of behaving. However, the consequences do not have any repercussions in the

"real world" and can be managed by the therapist. For people who often feel inadequate in some way, RPGs give players a chance to experiment with a new identity and feel successful and capable (Allison, Wahlde, Shockley, & Gabbard, 2006).

The less intimidating nature of RPG interventions seems to make participants more willing to try on different roles and behaviors (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Enfield, 2007). As participants gain awareness, knowledge and skills, they can experiment with enacting these new parts of their identity (Enfield, 2007). Participants can try out, "various emotional states and behaviors, through the role of imaginary characters... The fact that players explore and live different identities through RPGs allows them to build and assert their self, which can be done without risks for themselves or others" (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013, p. 181).

RPGs lend themselves well to the therapy context because they are flexible and allow therapists to practice a variety of skills with their clients, including working on identity development at the same time as practicing social awareness (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). RPGs can be used with a variety of populations, including gifted children and adolescents who may have relatively weak social skills (Winner, 2008). Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) noted that gifted children often develop unevenly, so that their cognitive abilities are far more developed than their social skills and emotional regulation abilities. RPGs are also flexible because they work well for groups. The game becomes a shared interest that the group members can bond over, and the ongoing intervention helps the participants build ongoing relationships (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). The collective nature of RPGs is helpful for building social skills and social competence. Group issues such as dividing labor and formulating strategies for reaching

the group goals naturally arise (Zayas & Lewis, 1986). In addition, communication and collaboration skills are important (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Enfield, 2007).

Zayas and Lewis (1986) described a number of Dungeons & Dragons components, which position the game as an appropriate tool in the psychotherapy context. Many of the advantages of RPGs in general apply to the use of D&D. Cooperation, collaboration, planning teamwork are necessary and the game provides a good basis for practicing these skills. Interdependence is learned, while also providing the players with a sense of distinction and self-confidence. Children can "act out" in more acceptable ways through verbalizations and fantasy actions, rather than physically. In addition, the reward structure of the game feels gratifying and keeps players moving forward towards their individual and shared goals.

Therapist Role in Leading RPGs

The dungeon master plays a vital role in leading traditional games of *Dungeons & Dragons*, and when RPGs are played in the context of psychotherapy, the therapist must balance their clinical role with leading the game. Trained leaders can help lead role-playing interventions in ways that improve the social and emotional functioning of participants (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). Skilled leaders see that, "through cooperative ventures, fantasy role-playing games can provide a continuous focus for the group. The worker can capitalize on the game's opportunities to aid children in conflicts in interpersonal relations and in the acquisition of adaptive social skills" (Zayas & Lewis, 1986, 62). Rosselet and Stauffer (2013) pointed out that skilled therapists are also able to reflect aloud on what they notice about the game and the individual players. By sharing these ponderings with the group, the therapist can help the players develop greater levels

of awareness about their actions and decisions. This can be done in a more delicate way through the game, as therapists can notice and comment on actions or statements made by players while they are in character. That way, the therapist can indirectly help the players develop a greater awareness of their strengths and weaknesses in a way that is less confrontational than commenting directly on the players themselves (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013).

Therapists can also help children address their goals during the processing time before or after game play. While much of the intervention allows the therapist to deal indirectly with the presenting concerns of each child, the processing time creates the space for direct conversation about the children's strengths and weaknesses. Pointing out the positive outcomes that resulted when the players used their characters to try new things can help inspire more of this sort of behavior outside of the therapy room. In addition, the therapist can lead meaningful conversations about difficulties that children experience during the game so that they can also address similar difficulties outside of the game.

In addition, the leaders can help participants generalize the skills that they learn during the game to settings outside of the game (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013). "The counselor's intervention in RPGs fosters change, familiarizes clients with new ways of regulating their emotions and social interactions, and facilitates the transfer of these skills to real-world settings through the safety of rules and limit setting" during the game (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013, p. 181). Enfield (2007) agreed with this essential role of the therapist as one who facilitates the transfer of skills learned and practiced in the game in order to function more adaptively in the outside world.

Guild Chronicles

The Guild Chronicles Roleplaying System (GC) is an RPG that is used in the context of psychotherapy. GC provides the basis of a social skills intervention, and seems to exemplify the new trend of using RPGs in psychotherapy. Currently, GC is used with children aged 8 to 25 in two school districts in Massachusetts and at Massachusetts General Hospital's Aspire Program, a program for individuals with ASD. GC is, in many ways, similar to *Dungeons & Dragons*. It is a collaborative game in which participants, called Heroes, go on quests to battle monsters and solve problems. Each participant designs a character with different strengths and weaknesses and the characters work together as a team to overcome challenges. Participants meet at regular intervals, typically one session per week, for an extended period of time. The game can be modified depending upon how long the intervention is supposed to last. The intervention facilitator, acting as the Storyteller, leads the participants through the game.

Many of the typical RPGs, such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, are very complex and have a steep learning curve to start. For this reason, the creators of GC made a number of significant adjustments to the *Dungeons & Dragons* framework in order to make it more appropriate for an intervention tool. First, GC is much more accessible to a wide range of participants from the start. It currently has three levels of complexity. Each version becomes increasingly involved in terms of the rules and the development of the characters. GC is designed in a way that allows participants to play at different levels in the same game. For example, children who struggle with organization may play as a less complex Hero to begin. Children who are more familiar with the game may have more

powers to organize and keep track of. This customization allows the facilitator to better address the needs of the individual participants.

In addition, though many of the general aspects of RPGs provide the framework for GC, it incorporates social skills development in a more explicit way. The Storyteller leads the participants in game play and discussions that help increase the knowledge, awareness, and utilization of social skills. By moderating the game play, modeling behavior and coaching the participants, the facilitator dynamically molds the RPG to work towards achieving the participants' goals. In addition, the game focuses on cooperation amongst its players to an even greater degree than other RPGs. Each Hero has its own strengths and weaknesses, and role within the group. Participants quickly learn that the group will do better if the Heroes are designed with complimentary roles.

The plot of the game can be customized to fit the participants' interests and goals in the hopes of increasing buy-in and efficacy. The goal of GC as an intervention is to, "use high interest and create game playing to reinforce and internalize social behaviors, flexibility, the regulation of emotions, and organizational skills" (Harris, 2015). In order to help support this transfer of skills into the child's life outside of the therapy office, the participants' teachers and parents are made aware of the participants' goals so that they can reinforce the learning in the classroom and at home.

Early anecdotal feedback from participants suggests promising results. They report enjoying participating in the GC groups. The participants feel that they are more self-confident and that they are able to identify their goals and how the game helps them work towards achieving their goals. Still, further research is needed to learn more about the experiences of the participants in the Guild Chronicles program, as well as the

experiences of the parents and the teachers of the participants who see their children outside of the therapy room.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

The following section outlines the methods used in this project to learn more about the experiences of participants in a new social skills intervention. A phenomenological approach was used to explore the participants' experiences, as well as the experiences of their teachers.

Social competence is an essential part of functioning and the development of social skills is a major task of childhood. Those who have poor social skills face significant difficulties as children and the negative effects impact adulthood as well. Currently, there are many different interventions that are used to address social skills concerns. One relatively new category of social skills interventions is role-playing games (RPGs). Early evidence suggests that the use of RPGs in psychotherapy may address some of the problems with typical interventions, including lack of investment and generalizability.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of 10- to 14-year old participants in a newer type of RPG that is used as the basis for a psychotherapy intervention for social skills development. This age group was an appropriate target group for the intervention as early intervention is important for social skills development (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004; Ramey & Ramey, 1998). In addition, the children were old enough to manage the demands of the game such as organization, planning and imaginative play. This age range of participants was also developmentally appropriate for engaging in semi-structured interviews about their experiences in the group. The age

group was similar to the age groups participating in the studies examined in the literature review.

This new RPG intervention, Guild Chronicles (GC), is an RPG in which participants design characters that work together to overcome challenges while working on developing social skills. This particular game was the focus of the study because it shows promise in addressing social skills needs and is representative of RPGs used in the psychotherapy context. Currently, CG is used differentially and there is some flexibility in the way it is administered based on the group leader and the participants.

At this time, GC is being used in several settings including two public school systems. One of the school systems is in Wayland, MA, where many of the participants have specific social goals that are supposed to be addressed by their participation in the game. The groups in the Wayland schools generally meet weekly for 60-minute sessions throughout the school year. The study explored the experiences of a sample of the students participating in the intervention. In addition, the study explored how the children's teachers felt about the intervention, and whether they perceived any changes in social skills in their student.

Research Design

The research on the use of RPGs in psychotherapy is still limited at this point in time, and there had been no formal research done on Guild Chronicles. This study was an attempt to learn more about the use of RPGs, and specifically Guild Chronicles, in the context of psychotherapy, in an effort to improve social skills interventions and guide future research. A qualitative approach was used during this study to develop an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the experiences of those who participate in this

intervention. Specifically, a phenomenological research method was used because it allowed for a greater understanding of how the participants made sense of their personal experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). In addition, it sought to learn more about the shared experiences of the participants. Unlike many other qualitative approaches, "the sole purpose of phenomenology is to describe the depth and meaning of participants" lived experiences (Hays & Wood, 2011, p. 291).

Individual semi-structured interviews with the participants and their teachers revealed information about the participants and their experiences. Interview questions with the students aimed to explore how well the participants understood why they were referred for the group, whether they liked participating in the intervention, their awareness of the group experience and group dynamics, and the social and emotional learning taking place during the intervention. Interview questions with the teachers aimed to explore their knowledge and understanding of GC, their views on the students' participation in GC, and suggestions for improving GC. Reviewing the interview data in its entirety generated similarities and differences across participants.

Participants

Phenomenological studies are typically small, and have five to 25 participants (Larkin & Thompson, 2011; Hays & Wood, 2011). This study aimed to enroll between eight and ten individuals who participated in the intervention. For each participant, a teacher was interviewed also in order to gain a more complete picture of the impact of the intervention on the child's social skills. This sample size was large enough to allow for the emergence to differing experiences and opinions, while still being small enough to find common themes.

All of the participants were between the ages of 10 and 14, and all were currently participating in, or had very recently participated in, the Guild Chronicles group in the Wayland Public School System. The study participants had a range of exposure to GC in terms of the number of sessions they have participated in. However, in order to be included in the study, the students had to have already participated in a Guild Chronicles group for a minimum of 14 sessions, as this allowed the students to become sufficiently familiar with the game. All of the students had social skill goals as part of their inclusion in the intervention. Participants also had a teacher who was willing to be interviewed as part of the study.

Procedures

Soliciting Participants

Participants were solicited from the current and recent participants in the Guild Chronicles groups in Wayland Public Schools. Eligible students were given a packet of information to bring home to their parents/guardians about the study. The packet included a participant solicitation letter, which included a brief description of the purpose of the study (see Appendix A). The potential participants were told that an individual interview would be conducted with their child and their child's teacher, and that each interview would last approximately 60 minutes. Confidentiality was reviewed, and the interviews took place in a setting that allowed for confidentiality to be protected. In addition, the forms included the contact information for the institution, committee chair, and researcher should they have any questions or concerns regarding the study. Informed Consent documents (see Appendix B) were included in the packet and were returned to the researcher before the study begins. The teachers were given an informed consent

form (see Appendix C) to sign and return before the study began. The student participants were given an informed assent form (see Appendix D) to sign and return before the study began. All parents, teachers and students were given a chance to ask any questions or express any concerns before participating in interviews.

Enrollment and Instruction

Parents/guardians who expressed an interest in the study were contacted via phone to review the details of the study. Should they wish to proceed, a meeting was set up with their child and their child's teacher to review the study, as well. Children were assented after their parents provided consent for participation. Informed Consent/Assent documents (see Appendix B, C and D) were provided for all participants. After all written consent and assent was obtained, interviews were arranged with the students and teachers. The parents/guardians were then asked to compete a brief questionnaire about basic information on the participant (see Appendix F).

The interviews were conducted in locations that were convenient for the participants and maintained the participants' confidentiality. The participants were informed of the approximate length of the interview and the general content that was discussed. All participants were informed that their responses were going to be recorded and later transcribed by a professional translator in order to learn more about the experiences of GC participants. Participants were given a chance to ask any questions before the interviews commence.

Data Collection and Storage

The information was collected using short questionnaires as well as semistructured interviews. The questionnaires were given to parents and included basic information regarding gender, age, culture/ethnicity, and length of participation in the group (see Appendix F). The semi-structured interview included a series of open-ended questions used as narrative prompts (see Appendix G and Appendix H). Student participants and teachers were asked a different set of questions. Questions explored the experiences of the student in GC, as well as their experiences of social interactions before, during, and after their participation in the group. Teachers were interviewed about their knowledge of the GC intervention, as well as any perceived impact that the intervention had on the students' lives.

In the event that the researcher believed the participant had more to share regarding a particular topic, or touched upon an area that was not included in the original list of questions, further information was solicited. Prompts to open-ended questions included examples of possible responses, and were presented after they were given an opportunity to answer the original questions. For this study, prompts to the students were intended to gain specific information about their experiences, and specific prompts were used, as this was developmentally appropriate for children who may need more guidance than older participants would typically need. Follow-up questions were used to ensure that the participants' responses were fully and accurately captured.

Once the interviews were completed, a professional transcriber or the researcher transcribed the recordings. All transcribers were required to sign an informed confidentiality agreement (Appendix E). All research data was stored in a secure location. At the start of the study, students were assigned a participant number to use throughout the study. The parents and/or teachers of the students were given a coordinated number so that student interviews could be matched with their parent/teacher

interviews. The master list of participant names and their unique identifiers was stored on a locked computer. This list is only be accessible to the researcher and will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

Data Coding and Analysis

Data was analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. According to this approach, during interpretation, "you aim to develop an *organized*, *detailed*, *plausible*, and *transparent* account of the *meaning* of the data" (Larkin & Thompson, 2011, p. 104). Patterns of meaning, or themes, were identified by reading the transcripts multiple times. First, line-by-line analysis of keywords and concepts was noted in the left margin. Then, themes were coded in the right column. Analysis included areas of theme convergence and divergence among the participants, and a relationship between the themes was developed. Common themes were color-coded so that each transcript could be re-read with the common themes in mind. The themes that emerged were shared with the researcher's committee to allow for richer and more nuanced analysis. The researcher provided interpretations based on these themes.

Debriefing of Participants

Participants were provided with the contact information of the institution, the doctoral project committee chair and the researcher should they have any questions or concerns at any point. Should any participants have expressed feeling of distress as a result of things discussed during the interviews, the Massachusetts Psychological Association (MPA) referral service contact information was provided to them.

Protection of Participants/Ethical Considerations

Before enrolling in the study, parents, teachers, and participants completed the appropriate informed consent or assent forms (see Appendix B, C and D). All information remained protected and anonymous, as discussed above. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study or discontinue the interview at any point. In addition, parents, teachers and students were clearly informed that their participation in the study, or choice to not participate in the study, in no way impacted their participation in the Guild Chronicles group.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of 10-to 14-year old participants in a newer type of role-playing game (RPG) that is used as a social skills development intervention directly in the psychotherapy process. The study used one-on-one semi-structured interviews with the participants and their teachers to reveal information about the participants and their experiences in the intervention. This chapter will include an overview of the participant demographics and a thematic analysis of the findings. A thematic analysis of the interviews with the eight students will be presented first, followed by a thematic analysis of the interviews with the six teachers.

Demographic Data

Parents of the student participants were asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire (see Appendix F). Eight student participants took part in the study. All eight participants were males in fourth or fifth grade in the same school system in a suburb of Boston. The participants were between the ages of 10 and 12 and had been participating in the Guild Chronicles intervention for at least 14 sessions. On average, the students had attended 22 sessions. Pseudonyms will be used in order to protect the participants' anonymity. A summary of the student demographic data is presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Student Participant Demographic Summary

Student Pseudonym	Participant Gender/ Anatomical Sex	Participant Age	Participant Grade
"Alex"	M	11	5
"Brian"	M	11	5
"Charlie"	M	10	4
"David"	M	10	4
"Evan"	M	11	5
"Frank"	M	11	5
"George"	M	10	4
"Harry"	M	11	5

For each student participant, their teacher was interviewed to explore how she felt about Guild Chronicles and whether she perceived any changes in her student's skills. Two of the teachers were interviewed about two students each because the students were in the same classroom. The teacher's pseudonyms, as well as their students, are listed below in Table 2.

Table 2

Teacher Demographic Summary

Teacher Pseudonym	Student(s)
Ms. AF	Alex and Frank
Ms. BE	Brian and Evan
Ms. C	Charlie
Ms. D	David
Ms. G	George
Ms. H	Harry

Thematic Analysis of Student Interviews

Data was analyzed using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach. Each of the interview transcripts was read multiple times by multiple reviewers to capture the experiences of the participants. The researchers first noted themes separately, and then met to compare the themes that were derived across all participants. The themes that emerged from the transcripts were then clustered into overarching concepts. Six overarching concepts were extracted from the student data: engagement, gameplay, social dynamics, relationship development, growth, and group facilitator. Several of the themes were then broken down further into subthemes to further organize the data. It is interesting to note that some concepts, themes, and subthemes came up in all of the transcripts, while others only emerged in two. Those that were endorsed by a majority of the participants may be more meaningful than those that came up in fewer interviews. The concepts, as well as the themes and subthemes, are listed below in Table 3.

Table 3
Student Participant Data: Overarching Concepts and Themes

Overarching Concepts	Themes	Subthemes
Engagement	Enjoyment	
	Creativity	
	Interest	Battles
		Investigation
Gameplay	Group Decision-Making	
Gumepiay	Planning	Strategy
		Battles
		Interactions
		Future
	Outside of Group Work	
	Conflict	
Social Dynamics	Teamwork	
Social Dynamics	Roles	
	Empathic Actions	
	Emparite rections	
Relationship	Encourage Social Interaction	
Development		
	Relationships with Group Members	Relationship enhancement Relationship facilitating experience
		experience
Growth	Improvement	
	Trial and Error	Gameplay trial and error
		Battle trial and error
	Self-Awareness	
Experiences with the	Offer Praise and Encouragement	
Group Facilitator	Offer Traise and Encouragement	
Group r uciniuioi	Encourage Participation and	
	Teamwork	
	Provide Guidance	

Engagement

Over the course of the interviews, all eight participants talked about how engaged they were in their Guild Chronicles groups. Some of them talked broadly about enjoying the group and having fun. Others talked about specific aspects they enjoyed including the creativity that it allows for, and the inclusion of content that they are interested in.

Enjoyment. All of the eight participants made statements indicating that they enjoy the Guild Chronicles intervention and find it fun. Charlie noted that, even though the group members argue with each other at times, they are able to move past the arguments and have a good time. Brian noted that the overall enjoyment of the group members brings them together. He shared that Guild Chronicles is "something that I really enjoy. And I think the group also enjoys it so I can really bond with these people better over something we all really enjoy." Two of the participants described their experience of the intervention as a kind of adventure, which contributed to their enjoyment of Guild Chronicles.

All of the participants indicated that they have fun during Guild Chronicles. Several participants made general statements about the group being fun. Alex said, "the whole game is fun" and Evan stated that, "I think [the facilitator] tries to make it a fun environment for us to work together as a team and stuff, which can help with our social skills sometimes or something to that matter, and also have fun doing it." Other participants talked more specifically about an aspect of the game that they found especially fun. Four students mentioned that participating in the battles and fighting monsters is fun. Charlie shared that he had fun designing his character. Frank and George said that they thought that exploring the Guild Chronicles story was fun.

When asked if they would recommend the group to other students, three of the students, Brian, David and Harry, cited that the fun nature of the group was what would draw other students to Guild Chronicles. Harry first shared "I liked playing the game.

It's fun. I like playing with some of my friends" and that, "I would like [other students] to play the game, because I want other kids to have fun and to play and to join us to play, because I think with more kids it would be more fun."

Creativity. Three of the student participants spoke of the creativity that Guild Chronicles encourages. The students also discussed the freedom they enjoyed when creating their characters. They also mentioned how the participants can choose where they would like to go and what they would like to explore, so much so that Alex said he feels like he, "can create the story as we play the game... We can go wherever we want. There is a story, but the story builds the world." In addition to creating the story as they proceed with the game, Frank discussed the creativity he enjoyed when deciding how to approach situations in the game. He shared a desire to, "make something happen that doesn't really happen usually... [that] other groups wouldn't think of. I try to do what other groups wouldn't think of so [the group facilitator] can speak of that idea and that strategy." For Frank, the creativity that the game fosters allows him to think about playing the game in more original ways.

Interest. Four of the students referenced their interest in the subject matter of Guild Chronicles as a basis for their strong engagement. Both Brian and Charlie mentioned that their passion for fantasy, including adventure and magic, contribute to their interest in the game. Charlie suspected that his teacher's awareness of his interest in fantasy led her to refer him to the group.

Alex and Evan shared that the content of Guild Chronicles reminds them of books that they have enjoyed reading such as The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings. Alex felt that he kept some of the characters from his favorite fantasy books in mind when designing his Guild Chronicles character. Evan shared that he would recommend Guild Chronicles to many of his friends who also enjoy fantasy.

Battles. All eight students talked at length about their interest in the battles that take place during Guild Chronicles. They described the battles as the central feature of the game and one of the main reasons why they are so engaged in the intervention. Alex shared that "the game is about fighting" and Brian felt that, during the battles, "that's when we're at our peak." Charlie added that there are certain rules about the content of the battles that must be followed since the game takes place during school. For example, they are not allowed to attack any humans.

Charlie, David and Frank remarked that battles are their favorite part of Guild Chronicles and that they greatly enjoy battling and defeating monsters. Evan reinforced this point and also added that it seems like everyone in his group finds the battles very much fun, which seems to bring the group together and help them bond. Another two participants, Alex and George, thought that the battles were one of the main reasons that others would be engaged in the game.

Investigation. Four of the students described how much they enjoyed the investigation and inspection aspects of the intervention. Charlie reported feeling like, "it's kind of like being a detective." Evan talked about enjoying, "when I do detective work, like when we were on a farm trying to find something that might lead to a clue or something, so you have to throw things at things and look for traps and all that stuff,

which I find really cool." Similarly, Brian stated that he enjoys finding things that seem "sort of out of place" and investigating to learn more. Evan discussed piecing together the story as they collect more information from different sources. Harry described how he enjoyed a similar aspect of the game, specifically how he uses role-playing to interact with other characters in the game to gather information from them.

Gameplay

Seven of the students talked about themes of gameplay. Four themes emerged from the transcripts: group decision-making, planning, outside of group work, and conflict.

Group decision-making. Six of the students commented on the group decision-making process, including both their strengths and their weaknesses. Some of the students discussed the challenges of making decisions in a group. Charlie talked about how the group often became distracted. Brian described how everyone in his group might have a different idea about what to do and it can be difficult to organize everyone's ideas. He said, "everyone is trying to talk on top of each other and you can't hear anything. And there's zero productivity." He shared that, in order to combat this, his group will go around in a circle and share their opinions.

Similarly, two other students also talked about negotiation. David and Evan shared the approaches that their groups use. Though the members may disagree at first, they often vote on which idea seems best so that they all feel included in the decision-making process.

Three students discussed the importance of listening to each other. Evan felt that his group was good at making helpful recommendations to each other and listening to

input from others about actions and designing their characters. Frank mentioned that they share ideas, which is encouraged by the group facilitator, and they then evaluate which idea would work best. Alex said he learned that, "it's very important to see two sides of a problem. Like in the beginning when we were arguing over what we could do we only see the logic of our own reason. We couldn't see the logic of other people's reasons." He found that listening to other people's ideas helped him keep his mind open to alternative ways to play the game.

Planning. During the interviews, six student participants talked about the planning that takes place during gameplay and how important their planning was to their success. The most commonly talked about planning had to do with strategy and how they plan for battles. Additionally, two students talked about planning for the future and two reported that they plan for interactions with other characters in the game.

Strategy. The way the group members approach the game was a common topic of conversation. Four students said that they talk about strategy frequently. Evan described how, when the group first started, the members acted with very little direction or planning. However, as they learned the importance of planning, they make more deliberate decisions about how to proceed, which he believes helps them work on their "team skills." Charlie described how the group would pause the game to discuss strategy before proceeding. In fact, Charlie reported that discussing strategy and making plans is one of his favorite parts of the game. Brian and Harry both explained how their groups discussed strategies that helped them feel better prepared for situations in the game and ultimately made them more successful.

Battles. Alex, Brian, Frank and Harry talked about planning specifically for the battles. Alex said he enjoyed how much planning the battles required and that the resulting synchronization of attacks is very helpful for the team. Harry described how the group comes up with battle plans together so that they all know how to work together during the battle. Brian remembered a specific time that they had to plan a battle:

Once we ran into a dire bear, which is like a really big evil bear. And then it's a pretty strong enemy. And that was earlier in our story, and for an early level like then that's a pretty strong enemy. So then we planned it like "Ok, here's what we should do. You should stay in the back since you're our archer. You should go and distract the dire bear" and so I think that entire planning thing really got us out of that trouble. Eventually we defeated the dire bear. But it took us like an entire session just to defeat the dire bear.

Brian stated that he believed the team would not have been successful if they had not planned the battle together.

Interactions. Brian and Charlie focused mainly on the planning that is done to prepare for interacting with other characters in the game such as the ones played by the group facilitator. Brian pointed out that it "takes some coordination to know exactly what to say." As a result, the groups talk about the interactions ahead of time so that the interactions ultimately go more smoothly. They work together to decide how the roleplaying should go and what to say before the interaction takes place.

Future. In Guild Chronicles, the participants are given a chance to upgrade their characters at various points throughout the game. Alex and Evan both talked about how they were planning for the future. For example, Evan said he was saving up to purchase a crossbow. He thought that this addition to his arsenal would help his team face harder opponents in the future.

Outside of group work. Two participants talked about working on the game outside of the group time. Evan also described how he and the other members of his group talk about the game between sessions so that they can brainstorm ways to be successful during the next session. He felt that this work outside of the group also gave them an advantage because the group facilitator, who plays as their opponents, was then unaware of their plan of attack. Brian echoed his points about increasing their success by working together outside of the group. He added that this communication between the members, "brings kind of like an out of the group connectivity" and that "it makes me feel like it's strengthening our relationships outside of the group also." In fact, Evan shared that he and the other members of his group are discussing writing and creating a Guild Chronicles movie together during their summer vacation.

Conflict. Five of the participants spoke about conflict within the group. David felt that conflict often arose because one person wanted to make all of the decisions. Similarly, Frank described situations in which another student in the group "gets bossy. When something happens he wants to be the leader of everything. He doesn't really think of us, he thinks of us like his workmen kind of." This influenced Frank's perception of his teammate as a true teammate but he also acknowledged that the "bossy" teammate typically had very good ideas about how to play the game. Alex and Evan each described how the group got into conflicts about how to approach situations, and Alex often felt "frustrated that [the other group members] couldn't see my side of the argument." Charlie also described how the group often disagreed, but felt that they "set [their] differences aside" and learned to negotiate. Evan, too, was sure to reiterate that, though the group members argue and joke around with each other, they are never truly mean to

each other. Rather, they, "just like 'friendly' disagree. So usually we work it out and I don't feel bad about it because I respect other people's ideas."

Social Dynamics

All of the student participants discussed the social dynamics at play in their Guild Chronicles group. Their comments fell into three themes. The first, "teamwork," was talked about by all eight students. Six students talked about the roles that they took on during the game as part of the roleplays, and the way the roles impacted the ways they played together. Seven students described empathic actions, or actions that assisted their fellow group members.

Teamwork. All eight student participants talked about the teamwork aspects of Guild Chronicles. Six students mentioned that the intervention promotes teamwork and helps them learn about how to work better as a team. Evan said that it is "a fun environment for us to work together as a team." Alex reported that "it enhances teamwork" and that he has "learned that it's important to have everyone participating." David and George echoed these thoughts. Frank and Harry talked about how they need to work as a team in order to be successful and how if they played alone they would not be able to defeat the monsters they encounter.

Five participants shared their impression that their groups are good at teamwork. Alex said, "We work as a team pretty seamlessly" and the others had similar impressions of the teamwork in their groups. Brian reflected on some of the times that his group came together when they needed each other's support in the game and how during battles they tend to have "maximum cooperation." He said that he enjoyed the experience of "feel[ing] like part of a well organized team."

Several of the participants also reported that they truly enjoyed the teamwork aspect of the game. In fact, both Brian and Evan named playing as a team as their favorite part of Guild Chronicles. Brian also said,

I feel like the group really relies on me almost. Like most of the people are strong, you know? So I feel like without me everyone would just run in. But I feel that if I was alone, then I wouldn't be successful either. Because I am not a very strong character. So I really like this feeling of cooperation.

Alex and Evan based their desire to recommend Guild Chronicles to others on their impressions that others would also enjoy the teamwork that the game promotes.

Roles. During Guild Chronicles, the students each design a character that they take on for the length of the game. Six of the students mentioned their roles in the game. All six talked about the process of creating their characters. They explained how they designed their characters, and that each of the characters plays a certain role in the group. For example, some of the characters include healers, warriors and magicians. Brian described his experience of assigning characters:

Since we create our characters, we created our characters to a certain role. Also when we were creating our characters we kind of were discussing like "we should have a varied group" like we should have a knight and a healer. So then we already have our roles sort of set up. Then we know what we're doing. So like, you are the healer, you are the knight and you can take a lot of damage, I'm the wizard so I can deal a lot of damage.

Charlie remarked that the roles evolve over time as the characters obtain new properties. When asked if he would change anything about his character if he could, he responded, "Well I wish I could read people's minds and teleport. And also time travel. But I don't have those abilities and I'm fine with that because I know it's not realistic and it would be way too overpowered." He demonstrated an awareness of the balance

between the roles. Similarly, George was aware that each person in the group played a different character so that they all formed a team when playing together.

Empathic actions. Seven of the eight student participants mentioned empathic actions that they did in order to help another player or the team as a whole. More generally, Harry and Evan talked about how they remind their group members about how to play the game and help each other with strategy. Evan, as well as five other students, discussed empathic actions done in character during gameplay. Evan described how there were several times that he was having a difficult time interacting with characters in the game. Other participants intervened at that point to help him deal with the situation. George stated, "If someone needed help, I'd be there for them."

During battles, the students go around in a circle and each have a chance to make a move. However, the students are allowed to share their moves if they would like to. Several students talked about how they often do this. David described how his teammates lend him turns, which makes him feel good. One student per group acts as the healer who is able to treat the other members of the team if they get hurt. Alex remembered that the healer in his group "gave up his move to heal me in a battle. He could have either attacked the enemy or healed me... That made me feel special." Alex, Frank and Evan all shared similar experiences with the healer.

Relationship Development

The theme of relationship development emerged in all eight of the student interviews. Some described how Guild Chronicles encourages social interaction between the group members. When asked, all of the students talked about their relationship with

their group members, including the status of their friendships and how their relationships have helped their experience in the group.

Encourage social interaction. Four of the eight student participants mentioned that Guild Chronicles encourages social interaction. Two students talked about how the intervention is a good way to meet fellow students and make new friends. Brian said, "I think it's really cool that this game can actually strengthen your social interactions and all that." Evan echoed this sentiment and added that Guild Chronicles, "can help with our social skills… and also have fun doing it." One student, Frank, shared that he believes his parents think that he can make new friends by participating in the group.

Relationship with group members. The students were asked to discuss their relationships with the other participants in their Guild Chronicles group. Three of the eight students said that they were not friends with the other students outside of the group. The other five students, however, described the students in their group as friends. They reported that they had positive relationships with at least one of the group members prior to joining the group. Charlie remembered feeling excited when he found out that some of his friends were fellow group members. He said, "that's a big part of it. I like hanging out with [them]... It's one of my favorite parts." Evan indicated that he spends his lunch and recess with his group members.

Relationship enhancement. Though some of the interviewees reported that they were friends with their group members before the group began, three of them said that they became better friends with the group members through their participation. Charlie and Frank both felt that their friendships with the other students had intensified during the group. Brian talked at length about this topic. He described how he was able to interact

with the other boys more in-depth and how they were brought together by their common interest in the group. Brian stated that Guild Chronicles increased his social interactions with the members and he noted that they "socialize really well" and now have more to talk about.

Relationship facilitating experience. Four of the students described how their friendship with the fellow participants facilitated their Guild Chronicles gameplay. Frank and Harry said that their friendships within the group made them have more fun and feel more comfortable playing. Brian commented on how they know each other's strengths and weaknesses, which helps with their gameplay. He said:

I think that just having a stronger friendship is not only beneficial in having someone to hang out with but also if you're in a situation where you have to depend on these people it's nice to have a friendship and know each other so you know each other's strengths and weaknesses. And I think this is amplified in Guild Chronicles almost because everybody has a set role and we were communicating about our roles also.

Two participants, Brian and Evan, also mentioned how their friendships with the group members increase the trust between them. Evan stated, "I trust my friends and I know that they'll make the right decisions for the group."

Growth

The eight student participants each mentioned some form of growth that they noticed over the course of their time in the Guild Chronicles group. Some of the growth discussed was specific to individual students, while other growth had to do with the group as a whole. The remarks were sorted into three themes: improvement, trial and error, and self-awareness.

Improvement. Half of the students spoke specifically about improvements in the group's game play since they began playing together. David shared his impression of the group's improvement and cited more experience with the game as one of the main reasons. Similarly, both Alex and Evan felt that their groups had improved. Alex noticed that the group leader had to explain the rules less frequently as the students were becoming more comfortable, and Evan remarked that, when they do have questions about how to play, the students are able to remind each other of the rules.

Three of the boys, Alex, David and George, reflected on the improved teamwork that they noticed. George shared that the group has gotten better at listening to each other. David based his impression of the improvement on their increased ability to fight more difficult monsters as a group. Alex felt that they are better able to work together to synchronize attacks, which marked an improvement among the group members

Trial and error. Four students referred to a "trial and error" aspect of Guild Chronicles that encouraged an ongoing assessment of their performance in the game, while also providing them with the sense that they could correct their mistakes. Frank mentioned that the group was a well-suited arena to try different tactics. He explained that he wants, "to try different things. This is the point of the game... why don't we just try something out when we have the chance?" Another student, Brian, stated that Guild Chronicles, "really has this trial and error feel that I think is really nice for bonding." He also added that they could learn from their mistakes to improve their performance.

Gameplay trial and error. Students talked about how they have been able to practice their interactions with other characters in the game. Brian recounted a time when one player was speaking to another character in the game, a farmer played by the

group leader, and was unintentionally scaring the farmer by talking about unexpected topics. Brain described how they learned from this experience, saying, "that's what started our habit of asking everybody what they're going to say before they say it."

Frank also discussed the allowance for trial and error in the students' actions during the game. He described how, if he says something as part of his roleplaying, other participants will help him refine his statement if they have feedback for him. The group facilitator will let the participants hone their statements and actions in this way.

Battle trial and error. Three of the four students who discussed the "trial and error" nature of the game talked about it more specifically in the context of battles. They described how they were able to learn from previous mistakes to approximate the best techniques for fighting and working together. Harry said, "We were fighting trolls last Monday and we had trouble fighting with them... So we had to come up with more strategies to fight and kill them." They also described how the opponents they faced became increasingly difficult as the game progressed. Brian noted that his group was able to practice their strategies and coordination on weaker monsters and more simple battles so that they could refine their approach before progressing to more complex battles. Additionally, Brian described how the group has been able to figure out how the players should work together to increase the likelihood of success. He recounted an experience, describing how, "we know that the healer should always be handy because once our healer ran off into the woods to try to find a pet in the middle of combat so we had to call him back."

Self-Awareness. The most often cited sense of awareness had to do with a greater understanding of how the individual functions in a group context. Three students

referenced this point. Brian noticed that he tends to take on the role of the group manager and organizer. When in this role, he learned that he should be cognizant of everyone else's feelings and emotions. On a related note, Alex reflected on his understanding that he can learn by listening to others. He stated, "I learned that when I sit back and don't always take control of the situation I can learn a lot from it." He went on to say, "I have learned that it's important to have everyone participating... Other people can have other ideas and it's important to let everyone participate in the conversation."

Evan echoed similar points about group work, noting that he has had trouble working in groups in the past. He stated, "I don't always work well in a group if it's our class or something because I'm sort of a control-freak... And I don't always trust the people in my classroom 'cause they can be strange sometimes." However, he went on to say, "in Guild Chronicles I'm not as much of a control-freak because I trust my friends and I know that they'll make the right decision for the group."

When asked to reflect on whether they had learned anything about themselves while participating in Guild Chronicles, four students articulated some self-awareness. Charlie noted that his strengths include, "strategy and thinking fast." He shared that he experiences many emotions during the group process, including happiness and anger, and that the group sometimes makes him feel smart. Charlie also displayed some self-awareness about his tendency to become distracted during the group. He felt that his distractibility often led the group off-task and limited their productivity during a session. After sharing this reflection, he proudly exclaimed, "I'm going to improve on it next week, yes! That's a goal."

Experiences with the Group Facilitator

The Guild Chronicles groups in this study were all facilitated by the school psychologist. Seven of the student participants talked about their experiences with the group facilitator. Their comments fell into three themes. They described how the facilitator offers praise and encouragement, how he encourages participation and teamwork, and how he provides guidance and facilitation of the game.

Offer praise and encouragement. Seven of the eight students talked about the group facilitator. George talked specifically about how much praise and encouragement the facilitator provides. According to George, the facilitator reinforces their use of teamwork and cooperation. He was also very proud that the facilitator told them that their group uses their time wisely so they are able to accomplish a significant amount each time they meet for a session.

Encourage participation and teamwork. Two participants talked about how the facilitator led the story and made up the characters. They commented on how impressed they were by his imagination and ability to come up with an interesting story for them to play. Four students talked about how the group leader encourages participation and teamwork. Both Alex and Charlie described how the group facilitator intervenes during disagreements between the group members and helps them resolve any issues. David reported that the group facilitator would remind them to involve all of the group members in discussions rather than have the sessions dominated by the most talkative members. Frank reiterated this point and also pointed out that the facilitator makes sure that they all stay in the same area during a battle to encourage them to work together.

Provide guidance. The ways in which the group facilitator provides guidance through the game was also a topic of conversation. Harry remembered having a somewhat difficult time designing his character. The facilitator helped Harry through this process and helped prepare Harry to start playing Guild Chronicles. Evan felt that the facilitator, "helps us out a lot 'cause it's hard to remember every little thing." This help made it easier for him to get used to playing the game. Both Evan and George described how the facilitator aided in their investigations and made suggestions when they needed assistance. George said, "he helped us by saying 'what you might want to do is...' and how to do stuff and it gave us clues."

Thematic Analysis of Teacher Interviews

The same method was used to review and organize the teacher participant transcripts. Six overarching concepts emerged: referrals, Guild Chronicles characteristics, engagement, transitions, changes noticed, and requests. The overarching concepts, as well as the themes within each concept, are listed below in Table 4.

Table 4

Teacher Participant Data: Overarching Concepts and Themes

Overarching Concepts Goals	Themes Skills Deficits External Factors Impacting Involvement
Guild Chronicles Characteristics	Group Facilitator Experiential Training Flexibility Embedded Goals Other Interventions
Engagement	Enjoyment Interest in Game Content
Transitions	
Changes Noticed	Social Changes Skills Changes
Requests	Request for Exposure Request for Follow-Up

Goals

During the interviews, the teachers were asked to reflect upon the reasons that their students in particular, and students in general, were participating in Guild Chronicles. Five of the six teachers shared their impressions of the goals of the Guild Chronicles intervention. The most commonly mentioned goal, talked about by four teachers, was social skills, including perspective taking. Three teachers named teamwork as a main goal. Two teachers mentioned that they thought Guild Chronicles worked on developing advocacy skills, and two teachers mentioned strategy and planning. One teacher named organization and another teacher named problem solving as goals.

These ideas about the goals that Guild Chronicles addresses impacted their decisions to refer students to the groups. Five teachers discussed a number of skills deficits that their students displayed which they hoped could be addressed by their participation. Four teachers talked about external factors impacting their involvement.

Skills deficits. Ms. AF described several areas of skills deficits that she had seen in Frank. Specifically, she talked about how he has a difficult time making friends and maintaining appropriate boundaries in relationships. She also shared how he is not consistently aware of how his body language comes across to other people. Ms. C shared how Charlie, too, misreads social situations:

Charlie is a very social kid. Kids like him, he's friendly. I think what I notice in challenges for Charlie is that sometimes he misreads social situations. I think also sometimes he doesn't think before he speaks. And sometimes he'll say things and realize "I shouldn't have done that" later on. And I think that's sometimes what I hear from [the group facilitator] in Guild. Like Charlie will just come out and say something like "why are you being such a baby?" And you know, that's Charlie. He'll just sometimes say things that kind of take kids aback a little bit. Like you're not supposed to say those sorts of things.

She talked about her impression that Guild Chronicles is a helpful place to address these sorts of issues.

Ms. D, Ms. H and Ms. G all shared a number of skills deficits they noticed in their students. Ms. D felt that David has significant social skills difficulties and emotional needs. Ms. H discussed similar social skills issues with Harry. She also felt that his extremely slow processing speed was making social interaction especially difficult for him, as the social demands have increased as he has gotten older. Finally, Ms. G talked about George's skill deficits. George, "has such social and emotional difficulties that are beyond the scope of direct social skills teaching." As a result, Ms. G felt that Guild

Chronicles was an appropriate place for him to engage in a social skills intervention that allowed him to practice skills in the moment.

External factors impacting involvement. The external factors impacting involvement had to do with situations out of the students' control. For four students, family circumstances made them likely candidates for the program. Many of the students had a skills deficit as well as some situation that they were coping with.

Ms. AF described how Frank had recently moved to the school district. As a new student, and especially as a new student with some social skills difficulties, she thought that the group would be a good place to make social connections. She also described how Alex's mother was a factor in his referral to the group because she was anxious about her son's ability to establish and maintain relationships.

Ms. G shared how many changes in George's life at home and new demands placed on him impacted his involvement. She said:

There's a lot going on for him in his life. While he's participating in the group he's had more demands placed on him. He's in fourth grade now so the work gets more intense. And you have to have more organizational ability, which is hard for him when he's dysregulated emotionally. And his adoption was just finalized last year so he's just settling with the new family.

In Ms. G's opinion, these changes, as well as social and emotional difficulties in general, made him a good candidate for Guild Chronicles.

Ms. D talked about her hopes that Guild Chronicles would help David cope with difficult family circumstances. After a death in his immediate family earlier this school year, David has needed extra emotional support. Social interactions, as well as self-regulation, have been difficult for him. Ms. D felt that Guild Chronicles was a helpful place for David to develop these skills.

Guild Chronicles Characteristics

Characteristics of Guild Chronicles were discussed during the interviews with five teacher participants. Specifically, five different themes emerged including the group facilitator, the in-vivo training, the flexibility of the game, the embedded nature of the goals, and the differences between Guild Chronicles and other interventions.

Group facilitator. Ms. G and Ms. H both spoke about the group facilitator's role in Guild Chronicles. Ms. G felt that the "therapist's eye" set this intervention apart from many others. She felt that the facilitator "would be able to see some of the stuff that's coming up and know where to intervene next. That's really good and important." She also felt that the facilitator's ability to be flexible in terms of what is being addressed each session was vital, as well as strong group management. Ms. H, who had observed her student Harry during one session, described a situation in which the facilitator intervened:

When I was sitting in one time it was [Harry's] turn and he had the power to ask a question of someone who knows a lot in the game, and the other kids in the group who are just really fast, were going "Harry, ask this, Harry, ask this, no ask this!" and Harry was just sort of sitting there like blank stare on his face, and [the facilitator] was able to sort of come in and suggest some things gently for him to ask. I could tell he was kind of torn between, "Should I ask what the kids are saying? What did the kids say?" And when [the facilitator] gave him some suggestions like, "Well you can ask about this, or you can ask about this" and slowed it down a little bit he was able to sort of figure out for himself. What he wanted to know and what would be most helpful in the game.

In this case, she believed the facilitator was able to lead the game while targeting Harry's specific strengths and weaknesses.

Experiential training. The experiential training nature of Guild Chronicles was brought up by three teachers. This refers to the real-time and immediate opportunity to receive feedback from the group facilitator and group members. They all thought that this provided their students an opportunity to confront, and then practice, the issues they were working on. Ms. C pointed out that Charlie "needs to be put in situations where you don't know what's going to happen and figure out how you're going to react to it." Similarly, Ms. G thought that the group was a chance for George to face deep-rooted issues in a supportive setting where he could practice managing those issues. Ms. G also talked about the aspect of getting feedback from the group about one's behavior. She felt that this was very helpful for George because, "It also allows for peers to give him feedback, which can be one thousand times more helpful than the teacher giving him feedback or the therapist." The feedback from George's peers led to more positive behavior changes, in her opinion.

Flexibility. Three teachers mentioned the flexibility of the game. Ms. C described how most other interventions have a set curriculum that lays out what should be reviewed each day. Alternatively, Guild Chronicles focuses more on whatever comes up among the participants during that session. Ms. C thought that this factor pushed the participants to "think about it and come up with a way to deal with it and make choices right there in the moment, rather than following a script of a lesson plan." Ms. G and Ms. H shared similar sentiments.

Embedded goals. A theme that emerged among three teachers had to do with the fact that the goals of Guild Chronicles are embedded in a game format. The teachers thought that this created a natural environment for situations to arise in which the

students were able to work on their goals. Ms. C thought that the integration of the goals into the game format meant that the kids often did not even realize that they were addressing their weaknesses. She thought this most likely increased their engagement in the group. Ms. H shared this impression. She said,

What they're working on is embedded in the game so it's not on the surface, you know, like 'let's talk about taking perspective' and 'how do you think people think about that?' or if you're trying to work on advocacy skills, it's easier to do it sort of in a context with other people but there's not this clinical focus like 'okay, today we're going to work on this.'

She stated simply, "It's so engaging that the kids don't even know what they're sort of working on, it's very hidden but it's done really well I think."

Other interventions. Four of the teachers mentioned differences between Guild Chronicles and other interventions in the school. Ms. AF shared her impression that this intervention is more motivating than others. Similarly, Ms. C shared that Guild Chronicles is more engaging. She said, "When I think about Charlie's personality and Charlie, I think this is a much better way to get at the social skills than just following [another] curriculum or other social competency curriculum because that's not going to engage him like Guild."

Three of the teachers mentioned the fact that the intervention is structured around a game. They all thought that the game aspect helped draw the participants in and keep them engaged. In their opinions, this set the intervention apart from most other interventions that are not game-focused. Ms. H also talked about how role-playing games specifically can be very helpful for children.

Ms. D liked that Guild Chronicles is a cooperative game. In addition, she said that the students' goals "come up naturally in the game so it sort of sets up a natural way

of dealing with real life issues that might come up in anyone's real life, rather than 'this is the lesson.'" Finally, Ms. D shared that the game feels less threatening than other interventions in the sense that "it's a game, so you can leave it at the table and go away."

Ms. G reflected on all of the other interventions that are in place to support

George. She felt that Guild Chronicles has been a nice complement to her student's other
interventions. However, she thinks that the importance of the other programs cannot be
overlooked. For George and other similar students, she believes that direct social skills
lessons are still important and that support such as occupational therapy, physical therapy
and speech and language therapy must remain in place even as they participate in Guild
Chronicles.

Engagement

All of the teachers discussed how engaged their students were in Guild Chronicles. They mentioned that it seems to be much more motivating than other interventions with which they were familiar, specifically social-emotional interventions.

Ms. C said, "When I think about Charlie's personality and Charlie, I think this is a much better way to get at the social skills than just following [a different] curriculum or other social competency curriculum because that's not going to engage him like Guild." The teachers discussed how their students enjoy the group, as well as two reasons they believe their students are so engaged including the fact that it is a game and an interest in the game content.

Enjoyment. When asked, all six teachers said that their students, eight in total, enjoy attending the group each week. All of the teachers talked about how their students looked forward to going to the group. Ms. AF said Frank "wouldn't miss it... He'd miss

every other day of school but he wouldn't miss a Monday when they have group." When asked about how her students Brian and Evan respond to group, Ms. BE said the group "makes them smile." She described how, "They love it and they come back and they talk about it... They love going, and I can't always say that about some of the other pull-out services."

Interest in game content. Three teachers thought that the game content was especially appealing to their students. Ms. AF and Ms. C both thought that the fantasy aspects of Guild Chronicles appealed to their students Alex and Charlie. Ms. H believed that the game content was specifically of interest for Harry because of his interest in history, social studies and maps.

Transitions

After each group, the group members have to transition back into their classroom and join the rest of their class in whatever activity is going on at that time. When asked about how their students transition back, the teachers had differing experiences. Ms. H reported that Harry has no problems. She said, "He comes in and looks around, sees what everyone has, takes out his stuff and starts doing his work. It's great." Ms. AF had a similar experience of Alex and Frank. Both students "transition perfectly" and get "right back to work."

Ms. C and Ms. G both reported that their students, Charlie and George, occasionally have trouble transitioning back into the classroom. They both believed that this happened when the group was especially difficult for them. Ms. G reported that George "might be dysregulated after the group for a little bit of time... before he can go back to class. He might need to take some time." Ms. C has had a similar experience

with Charlie. She said, "he can kind of sometimes be a little different when he gets back depending on how the game went. Be a little agitated or something like that." However, even on the days that were more difficult, she felt that he was always able to join the classroom.

Ms. BE and Ms. D both felt that their students occasionally had trouble transitioning back to the classroom, but that the difficulty had more to do with situational factors. Brian and Evan, the students in Ms. BE's classroom, returned with only a few minutes left in the school day. She felt that the chaotic environment of the end of the day caused inconsistency in their transition. Similarly, Ms. D said that David returned just as his class was coming back from lunch, which is an especially disorderly time of day for the class as a whole.

Changes Noticed

The teachers were asked to reflect upon any changes that they noticed in their student as they have been participating in Guild Chronicles. Four teachers talked about social changes that they have seen over the course of the previous six months since the school year, and the intervention, had begun. Four teachers mentioned overall skills change.

Social changes. Each of the four teachers talked about how they noticed that their students were more engaged socially. Ms. AF shared her impressions of her two students, Frank and Alex. She felt that Frank is better at connecting to his classmates. She also described how Alex seems to be nicer to Frank after they had a somewhat contentious start to the year and, in fact, how he has been nicer to his classmates in general. In reference to Charlie, Ms. C said, "Overall this year Charlie has completely

blossomed socially. I think he's making really good connections and gaining some really true friendships, which is nice to see. I think overall since Charlie's been at [this school] he's made really great gains socially and academically and emotionally. I think he's in a much better place." Ms. BE discussed how Evan, too, has made progress socially. Finally, Ms. H shared the changes she has noticed in Harry. She described how Harry has historically been very shy and socially isolated. She noticed that he has been much more connected to his classmates as the year has gone on and he has diversified his group of friends. She said, "I see him much more as a part of the mix in the classroom and on the playground."

Four of the teachers, Ms. BE, Ms. C, Ms. D and Ms. H, mentioned their students' relationships with the other members of their Guild Chronicles groups. All four of the teachers said that their students were kind to each other and had developed some sort of bond because of their shared involvement in the group. Ms. BE thought that her two students, Brian and Evan, had formed a true friendship outside of the group. However, the other three teachers all said that their students' relationships with their group members was, for the most part, limited to Guild Chronicles and did not necessarily translate into spending time together during recess or lunch. Ms. H said that Harry got along well with his fellow group members but "outside of the group does not really hang out with those guys. But he's hanging out with other people, which I think is great."

Skills changes. More generally, four teachers talked about the development of skills over the course of the year. Ms. AF has noticed that Frank's regulation skills improved. If he has a difficult time in the classroom, he is better able to control himself and manage his reactions. She also felt that Alex seems to be more patient. Ms. G

noticed several changes in George. First, she has found that he is better able to interpret other people's perspectives. She provided an example of how this helps him interact with kids on the playground in a more appropriate way. She also described how George had been sucking his thumb since he joined the school several years before. Recently, however, he has been showing an increased awareness of this behavior and a desire to stop. Ms. G thought that feedback from the other students in the group about sucking his thumb has helped get him closer to extinguishing this behavior. Ms. D mentioned that David has more strategies that he can use to cope with his frustration. Though he still needs some prompting to use the strategies, she thought that he has gained more skills to manage his frustration. Finally, Ms. H discussed Harry's improving advocacy skills. She described how he is more talkative in the classroom and will raise his hand to ask questions and participate in conversations.

Requests

During their interviews, all of the teachers expressed a number of requests about how they would like to see the program better integrated into the school atmosphere. The issues that came up most frequently had to do with a request for greater teacher exposure and increased follow-up from the group facilitator. One teacher specifically asked for more information from the students and thought it would be interesting to talk to the students about what they have noticed about themselves as they have been participating.

Request for exposure. Five teachers requested more information and exposure to Guild Chronicles. They said that they knew that it was helping their students but they were not exactly sure what went on in the group. Two teachers said they would love to be able to sit in on the group to watch it being played. Ms. D said she would like more

concrete information about the game and what her student's role is. Ms. C would like to know the reasoning behind Guild Chronicles. In speaking about her knowledge of the intervention, Ms. BE said, "I think I have the pieces but I don't have the whole puzzle" and thought more information would be helpful. She also thought that more exposure would allow her to converse with her students more about the game.

Request for follow-up. Five of the six teachers requested more consistent follow-up in terms of how the group was going and what the students were working on. They cited a lack of knowledge about what goes on in the groups and a hope that more knowledge would help them better assist their students. For example, Ms. D wanted to know if her student was working on developing any coping strategies for when he is feeling frustrated so that she could better encourage him to use the same strategies in the classroom. Ms. C also mentioned that this follow-up would make it easier to create continuity between the classroom and the therapy room. More generally, Ms. G, Ms. AF and Ms. BE requested progress reports or more frequent updates about how their students are doing.

Summary

This chapter shared the overarching themes that emerged from interviews with eight student participants in Guild Chronicles and their six teachers. While it is clear that there are many differences in students' experiences in Guild Chronicles, most of the student participants shared many experiences. They all enjoyed their time in the intervention and discussed their relationships with their fellow group members. The teachers noticed many changes in their students including both social skills changes and more general improvements. When taken together, the overarching concepts and themes

illuminate both strengths and weaknesses of the Guild Chronicles intervention. The following chapter will review the findings from this study and offer an interpretation of the results.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of eight student participants in a newer type of role-playing game, called Guild Chronicles, which is used as the basis for a psychotherapy intervention for social skills development. The student interviews were designed to reveal information about their experiences during their participation in Guild Chronicles. Their teachers were also interviewed to gain insights about their impressions of the intervention, as well as whether they perceived any changes in their students' social skills. This chapter will begin with an interpretation of the results of the study. Limitations of the study will be reviewed next, followed by recommendations for future research, clinical implications and final conclusions.

Interpretation of Results

An interpretation of the results that were discussed in Chapter Four will be presented in this section. Though several concepts and themes were seen in both the student interviews and the teacher interviews, there were also many differences. The section will begin with a discussion of the student interviews broken down by concept, and will be followed by a discussion of the teacher interviews.

Discussion of Student Interviews

Engagement. Overall, it was clear that the students were quite engaged in the group as it was the most common thread through all of the interviews, and the concept that was most strongly endorsed time and time again. It appeared that their strong engagement was due to their comfort, enjoyment, and interest in the role-playing game

format, and how it allowed them to flex their creativity and engage with material that they were already interested in.

All of the students talked at length about their positive experiences, describing how much fun they had and how enjoyable they found the group. Several students discussed how the game seemed to spark their creativity when designing their game characters and encouraged them to think creatively when solving problems. They spoke in unexpected detail about specific sessions during which they worked together to fight opponents and overcome obstacles. Having an interest in fantasy and investigation was cited as a reason that the students were so engaged, but their limited endorsement made the subtheme relatively weak. The battles that the students participated in against fictional characters were the most consistent and concrete examples that all of the students provided when asked about their favorite parts of participating. The fact that the battles were endorsed by all of the students as one of their favorite parts of Guild Chronicles makes this a strong subtheme and an aspect of the game that is especially meaningful. Still, their engagement went beyond simply having fun while playing the game. While many other interventions have trouble sustaining the participants' attention, the students indicated that their interest had only increased as they became increasingly familiar with Guild Chronicles (LeGoff, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2012).

This high level of engagement offers distinct benefits to the intervention as many other interventions have low levels of investment from the participants (LeGoff, 2004; O'Neill et al., 2012). Their engagement seems to distract from and minimize any stigma or sense of "work" that participants may experience in other interventions. They are able to engage with the lessons and skill building in a more natural way that hopefully leads to

greater development of skills. In addition, the high levels of engagement indicate a greater buy-in from the students. This will yield a more productive and rich gameplay experience as they are more invested in participating in and learning from the intervention.

Gameplay. The next major concept that emerged from the data had to do with specific features of gameplay that contributed to the students' enjoyment and encouraged them to practice skills that were vital to their social development. Six of the eight students talked about the theme of group-decision making, and the same number commented on the theme of planning, suggesting that both are important aspects of Guild Chronicles. Several students shared challenges that their group encountered when playing, including making decisions together, talking over each other, and becoming distracted. Over the course of the interviews, however, it was clear that the participants learned what they needed to do in order to maximize their gameplay. For example, the students described negotiating with their peers and sharing their opinions in an organized fashion. These skills helped them be more successful in Guild Chronicles, and whether they were aware of it or not, they are important skills to have in any social interaction. In this way, the importance of negotiation and communication was demonstrated to the students in the context of the game by yielding a better outcome for the players. The need for and the application of these skills arose in an actual situation, in the course of gameplay, which seems to offer a powerful and gratifying learning experience.

Additionally, the planning that the game requires forced the participants to prioritize this skill. They found that planning their approach to the game both as a group and as individual players led to greater success. The participants also talked about how

they worked on Guild Chronicles planning and strategy even after the group finished for the week. This level of dedication is not required of the students and it suggests that they enjoy the game and are invested in succeeding. However, only two students discussed this theme, suggesting that the other themes under the overarching concept of gameplay may be more meaningful for the students.

Sharing a vision for success among team members is a lesson that role-playing games are especially adept at teaching participants (Betz, 2011). The results of this study suggest that Guild Chronicles accomplishes this. While the game format and content sparked a high level of engagement, the gameplay encouraged the students to work together to practice skills that directly helped them in the game and, more importantly, outside of the game.

Social Dynamics. All of the students were able to describe social dynamics that were at play during the group sessions, including how the game stimulated, and actually required, teamwork and relationship development. Though some of the interview questions prompted the students to talk about the social aspects of their experience, the prominence of this topic during the interviews, as well as the extent to which they were able to discuss the social interactions during the sessions, suggest that it is a notable feature in their involvement.

As an intervention aimed at improving the participants' social skills, it seems that the group was successful. All eight students endorsed the theme of teamwork and also talked about how they were more successful in the game when they got to know their teammates and worked together cooperatively. This is an important take-away for the participants as it helped increase their interest in working with those around them, which

will serve them well in a variety of social contexts including their classroom environment. A majority of the students also talked about times that they helped other teammates in some way. These instances were categorized as the empathic actions theme. It was difficult to tease out whether the students performed the actions from a truly selfless place, or because they were interested in improving their group's standing in the game. Ultimately, however, it may not matter why the actions originated because it was clear that the students had made a positive connection between their pro-social action and a positive outcome. The hope is that these sorts of constructive social experiences lead to similar behavior in the future.

Six of the students talked about the theme of their roles and what it was like to design their characters. They described some of their favorite parts of their characters and how their characters changed throughout their time playing. Though it may be a concept that is too abstract for young children to grasp, there seems to be a parallel between the character development in the game and the students' development of social and life skills.

Research has found that learning the importance of a diverse team is a lesson that fantasy role-playing games can teach participants (Betz, 2011). Though the theme of roles was relatively strong, only two students described an awareness of the benefits of designing characters with complementing strengths in order to create a well-rounded team. It is possible that the participants in this study had a limited awareness of this since they had to design their characters before starting to play the game. The format of the game may address this limitation because, as the students learn more about the strengths and weaknesses of their individual characters and their team as a whole, they have

chances to evolve their characters. Still, the important concept of complementing strengths and weaknesses among team members seemed to be lost on many of the participants.

Relationship Development. The next overarching concept that emerged had to do with relationship development. Only half of the students interviewed had some awareness that their participation in Guild Chronicles was supposed to encourage social interaction with their peers. This relative weakness of the theme may be by design because one may guess that this awareness could have made the students feel self-conscious in some way, like their parents or teachers had singled them out as a student in need of help making friends. However, the students' positive view of the game seemed to mitigate this feeling if it was present and they maintained their enthusiastic impression of Guild Chronicles during the discussions about their relationships. As such, it may be beneficial to make this more transparent to all participants.

The strongest theme having to do with relationship development emerged as all eight of the students were able to describe their relationships with the other members of their Guild Chronicles groups. Students talked about how Guild Chronicles helped them build new relationships, as well as solidify existing friendships. Children with social skills impairments often experience trouble establishing and maintaining appropriate friendships (Bellini, Peters, Benner, & Hopf, 2007). Giving the participants a chance to make friends in a supportive and supervised context seemed to facilitate the relationships enhancement that they described. In addition, the long-term, ongoing nature of the group meant that students went through changes in the status of their relationships with the group members. As the students reported, they often experienced conflicts, as well as

successes, during their time in the group. As such, the hope is that they learned that friendships can be resilient and conflict can be addressed.

Growth. During the interviews, the students were asked to reflect upon why they were participating in the group and what they learned while participating in Guild Chronicles. All of the students were able to talk about some sort of growth that they experienced, but many needed follow-up questions to help scaffold their responses. They seemed to have a relatively easy time talking about their improvements in playing the game, such as working together in a team. One of the most interesting themes that emerged was the idea of a "trial and error" feature of Guild Chronicles, which facilitated growth. The student participants reflected upon times that they struggled, either as individual players or as a group. They talked about how these times led to some growth and improvement, suggesting that the game provided a safe space to address their own weaknesses. This sort of supportive space to practice skills is a vital aspect of group interventions (LeCroy, 1987; Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Enfield, 2007).

However, the students had a more difficult time discussing more abstract skills that they had developed or things that they had learned about themselves. Similarly, the students had significant difficulty talking about their goals in the program. The first question posed to the students asked them to reflect upon why their parents and teachers may have wanted them to join Guild Chronicles. The hope was that the students would be able to describe their goals for participation and then reflect upon whether or not they had noticed any growth in relation to their goals. Only two students ventured a guess, while all of the other students were unable to answer the question posed.

Still, the students were largely able to speak to the various aspects of the program that were helping them grow and develop a greater self-awareness. It remains unclear whether the difficulty that the students had in defining their own goals for participation impacted the nature of their participation in the group, or if the question, as posed, was simply too abstract. It is possible that the goals of the group are so hidden that the students only have a vague understanding of why they are participating. This could, in turn, negatively impact the effectiveness of the intervention in terms of the growth that was experienced. In the school context especially, students are used to transparent and definitive lessons. As the teachers pointed out, many other interventions make the goals explicitly clear to the participants by laying out agendas for sessions and framing lessons by saying things like, "let's talk about perspective taking."

However, the fact that the students had limited awareness of the specific goals may also be an asset to the intervention and lead to greater growth. In fact, many of the teachers thought that the embedded nature of the goals increased their students' engagement and made it easier and more comfortable to work on issues that may be seen as sensitive, embarrassing, or boring. Perhaps, since the students seem to think of Guild Chronicles first and foremost as an enjoyable game, rather than a social skills intervention, they engage in a more enthusiastic way that brings about greater growth and change.

Experiences with the Group Facilitator. Though none of the interview questions posed to the student participants focused specifically on the group facilitator, all but one of the participants referenced the facilitator's role in their group. This suggests that the group facilitator played a significant role in the students' experiences

and that they recognized how much guidance and assistance he provided. They discussed concrete examples of times that the facilitator helped them make progress in the game, as well as more abstract impressions of the facilitator as an encouraging presence.

It was clear that the students experienced some difficult times during their participation, both in terms of trouble making progress in the game and times that their skills deficits impeded their group functioning. Still, the students reported overwhelmingly positive impressions of their time in the group. This suggests that the facilitator was able to maintain a positive, enjoyable and engaging environment. The students felt that the facilitator stepped in to provide support and suggestions during difficult times. It seems that the facilitator knew when to let the students confront their own weaknesses to foster growth, while not pushing them so far that they left feeling frustrated or like they had failed. The facilitator played a valuable and vital role in the students' experience as he was able to guide, protect, and oversee their participation.

Discussion of Teacher Interviews

Goals. Both students and teachers were asked to answer questions about why they believed the students were participating in the intervention. Interestingly, despite having limited knowledge about the intervention overall, the teachers seemed to have clear ideas about why students would be referred to Guild Chronicles and what goals the group could address for their students. They talked about skills deficits that made it difficult for their students to interact socially and to manage themselves in the classroom. Most often, they referenced social skills issues as a basis for their referral, which was expected as Guild Chronicles is primarily a social skills intervention. The teachers displayed an impressive awareness of their students' experiences both in school and at

home, and often referred to these experiences as the basis for their students' participation. Though four teachers mentioned home circumstances as contributing factors to their referrals, it was clear that their first-hand observations of their students in the school environment were the primary basis for the referrals.

Guild Chronicles Characteristics. Two teachers made note of the facilitator's role in Guild Chronicles gameplay. The teachers noted the vital role the group facilitator played in leading the game in a way that both supported and challenged their students. Since only two teachers endorsed this theme, it seems to be less significant than some of the other characteristics described. This may have to do with the limited exposure that the teachers had to the game, or it may be because they did not attribute their impressions of Guild Chronicles specifically to the facilitator. They were better able to compare their impressions of Guild Chronicles with other interventions, noting that Guild Chronicles seems to be more motivating and engaging to their students. They also specifically liked the cooperative format of the group, perhaps because cooperation is such an important skill in the school context (Lane, Pierson, & Givner, 2003).

Three other related themes having to do with Guild Chronicles characteristics also emerged: the experiential training format, the game's flexibility, and the embedded nature of the goals. The teachers liked how the game provided an adaptable and in-the-moment training opportunity where students could address their individual skills deficits in real time, in a non-threatening way. As noted in the Literature Review, it is important that role-playing games used in the psychotherapy context be matched to the participants' demographics and needs, including age, developmental level, and treatment goals (Enfield, 2007). The results of this study, and specifically how the teachers viewed the

game characteristics, suggest that Guild Chronicles accomplishes this and is suited to achieving a focus that is personalized and individualized for each participant.

A referral to the group was based on identified social skills that the student would benefit from developing and, according to the teachers, the facilitator seemed to endeavor to align and maintain that focus in the course of gameplay. The teachers liked how the participants also contributed to the personalization and focus for themselves through such aspects of the game as character design, tool and role choices, and overall game strategy and participation. The dynamic nature of the game seemed to offer opportunities for flexibility and realignment with participant goals, as well as real time feedback and skill building.

Engagement. The teachers echoed the same sentiments made by the students about the students' engagement in Guild Chronicles. The strong endorsement of engagement by all of the teachers, as well as all of the students, suggests that it is a major strength of the intervention. The teachers based their experiences of the students' engagement on the enjoyment and excitement they perceived in their students, as well as their knowledge of their students' interest in the game content. Research has shown that fantasy is inherently appealing to children and it helps maintain high levels of interest (Rosselet & Stauffer, 2013; Enfield, 2007; Zayas & Lewis, 1986). This was certainly true for three teachers' impression of their students' engagement. The fact that only half of the teachers endorsed this idea of an interest in the game's subject matter indicates that this theme may not be as strong as others. It may also be true that could be an underrepresentation of the students' interest in fantasy. Had the teachers known more about

the game content, it is possible that more would have discussed their students' interest in the game content.

Transitions. The way the students transition back to the classroom after Guild Chronicles is an important consideration so that the group can be a positive part of their day rather than a disruptive one. The teachers reported mixed experiences of their students' transitions, with a third of the teachers feeling that the transitions were consistently smooth. The rest of the teachers, however, reported more trouble. The teachers' concerns about this aspect of Guild Chronicles warrant attention as the students' transitions back into the classroom impact how Guild Chronicles fits into the school environment.

Further investigation revealed that the classroom activities taking place during the transition were very important. Specifically, the students had trouble re-entering classrooms at the end of the day or during disorderly times for the class as a whole, such as at the end of lunch. As much as possible, it may be helpful to consider the placement of the group in the classroom schedule so that the student transitions back at opportune times. In addition, though it may be difficult in a time-pressured situation like a school day, it may be helpful to include a period of time for the participants to re-regulate before going back to their classrooms.

There also seems to be a benefit that is realized by the temporal and physical proximity between the game session and the classroom. Whether knowingly or not, there is almost certainly an advantage to being able to utilize new skills when they transition directly back into the classroom, while the skills are still fresh and exciting. The Guild Chronicles and role-playing game model is especially unique, and perhaps especially

effective due to the fact that it occurs in a fantasy world. It is important that the therapeutic team including facilitators, teachers, and parents help students make the connection between the new strengths and skills developed in the context of the game and situations and ways in which they are transferable and relevant in "real life".

Changes Noticed. During this study, the teachers were the main source of information about whether any changes were seen in the students because the students may have had trouble accurately assessing changes in themselves. The interview questions posed to the teachers were aimed at examining if skills practiced in the group were seen outside of the group. The majority of teachers had, in fact, noticed changes in both social skills and more general skills since their students began participating. They discussed positive changes in the students' abilities to engage in social interactions with peers and regulate themselves in the classroom, at lunch, and at recess. This is a very promising finding of the study because it suggests that, while the students noticed an enhanced capacity to interact appropriately with group members in the context of gameplay, the teachers also saw these skills transfer, or generalize, to other environments.

This generalizability of skills to contexts other than the therapy room may have to do with the experiential training described by the teachers, in which the students received real-time, immediate feedback from fellow group members and the group facilitator about their behavior. When coupled with the high levels of engagement and motivation reported by the students, it seems that the feedback is especially effective in helping the students connect their own specific behaviors to the reactions of those around them.

Additionally, Guild Chronicles provided them with the motivation as well as a supportive environment to practice shaping their behavior to bring about more positive social

interactions. The heightened awareness and understanding gained during the group seemed to help the students have better social interactions outside of the therapy room also. The endorsement of generalizability is a significant strength of Guild Chronicles as it suggests that the intervention prepares the participants for daily life in a way that many other interventions do not.

Requests. All of the teachers noted some weaknesses in the program in the form of requests for changes to Guild Chronicles. These requests indicate a number of recommendations that can be made to improve the Guild Chronicles program and better meet their needs and the needs of their students. They expressed a desire for more information about the program in general. Many had an idea about the game content and goals, but had only vague information about how the group was structured to actually meet the goals of the student. Perhaps disseminating more information to those referring to Guild Chronicles could lead to more appropriate referrals and better bridge the gap between the group and the classroom. As one teacher mentioned, it could even be useful to invite the teachers to watch a session so that they could gain first-hand knowledge about how Guild Chronicles works.

An equally prominent theme that emerged among the teachers made was a request for more follow-up from the group so that they had a better idea about their students' progress. Some teachers mentioned that they received occasional updates from the group facilitator, and that these updates were very informative for them. However, the follow-up was inconsistent and generally informal. It would be helpful to formalize this process in some way, perhaps through written updates, so that teachers could create more consistency between the skills and strategies practiced during Guild Chronicles and those

reinforced in the classroom. These recommendations become especially important in settings where there is less consistent, informal contact between the group facilitator and the other people working with the participants.

Limitations of the Study

Like all research studies, this study has a number of limitations. It is important to review the limitations in order to provide a lens through which the results can be interpreted. In addition, an acknowledgment of the limitations of this study may help address similar limitations in future studies.

First, the study was limited in terms of the number of participants. While the eight students and six teachers provided rich data, the sample was small and relatively homogeneous in terms of gender, age, and racial identity. Additionally, all of the students were in groups in the same public school, and the same group facilitator led all of the groups. Presently, Guild Chronicles is only used in very limited settings so the possibilities for this study were limited. In the future, a larger sample of students from a wider range of settings may have provided a greater range of responses.

Overall, all eight students and six teachers appeared engaged and forthcoming about themselves and the Guild Chronicles program. The teachers were generally able to respond to questions without additional prompting. The students were quite eager to share stories and memories about their experiences. However, many had difficulty answering some of the questions, especially the more abstract questions. They frequently benefited from prompts to help scaffold their responses to the questions. This issue could be addressed by making the questions more concrete to better match their developmental

level. Alternatively, older participants who may be more able to answer abstract questions could be interviewed in greater depth.

Another limitation has to do with the students' participation in other interventions at the same time as they participated in Guild Chronicles. Some of the participants were also participating in other interventions aimed at increasing their social skills, including lunch groups and individual therapy. As a result, this study sought to understand their experiences in the intervention rather than to prove the effectiveness of Guild Chronicles.

These limitations impact the extent to which the results of the study can be generalized to other populations. Still, the results from this study help illuminate the experiences of the specific participants, and can inform future research into Guild Chronicles and other role-playing game interventions.

Recommendations for Future Research

Further research into the experiences of Guild Chronicles participants is recommended. This study was conducted during a limited timeframe and with a small sample, and it is recommended that a similar study be conducted over a longer period of time and with a larger sample. Ultimately, a formal, longitudinal study is recommended to track the effects of the intervention over time. Additionally, further research should aim to recruit a less homogeneous sample including females and participants of different ages.

The results of the study reveal a number of important recommendations to improve Guild Chronicles. Though some are more feasible than others at this time, the recommendations could be explored and implemented as a series of changes over time. As they are implemented, further research should be conducted to assess the impact and

inform future changes. Also, as previously discussed, the student participants had a difficult time sharing why they were participating in the group. A number of possible effects of this were proposed, but the true impact should be investigated through further research.

The flexibility of Guild Chronicles also lends itself well to therapeutic groups that are focused on goals other than social skills. As the intervention is used more widely with participants with varying presenting problems, research into the experiences of the participants is warranted. Similarly, research on the use of Guild Chronicles in settings other than school systems would be a helpful tool in understanding which settings are most appropriate for its use.

Clinical Implications

The results of this study suggest that, by participating in an intervention like Guild Chronicles, participants with social difficulties may experience a number of positive outcomes. The development of social skills is a vital part of development and it is in the best interest of both psychotherapy clients and providers to utilize the most promising interventions available.

The Literature Review uncovered several limitations of more traditional social skills interventions. Overall, three issues often plague interventions and negatively impact their success: engagement, generalizability, and focus. The results of this study suggest that the design and implementation of Guild Chronicles has been successful in addressing these concerns for the study participants. The most consistent and enthusiastic experience shared across all of the participants, both students and teachers, was their engagement in the group. In terms of generalizability, the changes that the

teachers noticed in their students and reported during the interviews suggest that the skills learned in the group were, in fact, transferring to other contexts. Finally, the teachers strongly endorsed the idea that the focus of Guild Chronicles is flexible and individualized enough to meet the needs of their students. When taken together, it seems that Guild Chronicles addresses the concerns that plague many typical interventions. The hope is that, as a result, Guild Chronicles may bring about more meaningful change in its participants.

Though this study was not longitudinal and could not track changes over time, it is quite possible that the skills and development fostered by participation in Guild Chronicles would lead to better outcomes overall than would be seen in those who did not participate. The mastery of the game seems to facilitate the experience of mastery in other arenas, as well. Students seem to be more equipped to interact with peers and adults, and they can better handle the demands of the classroom. By experiencing favorable outcomes in both the game and in real-life social interactions, the students gained valuable senses of success that could bolster their self-esteem and encourage further growth.

Additionally, the participants are able to address their failures and relative weaknesses in a safe and supportive environment that encourages growth. During the interviews, many of the students described experiences of difficulty, either in the form of trouble in the game or trouble interacting with fellow group members. However, the design and structure of Guild Chronicles allows and encourages participants to learn from and readjust for that failure, in the non-threatening and supportive group context of the game. It seemed clear that any periods of difficulty were resolved in positive ways that

emphasized skills such as perseverance and teamwork. Perceived failure, it seems, truly becomes an opportunity for positive growth rather than an experience of defeat, as shown by developmental research (Davies, 2011). Ultimately, this experience of failure, when followed by a reparative experience and success in both the game and in real-life social interactions, is a powerful tool that allows participants to walk away from the group feeling a sense of accomplishment.

The results of this study also suggest a number of valuable pieces of information for providers. Clinicians need to be aware of the engagement of the participants as a precursor to change. The participants in Guild Chronicles appear highly engaged and motivated which, in turn, means that they attend sessions eager to participate in the intervention. Though it was beyond the scope of this study, the excitement shown by the participants most likely leads to more meaningful change than an intervention in which participants are only marginally engaged.

The extent to which Guild Chronicles seems to provide individualized treatment in a group setting also suggests important clinical implications. The focus of Guild Chronicles was general enough to make it easily applicable to students with a wide range of needs, while remaining customizable to each individual student in ways that kept the focus appropriately specific. While group treatments allow facilitators to reach many participants at once, many group approaches seem to apply a "one size fits all" treatment to all of the participants. Guild Chronicles, however, provides a game that structures the intervention while still allowing the facilitator to tailor the treatment to the individual participants. Clinicians running treatment groups should be able to appropriately tailor the sessions to meet the needs of the individual members.

In this case, the flexibility of the intervention was an important draw for referring providers. Referring providers should consider interventions like Guild Chronicles to be promising alternatives to more traditional interventions such as didactic programs. The results suggest that this flexibility means that interventions with similar designs, specifically those centered around a role-playing game, could be used to address a wide variety of patient needs. As such, role-playing games should be considered as a possible framework for the development of future psychotherapy interventions.

Summary and Conclusion

Research has proven the importance of social skills in the development of children. For those with underdeveloped social skills, a more structured and purposeful environment, such as a social skills intervention, is often appropriate. Unfortunately, many social skills interventions do not meet the needs of the participants. This study aimed to consider the experiences of a group of participants in Guild Chronicles. Interviews with eight students in fourth and fifth grade explored how they felt about the intervention, what they learned while participating, and if they had any recommendations for how it could better meet their needs. Their teachers were also interviewed in an effort to learn more about how the students felt and whether any changes in the students were perceived by those around them.

Guild Chronicles represents a newer direction of interventions that use roleplaying games as a structure for the development of social skills. The findings suggest that Guild Chronicles is an especially enjoyable and engaging intervention that calls for participants to practice a number of skills including teamwork, group decision-making, conflict resolution and planning. Even though the students had trouble verbalizing their specific goals, they often reported important relationship development taking place within their group. The supportive and flexible environment, reinforced by the group facilitator, seemed to foster growth. Their teachers confirmed these changes as they described how the students were exhibiting positive social skills changes.

Given the importance of social skills in a person's development, it is hoped that this study has provided some preliminary information about a newer kind of intervention that is especially poised to address the needs of those with social skills deficits. It is an engaging, creative and supportive intervention that offers a promising approach to address the social skills needs of the participants. The ultimate hope is that, through participation in role-playing interventions such as Guild Chronicles, participants will be able to effectively address their presenting problems and relative weaknesses.

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APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANT SOLICITATION LETTER

Dear	
Dear	 <u> </u>

My name is Emma Nathanson and I am completing my doctoral degree in clinical psychology at William James College. I am writing to invite you and your child to participate in a research project the experiences of students in the Guild Chronicles intervention that they participate(d) in with the Wayland Public Schools. This study will explore how they experience(d) their participation in the group, specifically in relation to their social skills development. This study is also interested in learning about the impressions that those around your child had on their experiences in Guild Chronicles.

I am seeking students, along with their teachers, who currently participate in GC, or those who participated in GC recently. All of the participating students should have a social skills goal as part of their involvement in the group.

Participation involves a one-on-one interview of your child with the researcher that will last approximately 60 minutes. Subsequently, a one-on-one interview with your child's teacher will be conducted. The interviews will focus on your child's experiences in the Guild Chronicles program, as well as any changes that are seen in your child's social interactions outside of the group. The interviews can be scheduled at a time and place most convenient for the participant and the researcher. Interviews may also be conducted at William James College in Newton, Massachusetts if you wish. Upon request, I will provide you with a summary of the results of my research project.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns at Emma_Nathanson@williamjames.edu. You may also contact my Doctoral Project Chair Dr. Sanford Portnoy at Sanford_Portnoy@williamjames.edu.

Emma Nathanson, M.A. Doctoral Student in Clinical Psychology William James College

APPENDIX B: PARENTAL INFORMED CONSENT

I have agreed to my child's participation in Emma Nathanson's doctoral project. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of participants in the Guild Chronicles program. I know that my child's participation in this study is voluntary and that my child's participation in the study will not affect his or her participation in the Guild Chronicles group. My child has the right to refuse to answer any questions and can withdraw consent at any time.

I know that my child will be given an assent form that presents the details of this research project before they participate. I know that the form includes information about the research design, risks and discomforts, benefits, researcher contact information, and confidentiality. I give the researcher permission to present this form to my child. I know that my child will be given a chance to ask any questions they have regarding the research and that they will be required to sign this form before participating.

I know that participation will include an in-person interview with my child. Participation will also include an interview with my child's teacher. The interview with my child should take approximately 60 minutes to complete all of the questions and it will be audio recorded. In addition, I will be asked to answer a series of questions, including demographic questions, about my child. To protect my child's identity, data will be encrypted and stored on a secure, password-protected flash drive. All data, including audio recordings and transcriptions, will be deleted following the project's completion.

I understand that participation in this study involves minimal risk. The risks are similar to risks faced in everyday life. A potential risk of discussing social experiences and the Guild Chronicles program is that my child may have negative feelings and thoughts. Should uncomfortable feelings and thoughts arise, I may contact the researcher if have any questions, comments or concerns. Should I need further support for my child, the Massachusetts Psychological Association referral service (www.masspsych.org) can be contacted if I would like to speak with a therapist.

The investigator does not anticipate a direct benefit to me or my child for participating in the study. However, data from this survey may be used to improve the Guild Chronicles program, which may prove beneficial to current and future participants.

I understand that the investigator of this study is Emma Nathanson, a student at William James College who is conducting the study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology. Information from this study may also be used in later papers or presentations. However, all information will be reported anonymously.

I have read this form and understand the terms of my child's participation. By signing my name below, I am agreeing to let my child participate in this study. I understand that I can

contact Emma Nathanson at Emma_Nathanson@williamjames.edu or Dr. Sanford
Portnoy at Sanford_Portnoy@williamjames.edu if I have further questions or concerns

This study has been reviewed and approved for use by William James College's Institutional Review Board (WJC IRB). If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant in the study, I may contact the IRB chair, Dr. Edward DeVos at 617-327-6777.

My child's name:	
Signature of parent/guardian:	Date:
C: another of massamaham	Data

APPENDIX C: TEACHER INFORMED CONSENT

I have agreed to participate in Emma Nathanson's doctoral project. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of participants in the Guild Chronicles program. I know that my participation in this study is voluntary and that my participation in the study will not affect my student's participation in the Guild Chronicles group. I have the right to refuse to answer any questions and can withdraw consent at any time.

I know that participation will include an in-person interview. The interview questions will focus on my student's social skills development and their participation in the Guild Chronicles program. The interview should take approximately 60 minutes to complete all of the questions and it will be audio recorded. To protect my identity, data will be encrypted and stored on a secure, password-protected flash drive. All data, including audio recordings and transcriptions, will be deleted following the project's completion.

I understand that participation in this study involves minimal risk. The risks are similar to risks faced in everyday life. A potential risk of participation is that I may have negative feelings and thoughts. Should uncomfortable feelings and thoughts arise, I may contact the researcher if have any questions, comments or concerns. Should I need further support, the Massachusetts Psychological Association referral service (www.masspsych.org) can be contacted if I would like to speak with a therapist.

The investigator does not anticipate a direct benefit for participating in the study. However, data from this survey may be used to improve the Guild Chronicles program, which may prove beneficial to current and future participants.

I understand that the investigator of this study is Emma Nathanson, a student at William James College who is conducting the study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology. Information from this study may also be used in later papers or presentations. However, all information will be reported anonymously.

I have read this form and understand the terms of my participation. By signing my name below, I am agreeing to participate in this study. I understand that I can contact Emma Nathanson at Emma_Nathanson@williamjames.edu or Dr. Sanford Portnoy at Sanford Portnoy@williamjames.edu if I have further questions or concerns.

This study has been reviewed and approved for use by William James College's Institutional Review Board (WJC IRB). If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant in the study, I may contact the IRB chair, Dr. Edward DeVos at 617-327-6777.

My student's name:	
Signature:	Date:
Signature of researcher:	Date:

APPENDIX D: STUDENT INFORMED ASSENT

I have agreed to participate in Emma Nathanson's doctoral project. The purpose of the study is to explore my experience of the Guild Chronicles program. I know that my participation in this study is voluntary and that my participation in the study will not affect my participation in the Guild Chronicles group. I know that I can refuse to answer any questions and can decide to not participate in the study at any time.

I know that participation will include an in-person interview with Emma Nathanson. It should take approximately one hour to complete all of the questions and it will be audio recorded. I know that my teacher will also be interviewed. To protect my identity, data will be encrypted and stored on a secure, password-protected flash drive. All data, including audio recordings and transcriptions, will be deleted when the project is completed.

I understand that participation in this study involves minimal risk. The risks are similar to risks faced in everyday life. A potential risk of talking about my social experiences and the Guild Chronicles program is that I may have negative feelings and thoughts. Should uncomfortable feelings and thoughts arise, I may contact the researcher if have any questions, comments or concerns. Should I need further support, I can tell the school psychologist, my parents or the researcher. The Massachusetts Psychological Association referral service (www.masspsych.org) can be contacted if I would like to speak with a therapist.

The investigator does not anticipate a direct benefit for participating in the study. However, data from this survey may be used to improve the Guild Chronicles program, which may prove beneficial to current and future participants.

I understand that the investigator of this study is Emma Nathanson, a student at William James College who is conducting the study in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Psychology. Information from this study may also be used in later papers or presentations. However, all information will be reported anonymously.

I have read this form and understand the terms of my participation. By signing my name below, I am agreeing to participate in this study. I understand that I can contact Emma Nathanson at Emma_Nathanson@williamjames.edu or Dr. Sanford Portnoy at Sanford_Portnoy@williamjames.edu if I have further questions or concerns.

This study has been reviewed and approved for use by William James College's Institutional Review Board (WJC IRB). If I have questions regarding my rights as a participant in the study, I may contact the IRB chair, Dr. Edward DeVos at 617-327-6777.

My name:	
Signature:	Date:
Signature of researcher:	Date:

APPENDIX E: TRANSCRIBER CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

	, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full opes and documentation received from Emr	
_	Fidence the identification of any individual the transcription of audio-taped interviews	-
	any audiotapes or computerized files of the cally requested to do so by the researcher,	
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agreement. I am aware that I o	egally responsible for any breach of this c can be held legally responsible for any har fiable information contained in the audiota	m incurred by
Transcriber name:		
Signature:	Date:	

Signature of researcher: ______Date: _____

APPENDIX F: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1. What is your child's age?
- 2. What is your child's gender?
- 3. What grade is your child in?
- 4. How long has your child participated in the Guild Chronicles group?
- 5. To the best of your knowledge, what interventions (groups with the school psychologist, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech and language therapy, etc) has your child participated in previously?

APPENDIX G: STUDENT INTERVEW QUESTIONS

Goals of GC

- What do you think your teacher's goals were for you when you were in Guild Chronicles?
- Feelings about participation in GC
 - o Can you tell me about a time when you really liked being in the group?
 - Can you tell me about a time when you really did not like being in the group?
 - o What was it like to design your character?
 - How has your character changed during the group?
 - Do you wish anything were different about your character?
 - What were your favorite parts of Guild Chronicles game-play?
 - Prompts:
 - Making characters and leveling up?
 - Exploring the story?
 - Talking to people in the game world and roleplaying?
 - Battling monsters?
 - Solving puzzles?
 - Hanging out with friends?

Group experience

- Can you tell me about a time that the group got into a lot of trouble? How did the group try to get out of trouble? Did it work?
- Can you think of a time when things were difficult between the group members?
- O Did you make any friends in the group? Do you still hang out (have lunch, play at recess) with them?
- Can you think about a time that another player was nice to you? What did they do? How did it make you feel?
- O Can you think about a time that you disagreed with another player? What did they do? How did it make you feel?
- o Did the group get better at playing? What helped the group get better?
 - Prompts
 - Learning more about the rules?
 - Leveling up?
 - Talking about strategy?
 - Working as a team?

GC as social-emotional learning

- o What did you learn about friendships?
- o What did you learn about yourself?
- What did you learn about your group participation?
- What feelings and emotions did you learn about during Guild Chronicles?

- Concluding questions
 Would you recommend Guild Chronicles to a friend? What do you think other kids would like about it?

APPENDIX H: TEACHER INTERVEW QUESTIONS

• Game questions

- What do you know about the Guild Chronicles program?
- How do you think this intervention compares to other social skills interventions in the school (pull-out groups, in-class interventions, OT, PT, speech and language therapy)?
- What would you, as a teacher, like to know about Guild Chronicles or other social-emotional learning interventions?

• Student-specific questions

- In your opinion, why is your student participating in the Guild Chronicles program?
- How did your student feel about attending Guild Chronicles each week?
- After attending the Guild Chronicles group, how did your student transition back into the classroom?
- Did you notice any changes in disruptive or challenging behavior while your student was participating in the group?
- Did you notice any changes in attitudes relating to school and friends while your student was participating in the group?

Suggestions for the future

- How do you think the Guild Chronicles program could better address the social still concerns about your student?
- Would you be willing to create a list of goals for classroom behavior that could be addressed in Guild Chronicles?
- Would you be willing to implement an incentive system for those goals related to Guild Chronicles?