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THE EVERYDAY BECOMES EXTRAORDINARY: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FAMILY VIOLENCE, THROUGH APPLIED THEATRE

By Peter O'Connor, Chris Holland and Briar O'Connor (New Zealand)

Abstract

Everyday Theatre is a government-department funded applied theatre program focusing on family violence, child abuse and neglect. Since 2004, it has been delivered to over 15,000 children aged 10 to 12 years across New Zealand. The paper describes the program's pretext and outlines how the workshops are conducted. Students', teachers' and principals' responses are included to give a rich description of the program. Using evaluation materials gathered through independent research in late 2006, along with the facilitators' narratives, this paper illustrates how applied theatre can provide a forum in which young people can create their own understandings of these sensitive issues.

Résumé

Everyday Theatre est un programme de théâtre appliqué subventionné par le gouvernement, qui se focalise sur la violence dans les familles et notamment sur le mauvais traitement des enfants. Depuis 2004, il a été offert à plus de 15.000 enfants âgés de 10 à 12 ans à travers la Nouvelle Zélande. L'article décrit le prétexte de ce programme et montre comment les ateliers sont menés. Les réponses des étudiants, des enseignants et des directeurs d'écoles y sont incluses, offrant ainsi une riche description du programme. Grâce des matériaux d'évaluation collectés à travers des recherches indépendantes datant de la fin 2006, et grâce aux descriptions des animateurs, cet article illustre combien le théâtre appliqué peut proposer un forum aux jeunes à travers lequel ils peuvent exprimer leur propre interprétation de ces problèmes sensibles.

Resumen

El Teatro de Cada Día es un programa para el teatro aplicado auspiciado por un departamento gubernamental que se concentra en la violencia familiar, maltrato y descuido del niño. Desde el 2004, ha sido presentado a más de 15,000 niños de los 10 a los 12 años de edad en toda Nueva Zelanda. El artículo describe el propósito del programa y señala como se conducen los talleres. Las respuestas de los "estudiantes", "profesores" y "directores" son incluidas para darle al programa una riqueza en su descripción. Utilizando materiales de evaluación acumulados mediante la investigación independiente de finales de 2006, juntamente con las narrativas de los facilitadores, este artículo muestra como el teatro aplicado puede proveer un forum en el cual la gente joven puede generar su propio entendimiento sobre estos problemas delicados.

Authors' biographies

Dr Peter O'Connor specialises in the use of drama pedagogy across curriculum areas, within public health campaigns, and with students with special needs. Peter was the recipient of the AATE 2006 Distinguished Dissertation Award. He and Briar are co-directors of Applied Theatre Consultants Ltd (ATCo).

Chris Holland's PhD (University of Auckland) focused on literacy: policy, professional development and

practice. Chris has published texts on workplace language and literacy, teacher training and research into arts education.

Briar O'Connor MA (Hons) manages the production, research and evaluation side of ATCo. She has delivered *Everyday Theatre* since 2005, and was part of the initial devising process.

Biographies des auteurs

Dr Peter O'Connor est spécialiste de l'utilisation pédagogique de l'art dramatique à travers le curriculum, au sein des campagnes publiques pour la santé et auprès des enfants ayant des besoins particuliers. Peter a reçu la récompense suivante: *AATE 2006 Distinguished Dissertation Award*. Il est co-directeur de *Applied Theatre Consultants Ltd* (ATCo) avec Briar.

Chris Holland's PhD (*University of Auckland*) se penche sur l'alphabétisation: la législation, le perfectionnement professionnel et la pratique. Chris a publié des textes sur le langage et l'alphabétisation sur les lieux de travail, la formation des enseignants et la recherche dans l'enseignement des arts.

Briar O'Connor MA (Hons) gère la partie production, recherche et évaluation d'ATCo. Elle a travaillé dans le projet *Everyday Theatre* depuis 2005, et elle faisait partie du processus de conceptualisation du projet de départ.

THE EVERYDAY BECOMES EXTRAORDINARY: CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FAMILY VIOLENCE, THROUGH APPLIED THEATRE

Introduction

When Janet Frame, New Zealand's most distinguished and successful novelist, was diagnosed with a mental illness, she said it was like becoming a child again because people stop talking to you and only talk about you (Frame 1983). In New Zealand, our newspapers, radio and television sets are filled with stories and pictures about children who are the victims of abuse. Adults plan responses and strategies; a whole industry of professionals and bureaucrats agonise over the solutions. Yet, although children are at the centre of the talk, they are absent from the conversation. Over the last four years, Briar O'Connor, Stephen Dallow, Peter O'Connor and others (Evelyn Mann, Julie Watson, Samantha Love, Kiel McNaughton, Kerry Warkia and Stacey Leilua) have had conversations with over 15,000 young people about family violence and child abuse, as part of Everyday Theatre.

Everyday Theatre is part of a wider community development program (McKnight 1996) called 'Everyday Communities', initiated and funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development's Department of Child, Youth and Family. The wider objective of the program is to motivate people to address their own community's issues around child abuse, family violence and neglect through awareness-raising media and public events. Everyday Theatre was devised to allow young people to participate in these discussions, and has toured to over 125 separate schools in many regions of the country. (For more details about Everyday Theatre's conception, see O'Connor, O'Connor and Welsh-Morris 2006.) In this paper, we share some of what we have learnt about families, and also what we have learnt about applied theatre, from those conversations.

In sharing the story of Everyday Theatre with you, we are indebted to Dr Chris Holland of Work and Education, Research and Development Services, whose independent research and evaluation of Everyday Theatre provides much of the structure of our recollections today, and also the direct quotations (Holland 2007). We also acknowledge the role of Professor John O'Toole, who was invited to be guest co-director for the devising of the original performance in April 2004, and Associate Professor Penny Bundy, who came over to act as dramaturge in February 2006. And of course we acknowledge the program funders, the New Zealand Ministry of Social Development's Department of Child, Youth and Family, without whom none of this would be possible.

Capturing the heart of an applied theatre program is difficult because, as John O'Toole notes, drama and theatre leave trails in the memory and they exist most validly in the memory (O'Toole 1996: 150). So here we will use extracts of the script, the words of the young people with whom we have worked, the writing they produced, the interviews Chris Holland undertook with the teachers, students and principals, and our own memory trails, to give a sense of the everyday of Everyday Theatre. No two sessions are ever the same, but the words and the scenarios we present here are from actual classrooms.

The performance

It's 9.00 a.m. Three teacher/actors have their backs turned to the audience and students file into the hall and take their seats in the first three rows. Some teachers sit with the students. The students are aged between 10 and 12. They are orderly; only a few whisper and fidget. In one or two places, giggles erupt, but quickly subside as one of the teacher/actors as a video games master bursts into the space from the rear of the hall ...

BRIAR — AS HELEN — PERFORMS 3 FREEZES, ALL IN SLOW MOTION.

Freeze 1: Seeing Tony and Nicky in distance.

Freeze 2: Helen hits child.

Freeze 3: Helen looks distraught, child holding face, upset.

REPEAT. THE FREEZE CYCLE CONTINUES AS STEPHEN AS GAMES MASTER TT ENTERS.

TT: *Oh, dropped my money. I was really pleased to get here to the arcade this morning, there was no one here, but look at everyone here now, why aren't you lot at work? I've come to play that new Family Game, that's new to this arcade ... My gaming name is Terminator Tane. You'll see my name up on all the scoreboards. It's not my real name, only my mum calls me that. This new game, the Family Game, is the hardest game of all. It's played in virtual reality, you know, where you have to jump right into the game itself to play it. I'm a games master: I've clocked every other game in this arcade. Look, I've won the t-shirt — Games Master. Now I'm just playing for the badge but I just can't seem to get on very far in this game yet. Not many people have been able to.*

FREEZES HAVE REACHED THE HIT.

Look, it's in demo mode. I'm going to press Pause and explain this game to you. There's all the gaming pieces around here. I'll just jump in and introduce the players and their gaming pieces to you. I'll press their speech buttons so you can hear them talk. [PRESS JUMPS IN] See, the one who wears this cardigan, that's the mother, Helen. Let's hear what she's got to say. PRESS.

[HELEN BREAKS OUT OF FREEZE]

HELEN: *And Michael was just standing there, worse than useless.*

HELEN RETURNS TO FREEZE POSITION.

TT: *Here's another one. Look, this beanie. This belongs to Helen's 12-year-old son, Bernie. What does he have to say? PRESS.*

PETER TAKES ROLE AS BERNIE.

BERNIE: *April says I should tell a teacher, but I reckon that's just dumb.*

TT: *Look at all these spare games pieces. These cool shades, they belong to Tony. He's the kids' real dad. He doesn't live with them anymore. This scarf, this belongs to Nicky. She's Tony's girlfriend. This one, this bag, this belongs to April. She's eight years old. She's Bernie's sister and Helen's daughter. And this games piece, this tie, that belongs to Michael. He's the kids' stepfather, he lives with Helen and the kids now. I've played him heaps of times before. If I put this games piece on, it'll start the game up. I'm not sure if it will start in old-fashioned arcade style or real time. I'll put the piece on and see what happens. REWIND, PRESS.*

Supermarket scene

STEPHEN TAKES ROLE AS MICHAEL.

MICHAEL: *Come on, let's get this shopping in the car.* HELEN: *Let's just go home, I've had enough ...* BERNIE: *How come we didn't get our Easter eggs?*

MICHAEL: *Be quiet and help get this stuff in the car and join your sister.* BERNIE: *But it's Easter — everyone gets Easter eggs at Easter.*

HELEN: *We've got no money for the eggs now — we've got to feed you this weekend. Your father was supposed to be getting you Easter eggs, remember that?*

BERNIE: *Oh Mum! That's right, blame the old man for everything, don't you?*
PAUSE. *Hey look! There's Dad now. And Nicky (GIGGLES). Hi Dad!*

HELEN: *Tony? Tony!* MICHAEL: *Oh great.*

BERNIE: Hi Dad. PAUSE — ALL LOOK AT NICKY — No, We were going to stay with you. [PAUSE] Then Mum said we couldn't and she stopped us.

HELEN: You stopped them, Tony!

BERNIE: Can we come over and stay then, Dad? We could have our Easter eggs? And play that cool new computer game?

HELEN: You're supposed to be away ... MICHAEL: Hi Tony, yeah, aren't you ...?

HELEN: Away with the truck this weekend. You said. Working, you said.

BERNIE: That's why we couldn't stay with you and Nicky — that's what Mum said ...

MICHAEL: Yeah Tony, what happened, mate?

HELEN: And you're with HER?

BERNIE: Her name's Nicky, that's her name.

HELEN: I know what her name is.

MICHAEL: Ok, so the work was cancelled, eh? Bad luck ...

BERNIE: [STARTS PUTTING PRESSURE ON HELEN] Come on Mum, we can go to Dad's now ...

HELEN: Bad luck? Bad luck for us ... MICHAEL: Lucky you found Nicky, Hey?

BERNIE: [KEEPS UP PRESSURE] Oh come on, Mum, he won't mind ...

MICHAEL: No, no, mate. Yeah, I understand. Sure, Helen and I will keep the kids ...

HELEN: What do you mean, you understand?

BERNIE: [MORE PESTERING] (LOUDLY) Mum! Come on, we can go ...

MICHAEL: No, it's OK — you and Nicky have a nice weekend...

HELEN STEPS BACK, SWINGS ROUND AND LASHES OUT AT BERNIE. ALL FREEZE.

We all play both the family inside the game, and 'Games Masters' who in turn demonstrate different game aspects to the students. Each Games Master layers the story carefully before the audience. Different buttons demonstrate other moments in the family's life prior to the supermarket scene, so that a fuller picture of both the game and its family is provided. For example, we see the two children two weeks prior to the supermarket incident, in arcade style as trapped inside a game of chance, picked up and dropped by the claw above their heads. Played in real time, the children argue about whether they should tell anyone about the bruises Bernie repeatedly has on his arms. This gives the audience time and opportunity to understand factors leading up to the violence. A student shows awareness of the purpose of the drama and the importance of the abuse scene:

They made it so you could relate to it. It wasn't over the top, like someone being knocked out, it was just like the little things that also happen in families and stuff. (Year 7 student)

By becoming players of a video game, where winning the game is all about helping a family in crisis, students don't work with their own story at any point. They don't have to deal with or reveal their own emotional issues, as they are only playing a computer game. Paradoxically, this allows them to feel their own story too, as this is what they bring to solving the problems in the game: their own understanding of how families become dysfunctional. And winning games is fun; dealing to the emotional mess of your own family in a classroom is not. As one 12-year-old student said, when asked whether he enjoyed the family

game:

No, it's a horrible game, but I'm good at playing it. (Year 8 student)

That young people intensely see themselves as playing a game was demonstrated to me when I was working in a classroom a few weeks ago. During a particularly emotional session, where the group was asking questions of Bernie and talking about the difference between hitting and abuse, an itinerant music teacher interrupted our class. He told a Year 8 boy he had a trumpet lesson. The boy asked whether he could stay in class. The music teacher asked what he was doing. The reply was: 'We're playing this computer game and we have to get to the passwords to get to the next level. I think we're nearly there.'

The tension of wanting to win, and the way that is reinforced by the structure of winning each level, is important to the success of the program. The goal is to achieve each level in an hour, and that time pressure really focuses kids to achieve the goals set for each level.

GAMES MASTER: Well if you are going to play the game, you'll need the level password. I'll give you the first word but after that you'll have to earn them yourself. E V E R Y spells ... Oooh good, they're smart. OK, we'll have to go back to our own arcades to play the next level. I'll take this class. JJ, you take that one ...

Back in the classroom, the desks and chairs are quickly cleared at the teacher/actors' request, leaving an open space in the centre of the room for the work to take place. The teacher is in the classroom, and takes part with the students, allowing the teacher/actors to organise the class.

We begin our session by asking the students to recap the game before we continue. We check that they know all the game players' names and the buttons available to them inside the game. Dr Helen Nicholson, who travelled with the group for three days last year, commented:

What's interesting is that [the games masters] are sufficiently teacherly in their approach. It starts off fairly formally, they use the board, [students] sense that they are teachers ... the students can tell that, if they're sitting at the back they've been noticed. Having that classroom antennae. That starts them off feeling safe, they don't feel like, this is a scary thing they are going to have to do, some scary drama. They feel like they are with some teachers ... And it's very structured. At no time is a student thinking, 'I wonder what I'm supposed to be doing now.' That makes them feel secure in the space. (Holland 2007)

It is as if we remind the students of the wider frame or context in which we are working — the classroom — and let them know we understand not just how the video game works, but how classrooms work too. Over the four years, we have employed a number of teacher/actors to work as games masters. For us as a company, when we are looking for employees to work in our Theatre in Education programs, we are first and foremost interested in finding people who know how classrooms function — teachers who understand and can use drama ahead of actors who want to teach. Jobbing actors, in our experience, don't often make good applied theatre practitioners. They don't have the 'antennae' that Nicholson talks about.

The first game the students play is the story wheel. Students create a 'donut', through which students can explore the narratives of the video game. The donut consists of an outer circle of children facing an inner circle, so that each outer and inner circle child is paired. Students take turns retelling the story several times to their partner from a range of perspectives, beginning with TV reporters, and later including family members, gossiping neighbours and visiting Martians. The game takes around ten minutes to play, and during that time all students busily and excitedly retell the story.

The students are told they have passed this part of the level and will now need to succeed at the next game before they can move on to even harder levels. They are told they need to play hot seating. Many students know the game because a version of hot seating is available on cable television. Few know of it as a teaching or drama convention. Here the students are asked which of the family members they want to talk to. Today, April is chosen.

GAMES MASTER: Right, firstly I'm going to explain to you how this works. Once someone sits in this chair and takes up the games piece: they become the character. There are three buttons at this level. The first one is the Writing Button. That activates as soon as the character sits down, and you hear something that character wrote, sometime in the past, which gives you clues about

the character, some information you don't already know. Directly above the seat is the Help Button. If the person in the hot seat gets stuck, they just need to put up their hand or stand up, and that activates the Help Button. You've all got one over your heads too. And this third button, this is really special. It's called the Truth Button. I know from playing this game in the past that sometimes the person in the hot seat doesn't tell the truth — either they've forgotten, or they remember it a bit differently, or else they downright tell lies. If you think the person in the hot seat isn't telling the whole truth, you can use the Truth Button. But, like all good computer games, there are some rules about this button. You can only use it once on each character, and when someone wants to use the Truth Button, everyone playing the game has to agree to use it. OK?

The hot seat starts in many different ways. Sometimes there is the flood of questions; however, in most classes this is the first time (and tragically likely to be the only time) they have done this. So, often after a hesitant start, questions come fast and thick. A sample of the questions we have been asked include:

- *Do you think your family is all right?*
- *Do you think you are safe with your family?*
- *Do you think your Mum needs help?*
- *Does your mum need help in the ways she acts with you guys?*

After more questions, the students are asked who might know more. It varies every time we play, but when Chris Holland saw us work one day the children chorused 'Bernie', and Bernie takes the hot seat.

PETER IN HOT SEAT AS BERNIE, BRIAR AND STEPHEN AS STUDENTS

STUDENT: *Do you think that you deserve to be hit?*

BERNIE: *I dunno ...*

STUDENT: *Do you think that there was a reason for her to hit you?*

BERNIE: *Sometimes I guess I must annoy her ...*

STUDENT: *Do you still like your mum even though she hits you?*

At this question, 'Bernie' pushes the help button, and the audience helps him to find an answer. 'Do you think Bernie still likes Helen even though she hits him?' Students have always replied: 'Yes'.

In the following few minutes, questions and answers are fired rapidly, and these have included:

- *Have you ever thought of leaving home?*
- *Why doesn't your dad do anything about your mum hitting you guys?*
- *Does your dad hit you?*
- *Do you like your dad's girlfriend?*
- *Would you rather have Nicky as your mum than Helen?*
- *Do you like your step-dad?*
- *Has Michael ever done anything about Helen hitting you?*
- *Does your mum hit Michael?*
- *Have you ever thought about why your dad doesn't want you sometimes?*
- *Do you like having alone time with your dad?*
- *Do you get jealous of Nicky spending too much time with your dad?*

We allow the students space to ask questions, and to build on them to achieve greater depth, leaving trails in our answers which are sometimes picked up, and at other times are lost. The point of the hot seating is to get students to explore the lives, motives and perspectives of the characters.

In making such connections, students are demonstrating their commonsense knowledge of their emotional world, or their emotional wisdom. In the research, I talk about how I think that's why, for many of them, it's a unique experience — that it works because the moment you *give them a message* they turn off. But if it's about how can we set up a space where they can use their emotional wisdom, then they

take off. In sharing this wisdom, they are giving, as much as receiving, powerful messages. Again and again, students brought this wisdom to sessions, sometimes astonishing adults.

I was astounded the first day we did Everyday Theatre. A newly trained games master was in the hot seat as Bernie, and I was assisting the facilitation. Our Bernie wasn't answering many questions except for giving an occasional grunt. I asked the class: 'Why do you think Bernie isn't talking to us?' Someone in the class answered: 'Because he doesn't trust us.' I asked: 'What do you think we could do to make him trust us?' and the answer came quickly: 'We could sing to him.' They asked the teacher whether they could get the class guitar, and once this had been retrieved, they sat close at the feet of Bernie. All together they sang 'Lean on Me'. At the end of the song, they started asking Bernie questions, and the answers now came. A student turned to me and said: 'See, he trusts us now.'

As a piece of theatre, of musical theatre, it was powerfully moving, and as real life it was deeply affecting. In session after session, students show that they are able to link the drama to their own and others' lives, and in that way identify with the pain of the characters.

Not only are they able to link the drama to their own lives, but the safety of double framing enables them to draw from their own lives in shaping the drama and the characters within it. One student later commented that hot seating gave students who might be experiencing family violence the opportunity to ask questions that related to their circumstances.

There was a boy recently who appeared to be taking no interest in the day's events. However, as hot seating continued, he worked his way up to the front of the class to ask 'Helen' if she loved her son Bernie. As Helen, the only answer I could give was 'Yes'. Satisfied with this answer, the boy returned to the back of the classroom, where he again appeared to be disengaged. But the one question he needed answering, most likely for himself, had been answered. On another occasion, Stephen was working in a school health camp. A young boy, placed in the health camp as respite for his family as he suffered from a brain tumour, sat in the hot seat as Helen. When this 'Helen' was asked, 'Do you think you deserve your children?' the young boy answered: 'No, but I deserve a break.'

Now the students are reminded that they can press the truth button once, so they practise what question they might want answered this way. Framed within the game as 'Now find the hardest question you can ask, the one that the person in the hot seat doesn't want you to ask', this has proved, time after time, to be one of the most effective teaching questions we have ever used. Bernie has had to struggle to answer these sorts of questions:

- *Would he swap dad for Michael?*
- *Does he love his dad as much as his mum?*
- *How can he make it stop?*
- *Is he prepared to live the rest of his life having his mum hit him?*

The group decides to ask this last question of Bernie, who looks sad and hangs his head. Then the student who asked this question is invited to take the hot seat as Helen and more questions are fired at her.

STUDENT: How do you feel about your anger?

HELEN: There's nothing wrong with my anger ...

STUDENT: If you felt you had anger, would you go to anger management?

HELEN: I don't have anger management problems.

STUDENT: Are you jealous of Nicky?

HELEN: Of my kids liking her more than me ...

STUDENT: Is that why you got angry at the supermarket?

One of the hardest question moments I remember was when we were at He Mataariki, a school for teen mothers in Whangarei. I was in the hot seat as Tony, the absent father. After nearly 45 minutes of questioning from some rather irate young women, the hardest question was asked of Tony: 'When you are dead, and they are lowering you in your grave, what do you think your children will say about you?'

The following 'hardest question' was asked of Helen by a Year 8 student: 'When your children grow up and hit their children, do you know that you would be responsible for them doing that?'

Over four years, we have played these characters hundreds of times in the hot seat. I feel like I know Tony and Bernie as if they were my own family. And yet each time I sit in the hot seat, I find out more about them and new questions, new possibilities, arise. Watching students play the role I have played for four years can provide startling revelations about the role. Just the other week, I finally understood Michael, at one level symbolic of those parents and step-parents who do nothing as their partners abuse their children. I asked a young boy who had played Michael in the hot seat what he now knew about Michael. He said: 'It's not that he's bad by not telling anyone about what is happening, it's just he's afraid.' I asked what he thought Michael was most afraid of. He said: 'He's afraid if he starts doing something he won't be able to stop it. He's afraid of what the end might be.'

It was at that point I realised that much of Everyday Theatre is about addressing the fear that stops us doing things. It is about creating a safe forum to talk about these issues, but at another level it is — at least for some of our students — about acknowledging the huge fear and risk there is in doing something to stop the abuse that occurs in families. Until that day, I couldn't put my finger on exactly what that meant. But as I looked at this young man who seemed to know more than he should, I said: 'It must take incredible courage to tell someone what is happening in your family, with all the risks involved in that.' To which he replied, 'Braver than you think.'

A principal commented on his appreciation of what happens with his students:

At the beginning, I was thinking it would be a good opportunity for me to go and do some desk-work in the background. After about four minutes, I realised that this was completely different, the way they involved the kids. It was gripping, it was powerful. I could tell by the way they looked at each other, and when they had to ask questions of each other they were really deep.

GAMES MASTER: Well you've done really well at this level. What password have you got so far? The next word is C H I L D. Put them together you have ... Right, now you're ready to play at the next level. If you keep listening to the research, you'll soon become games masters too.

In the second level of the game, the students are invited to work in small groups, to depict a part of the family's life in a freeze frame. In recent months, this has been framed so that the students are asked to list first what they feel are the questions left to answer to win the game. Students come up with a wide variety of ideas, such as needing to find out what happened the day Tony left, or what it looked like the day April was born. They are reminded of the demo mode they saw in the hall and are told that, to win this level, they must answer those questions with a frozen picture of moments in the family's life.

This physicalising of the game often produces freeze frames that reveal a deep understanding of how families function — or dysfunction. Students, as anyone who has used this simple convention will know, are often deeply impressed at the quality of their work. Every time we run it, there are different questions and different answers in the images we see. Each time we work with the images in different ways. With some images, we leave them to stand on their own; with others, we use questioning in role — some tapping for thoughts, others building short improvisations from them. Our goal always is to use the frozen images to answer those difficult questions posed by the students themselves.

For example, one question that has come up several times is: 'What was happening the day April was born?' Stephen gives this example from a class: 'One time I saw this image, Bernie as a four-year-old was with his mother as she cradled her newborn daughter. Tony was off to one side. When tapped for thoughts, it turned out Tony was down at the pub and his thought was, 'Not another one'. Briar recalls her group's interpretation of this image: 'I witnessed a frozen image where Tony was present at April's birth, but the image showed him leering down the neckline of the midwife.'

GAMES MASTER: What is the password so far? H A S — put it together. What have you got?

In this next level, the students are asked to create the writing for the writing button used in the hot-seat level. Blank A5-sized pages are distributed, and students are invited to write about their experience in the family to someone else. They are given prompts, such as 'a family member' and 'a friend'. The teacher/actors state that the students should 'write as though they were one of the people in the drama,

and in the writing, behave in role'. We added this instruction about a year into doing the work. This deliberately quiet and singular activity gives each student a space for reflection after an intellectually, emotionally and physically active morning. Some students lean against a wall or desk, or sit quietly in an available chair. Others lie in the middle of the floor or under desks.

After about five minutes, the notes are handed to the teacher/actors, who sit in chairs on opposite sides of the room and take turns reading each letter. It is not possible from this activity to identify who has written what, or whether every student has written according to something appropriate to the activity. It is clear, however, that in this aesthetically and emotionally powerful reading of their own words, the students are listening intently. These are pieces of writing we have kept:

Mum hit me again ... she said she didn't mean to. I didn't want to make her mad. It's usually Bernie, not me. Sometimes I play with my Barbies and I pretend that they're our family and we live in a castle and we all love each other. I'm the princess and no one hits me. I have lots of friends, so even if I do get hit they will support me.

If you get hurt, even once, then you will be sad for the rest of your life.

Dear diary, How much longer could this go on. All this misery and pain has got to stop. All the hitting must end, but how??? Maybe Bernie & I should tell someone. Maybe they could help stop all this madness. Whatever we need to do, it must be done fast.

Some students understood that a greater pain in their own or classmates' lives was being signalled in the drama. Later, in the focus group sessions, the Year 7 and 8 students talked about their realisation of others' lives:

My parents don't give me too much toys and I reckon they stink, but then if we get shown what it's like for some kids to have a terrible parent and stuff then they'll realise ...

I feel sorry for people to have parents like that. How could you not call the police?

You sort of start to realise what these people are going through, like you've made something up to go with it from your own life.

Students talk about how they could use this learning to help others, of how they can transform what they know into effective action:

Yeah, like you know what they are going through once you've done something like that. It gives you an idea what they're going through and what you could probably do about it ... you certainly come back to the play and think about it ...

Through these comments in the research, the students demonstrated that they understand the learning is not purely intellectual or aesthetic — that it has an effect on them on an emotional level, and is for a real purpose.

GAMES MASTER: Oh well done, you listened to the writing really well, what is the password so far? The next word is H O P E S.

Following this, we usually have morning tea. If the period before morning tea break explored the actions, motivations and feelings of each member in the family violence drama, the period after the break focuses on what actions could be taken to resolve their problems. When the students return to the classroom, they are directed to reform into their groups. They will now be playing 'The Decision Game', the final and most challenging level of the game.

GAMES MASTER: There are five buttons on this sheet. Button number one: Stay with Helen and Michael. Button number two: Go to live with the grandparents. Button Number three: Go to live with Tony and Nicky. Button number four: Split the children up. Decide where each is going to go, and why. Button number five: Go into Child Youth and Family Care, which is most likely a foster home. This decision is going to take place immediately. It's up to you to decide how long it is going to stay in place, and what changes, if any, need to be made.

They huddle down on the floor to make their joint decision. Each group's decision is heard and discussed with the whole class. Students recognise that they are being asked to make complex and important real-life decisions, and that their decisions are being respected as such. The decision is vital for the family, and the import of that decision is reflected in the way in which it determines whether the game is won or not. We have seen students debate, argue and discuss the decision game for up to half an hour. The stakes within the game are too high to make the decision lightly. They are determined to get it right, both for the family and the game. They also understand the effect these kinds of decisions could have on other classmates' real lives:

We were sort of giving advice, and it would sort of help other people like even if you didn't know who they were in the classroom. (Student)

To win the game, students must prove that their choice is right. There are numerous different ways in which this is played out. Ten-second improvisations of different members of the family meeting the night before, ten-second demo mode of pictures revealing the change the decision made, new arcade style games, dance or movement pieces have all been used. It all depends on the group we are working with to determine how we end the game.

In doing the research, Chris Holland saw us ask the students to relay their decisions to members of the family. The students were told that Helen has been informed that a decision had been made, and they now need to explain their decision to Helen in a way that she can accept. Helen is hot seated, and the students sit around her on the floor or in chairs. The students understand the enormous responsibility they have. They explain their decision gently and with empathy and Helen asks questions until she seems to understand and fully accept. The following is one conversation between three boys as social workers, and Helen:

STUDENT: In the week that they're gone you need to control your temper and try and... when they come back, not to hit them? 'Cos they are getting hurt badly and that's one of the reasons why they are going to Tony and Nicky's.

HELEN: I don't think I'll hit them if I get a break.

STUDENT: Maybe you should go to some martial arts like tai chi — it soothes your anger.

The student demonstrates, despite initial giggling from classmates.

HELEN: I've heard about that ... kinda like slow dancing, is it that stuff?

STUDENT: It's to soothe your anger.

There is more giggling.

STUDENT: Doesn't let out anywhere else ... let it out on the air ...

HELEN: So who's going to pay for this, the fancy classes?

The giggling stops.

STUDENT: I could arrange it so it would be free for you 'cos I know you are a very important person.

HELEN: You could arrange for me?

STUDENT: Yes.

HELEN: And they could be free for me ... as long as I don't hit them?

STUDENT: Yes. As long as you don't hit them.

A principal voices his surprise at the quality of student responses:

You don't really give them credit for ... Quite deeply complex — kids have an amazing way of simplifying it.

Finally, the students are invited to offer 'cheats' to the family. In video games, these would be ways that the game could be finished more quickly, or shortcuts that help you navigate the game more easily. In this instance, these turn out to be pieces of advice for the family. So what would be a cheat for each of the family members? Students have offered these:

Nicky, if you want the man, you have to take on the whole package.

For Tony: Take your shades off and face your responsibilities.

A cheat for Michael, the stepdad: Help your wife look after the kids. They're part of your family now too.

A cheat for Helen: Get some help. It's OK to ask for help.

A cheat for the kids: It's OK for you to ask for help too.

Bernie: You're 12. You don't have to be the grownup all the time.

One boy, Zane, said Bernie should ask for help. I asked him: 'Where around here could he go?' Zane's reply: 'Barnardo's. Well, I don't know if they could help him themselves, but that's where we get our clothes from, so they must be people who help other people.' Further discussion with this class revealed that, while the students knew they *should* ask for help, they didn't really know *who* to approach. We fed this back to the local community action group for families, who then created a wallet-sized information card. We were then able to distribute these cards as part of Everyday Theatre to all the people we worked with in that wider community. Along with other must-have information such as cinema and takeaway food phone numbers, a variety of helping agencies are listed. Because of the range of information on them, no one needs feel worried about being seen carrying — or using — one of these cards.

GAMES MASTER: Game over, you win. Well done — you've earned the last password: 'and dreams'.

It is lunchtime. The class teachers are left with an evaluation form to complete and a one- page information sheet suggesting how they might follow up on the drama work. After lunch, we have one more task: We return to the classroom out of role, as teacher/actors. Prizes for winning the game, such as rulers and pencil cases with positive messages on them, are distributed. We answer any questions that the students need answered, and talk about how the story was developed. This provides an important reassurance. It leaves the students absolutely sure that the drama was only a story, while at the same time reinforcing that issues in the drama are real in people's lives, including the lives of the teacher/actors.

We talk about applied drama, and the job we do. For some students, this tells them that they can use the experiences in their lives to create similar powerful work. This is an exciting possibility to think about for the future.

The last four years have shown us hundreds of classrooms where young people spend most of their days in silence. What we do isn't unusual because it's drama, but because we are listening to young people talk. As our country focuses on literacy and numeracy, I am reminded of how John O'Toole once described oracy as 'the forgotten basic' (O'Toole 1991). Young people are used to answering questions when the answer is already known. The greatest success, day by day, of Everyday Theatre, is seeing young people work towards answers, often tentatively initially, but then with growing confidence as they sense they might know something that wasn't delivered to them by their teacher. Young people, it seems to us, are used to school activities which have little or no significance to them. They relish the opportunity to not endlessly prepare for the future, but to question the present. We meet children who tell us they enjoy Everyday Theatre because it's hard work and they don't usually do hard things at school. They often can't believe their luck that there are some adults who want to talk *with* them about their worlds rather than talk *about* them.

And what are some of the things I have been taught by these young people about families?

- that it takes incredible bravery to say something when things go wrong in your family;
- that singing is a way to connect and to make those who are scared trust you;

- that sometimes saying you need to tell someone is worthless advice when you don't have anyone to tell;
- that you still love your mum even if she hits you;
- that you need to know your mum still loves you even if she hits you;
- that the hardest question I could be asked as a dad was 'what would my children remember me for when I'm dead?'

Letters we have received recently from young people we work with thank us by saying:

Making us do acting and freeze framing was fun, it was better than putting us to sleep

I just want to say thank you for helping us solve problems by acting, speaking and especially doing it for real

It was really cool winning the game. I was so interested I even listened.

In Northampton a few years ago, Dorothy Heathcote asked me: 'So in New Zealand schools, do young people do things that matter? And in doing that do they know they matter too?' In considering the work we do, whether in communities or in schools, the notion that it matters that we did it gives credibility to the idea that Every Child Has Hope and Dreams.

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