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POWER IN THEIR HANDS: THE OUTCOMES OF THE ACTING AGAINST BULLYING RESEARCH PROJECT

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Abstract

Bullying in schools is an ongoing issue of international concern and, despite more than three decades of concerted attempts in many countries to deal with it, extensive research continues to reveal increasing levels of persistent bullying — with serious consequences for students — in schools worldwide. This article reports on the outcomes of an innovative applied theatre research project that, over a decade, used a combination of process drama and forum theatre interwoven with peer teaching to empower students of all ages to manage the bullying situations they encounter in their schools. Earlier phases of this project were reported on in the *Applied Theatre Researcher*, vol. 3 (O'Toole and Burton, 2002). The more recent successful outcomes of the project and the constraints and problems encountered in the research are analysed here.

Résumé

L'intimidation dans les écoles est un sujet contemporain d'ampleur internationale et, malgré plus de trois décennies de tentatives concertées dans de nombreux pays pour y faire face, des recherches approfondies continuent à révéler des niveaux croissants d'intimidation persistante — avec des conséquences sérieuses pour les étudiants — dans des écoles dans le monde entier. Cet article traite des résultats d'un projet de recherche innovateur en theater appliqué qui a utilisé, pendant une décennie, une combinaison de théâtre de processus et de théâtre de forum entremêlé avec l'enseignement entre pairs pour rendre les étudiants de tous âges plus forts pour mieux gérer les situations d'intimidation qu'ils rencontrent dans leurs écoles. Les phases précédentes de ce projet furent traitées dans la revue *Applied Theatre Researcher*, vol. 3 (O'Toole et Burton, 2002). Les résultats positifs récents du projet ainsi que les limitations et difficultés rencontrées au cours de la recherche sont analysés ici.

Resumen

La intimidación en los colegios sigue siendo una preocupación internacional y, a pesar de más de tres décadas de intentos concertados en muchos países de hacer frente a la misma, las investigaciones exhaustivas continúan revelando niveles crecientes de intimidación persistentes — con graves consecuencias para los estudiantes — en colegios alrededor del mundo. Este artículo informa sobre los resultados de un proyecto innovativo de investigación teatral aplicada que, durante una década, utilizó una combinación del proceso de drama y teatro-foro entrelazado con enseñanza grupal para capacitar a los estudiantes de todas las edades a manejar las situaciones de intimidación que encuentren en sus colegios. En el '*Applied Theatre Researcher*' (*Investigador de Teatro Aplicado*), vol. 3^o (O'Toole y Burton, 2002) se informó acerca de etapas anteriores del mismo proyecto. Aquí se analizan los resultados fructuosos más recientes del proyecto así como limitaciones y problemas encontrados durante la investigación.

Authors' biographies

Professor Bruce Burton has an international reputation as a drama educator and has been a Visiting Professor at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom and Borås University in Sweden, and Director

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Professor John O'Toole is a world leader in drama education, holding the first Australian Chair in Arts Education at Melbourne University. He was a Chief Investigator on the decade-long DRACON research program. He is the co-editor of the *ATR/IDEA Journal* and has written a number of well-known scholarly books and texts.

Biographies des auteurs

Professeur Bruce Burton a acquis une réputation internationale en tant qu'enseignant de théâtre. Il a été Professeur à l'Université de Cambridge au Royaume-Uni et à l'Université de Borås en Suède, et Directeur du secrétariat d'IDEA. Il est l'auteur de huit livres. Il a reçu six importantes bourses de recherche du Conseil de recherche australien entre 2000 et 2009. En 2007 il a gagné le Prix national australien pour l'Enseignement universitaire en Sciences humaines et en Lettres.

Professeur John O'Toole est une personnalité internationalement reconnue dans l'éducation théâtrale, et tient la chaire d'éducation des arts à l'Université de Melbourne. Il était l'un des chercheurs principaux durant le programme de recherche DRACON, durant une décennie. Il est le coéditeur de *ATR/IDEA Journal* et a écrit de nombreux livres et textes académiques connus.

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El Catedrático Bruce Burton es internacionalmente reconocido como educador dramático y ha sido Profesor visitante en la Universidad de Cambridge en el Reino Unido y en la Universidad de Borås en Suecia, así como el Director de la Secretaría de IDEA. Es autor de ocho libros. Recibió, entre el 2.000 y el 2.009, seis becas significantes del Consejo Australiano de Investigación. En el 2.007 ganó el Premio Nacional Australiano de Enseñanza Universitaria en Humanidades y las Artes.

El Catedrático John O'Toole es un líder mundial en la educación dramática, teniendo la primera Cátedra Australiana en Education del Arte de la Universidad de Melbourne. Ha sido el investigador principal de DRACON, un programa de investigación de diez años. Es coeditor del '*ATR/IDEA Journal*' y autor de un número de conocidos libros y textos académicos.

POWER IN THEIR HANDS: THE OUTCOMES OF THE ACTING AGAINST BULLYING RESEARCH PROJECT

Introduction

Surveys and overviews conducted in the United Kingdom, Europe, Canada, Australia and New Zealand during the past decade have consistently identified bullying as a major concern in schools. A meta-evaluation of anti-bullying programs undertaken by Rigby (2002) suggests that one child in six is bullied on a weekly basis. Whitted and Dupper (2005) assert that bullying is the most prevalent form of low-level violence in schools today and, if left unchecked, it can lead to more serious forms of violence. In their overview of bullying, Smokowski and Kopasz (2005) found that it affected approximately one in three children in US schools.

An international survey of attempts to deal with bullying in schools during the past twenty years (Smith et al. 2004) identifies only limited success, and this is confirmed by recent research in the United States (Roberts 2006), which continues to indicate that bullying is the most significant behavioural problem confronting schools.

Similarly, a British Council survey (Roman 2008) revealed that 46 per cent of UK school children were seriously concerned about bullying. The most recent report on bullying in Australia, commissioned by the federal government and released in 2009, found that '1 in 4 children from Year 4 to Year 9 say they are bullied at least every few weeks ... and half of all students in Year 9 are both bullied and bully others' (McDougall and Chilcott 2009: 2).

The apparent increase in bullying behaviour revealed in the most recent research is partly due to the recent intense focus on bullying by the education sector and by researchers, particularly the identification of covert or hidden relational aggression, amongst adolescent girls as a major form of bullying (Leenaars et al. 2008). Another factor in the recorded increase in bullying in schools has been the rapid rise in cyber-bullying and the consequent attention paid to it (Kowalski et al. 2007).

This intense concern with bullying in schools is not limited to students or school systems alone. A 2007 national survey in Australia found that parents give anti-bullying policies a higher priority than academic standards when deciding on a secondary school for their children. Almost 75 per cent stated that it was essential for a high school to have an anti-bullying policy, which was almost twice the 45 per cent who placed the same emphasis on high academic standards and 43 per cent who were most concerned with outstanding final-year results (Australian Schools Directory 2007).

Addressing the issue

The *Acting Against Bullying* project was the final stage of ten years of applied theatre research into conflict and bullying in schools. The project began as collaboration between the Australian researchers and an international research program into cultural conflict in schools, with partners in Sweden and Malaysia. This was titled DRACON by the Swedish organisers — conflating the two words 'drama' and 'conflict' (Lofgren and Malm 2005). Established by researchers in conflict resolution at the Peace and Development Institute at Gothenburg University in Sweden, the DRACON program was originally focused on the use of drama in schools in a range of different cultures, with the aim of resolving inter-cultural conflict between students. As the program developed in the three different countries, a number of different concepts, techniques and approaches were trialled, and the focus shifted from cultural conflict to all forms of conflict, including bullying.

The final phase of the DRACON project in Australia, *Acting Against Bullying*, was funded by an Australian Research Council grant and conducted by the authors in partnership with Education Queensland, the state education department. The study involved three applied theatre action research phases, each one a year in duration. The project was progressively implemented in more than 20 primary and secondary schools, urban and regional. The funded research component of the project finished in 2006, but a number of the subject schools continue to run the program in its final form on an annual basis, while other schools have taken up the initiative and implemented the program themselves in their own ways. The program is currently (2009–10) being implemented fully in a large all-girls' school in Brisbane, focusing specifically on relational aggression that uses covert means such as exclusion, stigmatisation and cyber-bullying.

The research question

The primary research question that informed the action research was:

Is it possible to develop an ongoing, whole-school program using applied theatre that will effectively address the issue of bullying in schools?

The research outcomes of the project are reported in detail later in this paper. The key findings include a significant increase in awareness about the nature and consequences of bullying amongst both students and teachers, observable declines in the amount of bullying behaviour in the schools involved, increased self-confidence and self-esteem amongst those being bullied, and significant changes in attitudes and behaviour. The data clearly indicates that the effectiveness of the project depends on the combination of process drama and forum theatre in conjunction with cross-age peer teaching.

Theory

As bullying in schools increasingly has attracted significant research attention worldwide over the last decade, the use of drama as a technique to explore and address bullying has informed a number of research projects and anti-bullying programs, such as the Sticks and Stones program in Eire (www.sticksandstonesireland.com/index.html), which uses role play and forum theatre to address bullying in schools. The action research reported in this article incorporated major, international research findings about the use of key drama approaches such as the use of 'psycho-educational' drama by Beale and Scott (2001), utilising role-play to depict the negative consequences of the various forms of bullying, and then informing students about how they might overcome bullying's adverse effects.

The innovative features that emerged from the Acting Against Bullying research were the development of an effective style of theatre performance to address bullying (Enhanced Forum Theatre) and the integration of peer teaching and drama together as the core of the entire project.

The evolution of the drama forms in the project

Various dramatic techniques have been used in recent international anti-bullying research and in school-based programs to allow students to explore bullying in a safe, fictional environment. There is compelling evidence that dramatic enactment can be effective in enabling students of all ages to understand and deal with bullying (Nolte 2000; Smith & Ananiadou 2003; Parsons 2005; Belliveau 2007; Zins et al 2007). There is also evidence that students themselves prefer the use of drama to other approaches in anti-bullying programs (Crothers et al. 2006). In that study, 285 middle-school students in the United States were surveyed to obtain their preferences regarding anti-bullying intervention strategies from a choice of fifteen strategies. Strategies involving role-play and teacher facilitation of activities addressing bullying were amongst the seven chosen as always or most often successful.

Over the ten years of the DRACON project, several educational drama and theatre forms were developed and refined. Those drama strategies which emerged as most successful in providing students with a safe and creative structure for effectively investigating and managing bullying were based on improvisation using process drama, based on forms of mainly naturalistic role-play (O'Neill 1995) and Forum Theatre, based on the work of Augusto Boal (1979). By 1999, these two genres were incorporated into the Acting Against Bullying research as the dramatic basis of the program, and were further tested and refined.

Forum Theatre

As many readers of this journal know, Forum Theatre has proved particularly useful for addressing a range of issues in the developing world, and is used to explore situations of oppression as a prelude to providing the audience with agency to face the oppression (Freire 1973). Practitioners of Theatre for Development, particularly in Africa, use Forum Theatre to empower rural villagers and the urban poor to understand and address the problems that confront them, including poverty, the consequences of war, AIDS, and social and political injustice (Nogueira 2002). In Boal's 'classic' Forum Theatre, a group of actors dramatises an incident of oppression reported to the actors by the audience, then plays it through a number of times, giving members of the audience the opportunity to step into the improvised scene as 'spect-actors', but only as the oppressed protagonist, in order to try and change or ameliorate the oppression. The scene proceeds in improvised fashion until the oppression is countered, the intervention fails or the scene breaks down as inauthentic (known as 'magic'). Discussion is handled by a master of

ceremonies known as *The Joker*, who can also adapt the scene or suggest alternative interventions. In the three years of the project exploring conflict in schools in New South Wales, now called *Cooling Conflict*, Forum Theatre proved a useful device for students to identify and explore conflict and bullying, though from the start two major changes were made. Since the project taught students that there were three distinct stages to a developing conflict situation — latent, emerging and manifest — the performance was constructed in three scenes representing those stages. In addition, during the interventions audience members were invited to step in as any character, rather than just the protagonist, to explore the opportunities that antagonists and bystanders also had to help ameliorate conflict and bullying.

Process drama

Again, as many readers will be aware, process drama is entirely differently structured from forum theatre. More directly descended from children's dramatic play than adult theatre, it involves a reconfiguration of the usual role and relationship of 'actor', 'director', 'playwright' and 'audience'. The essential characteristic of process drama is that it is not for performance, but for experiencing and/or exploring a dramatic (fictional) situation and context (Bolton 1992). The participants classically start from a basis of experiential role-play — 'building belief' sufficient to enacting naturalistically how they might respond themselves in that situation. To this is added a further set of distancing and exploration techniques mainly derived from theatrical rehearsal, performance and games, now usually called 'conventions' (O'Toole 1992; O'Neill 1995).

After three years of using parallel classes to compare the efficacy of these two different dramatic approaches, a survey of participant teachers and students (most of whom had experienced one form, a few both) strongly confirmed our observations that each had signal strengths and a significant weakness. Both enabled the students to identify the stages of conflict and bullying, as well as some of the causes and effects, and to gain a sense of agency in managing and de-escalating conflicts. Forum Theatre was perceived as being very accessible and quickly comprehensible, and the basic skills needed were acquired quickly and managed; however, participants were sometimes frustrated because it provided only a relatively superficial understanding of the conflicts involved, and a very limited range of options (by the nature of the form providing little background information and demanding immediate intervention in conflict situations — both of which might often be inappropriate in conflict management).

Process drama permitted much deeper understanding of the conflict and could incorporate both contextual and psychological backgrounding within its structure, and a much wider range of options for the protagonists that could be explored through the role-play techniques. However, process drama was perceived as much more difficult, involving first a significant head shift for participants not skilled in drama or improvisation to get away from the concept of 'acting' for an audience. It was also seen as difficult to structure effectively, demanding sophisticated play-making and leadership skills.

Enhanced Forum Theatre

Process drama and Forum Theatre were therefore integrated through the action research into an innovative performance model, *Enhanced Forum Theatre (EFT)*. This is based on the three-scene version of Forum Theatre, which participants can grasp readily, but with some key strategies from process drama added. The most important of these happens in the preparation of the forum performance where, instead of just taking a participant story, the actors work through a range of process drama conventions to identify an appropriate story from real life, fictionalise it in order to make it safe and usable, and also increase its complexity to provide a challenging, authentic and multi-layered situation of conflict with which the audience of spect-actors can deal. During the performances themselves, other process drama techniques are used, notably giving the audience the opportunity to 'hot-seat' the characters, and to freeze the enactment in order to 'thought-track' the characters (listen to their inner voices at any particular moment) — both of these used in order to discover more about their motives and instincts. Following a series of inconclusive interventions (the usual pattern), the audience is given a new task: 'Scene four', conducted in groups to identify the character(s) who might be best placed to de-escalate the conflict, and an occasion outside the three scenes presented where this might occur. The groups brief the actors to try it out in improvised role-play, or demonstrate it themselves.

This blend of genres has had a major effect on the dynamics of the whole teaching encounter, as invariably the audience becomes progressively more engaged in reflective and critical discussion —

sometimes eventually forgetting and abandoning the drama entirely. Through this, the research shows, their knowledge about conflict and bullying becomes much more explicit — they become personally engaged. The research also indicates that they feel more confident about having the know-how to address conflict and bullying. Further detail about the specific techniques used can be found in the book discussing the project (O’Toole et al. 2005).

The power of peer teaching

Peer teaching emerged from the research as a major positive factor in facilitating the learning of different age groups and in creating strong mentoring relationships between students of different ages, particularly when used in conjunction with process drama and enhanced forum theatre.

Extensive research has identified peer teaching as a particularly potent approach to stimulating learning in schools. Falchikov (2001) argues that when students take responsibility for their own learning and use innovative methods to do so, motivation increases and learning escalates, while Gordon (2005) states that the most conducive environment for learning is an interactive and cooperative one, characterised by dialogue. Research by Morrison et al. (2006) revealed that peer teaching enhances the self-esteem and self-confidence of students who are peer tutors. Rubin and Herbert (1998: 11) assert that the results of their study show peer teaching also increases social and intellectual awareness.

Researchers who have focused on the impact of peer teaching on those being taught claim that this form of learning is superior in a number of ways to formal teacher instruction (Forsyth and McMillan 1991; Gordon 2005). In their study of peer tutoring, Goodlad and Hirst (1989: 39) found that students with low academic achievement and learning difficulties who were peer taught showed much higher levels of literacy and comprehension, and no significant differences in behaviour compared with similar students receiving traditional, teacher-centred instruction. In the Acting Against Bullying research, students consistently rated the experience of being taught by older students as one of the most enjoyable and effective parts of the project for them, and teacher and researcher observation indicated that they were strongly motivated to learn (Burton 2008: 145).

Methods

The action research structure

The three action research cycles that comprised the project, each taking a year to complete, experimented with the use of applied theatre to develop a whole-school anti-bullying program that was disseminated within the standard school curriculum. The first stage of the action research cycle began in each school with a senior secondary class teacher introducing the students through drama to a simple set of concepts and definitions about the nature and consequences of bullying. This cognitive understanding and a range of bullying management techniques were further explored through Enhanced Forum Theatre. Once the senior secondary class had acquired a clear understanding of the nature of bullying and had experimented through the drama work with identifying and managing its causes and consequences, the second stage followed with groups of senior students teaching a number of younger classes in their school, using the same conceptual framework and enactment strategies.

This peer teaching took place across a range of curriculum areas, so that the program was seen as cross-curricular. These typically included English, social studies, and health and physical education, but occasionally took in other subjects such as Indigenous studies, science and even maths. With the help of their classroom teachers and the older students, the younger secondary school classes reinforced their understanding of bullying and the use of drama to explore strategies to deal with it, first through taking part as spect-actors in the EFT provided by their elder peers, then in groups preparing their own EFT for use with younger students. In stage three, these students — known appropriately as ‘first-relay’ classes — relayed what they had learned to classes in the local primary schools. Stage four followed, with those students in the primary schools continuing the same process throughout their schools (as ‘second-relay’, ‘third-relay’ classes, etc). The findings from the completed cycle in each school then informed the next year’s cycle in that school. Data and findings from the individual school cycles were not collated and fed from one school site to another at this point, in order to preserve the contextual distinctness of the sites.

Data-gathering

Choosing the research sites was a complex process involving the team in lengthy discussions with the

local education authority (our industry partner), sometimes its regional or local officers and agents from the schools identified. This was sometimes the principal, in which case the successive negotiations were from the top down, to gain the interest and enthusiasm of key staff members (as mere compliance or acquiescence of key staff proved insufficient to generate the momentum for the program). Sometimes a keen drama or other leading teacher might be contacted or hear of the program, and start the process the other way round (again, a real commitment was needed from the school management, not just acquiescence). Few long-term mistakes were made, particularly at the secondary level, though key staff mobility — leaving or taking up other posts in the school — was a regular problem. Once the appropriate research sites had been chosen, the data-gathering for the first cycle began with a careful scoping of the particular context of the school with special reference to its behaviour management plans and incidence of bullying profiles. This scoping proved difficult and in places unsatisfactory, owing to the scarcity and inconsistent nature of the available baseline data. For instance, Queensland schools have varying and sometimes erratic methods of identifying and recording bullying incidents, and varying confidentiality procedures.

To provide baseline data on the incidence and nature of bullying in the research schools, pre- and post-questionnaires were administered to participant students and teachers, and over three hundred questionnaires were gathered and analysed.

In each cycle, interviews were conducted with focus groups of participant students from all year levels in each school, and summative one-on-one interviews were conducted with selected students and their class teachers. A number of students, especially in the high schools, wrote reflective journals. These data sets were collected during each of the three years of the Acting Against Bullying action research in four high schools and their neighbouring primary schools, along with ancillary data which are described below. Throughout, the research complied with ethical guidelines approved by the university and industry partner, which were themselves informed by the guidelines and experience that had been refined in the previous seven years of the DRACON research.

Results

The research findings from each action research cycle, and from the summative data collection, clearly and consistently revealed significant impacts on major manifestations of bullying in the subject schools. These impacts involved an increase in awareness about bullying itself, and positive changes in the attitudes and behaviours of bullies, those being bullied and bystanders. See figures and examples of qualitative data below.

Extensive researcher and teacher observations, and the use of questionnaires and interview data, also consistently revealed that students felt they were able to both empathise with students being bullied and understand the behaviour of bullies when they had the opportunity to experiment within the drama and to intervene in role as both parties. Furthermore, the great majority of students involved in the Acting Against Bullying project over the three final formal years of the project identified that the third party, the bystander, usually had the most opportunities for de-escalating the situation and was therefore crucial in a bullying situation. In Enhanced Forum Theatre performances, students intervened more often as bystanders than as bullies and bullied combined.

Bullying awareness

Over 90 per cent of the 216 secondary school students involved in Acting Against Bullying who were surveyed during the final two years of the program were able to define bullying, identify the three types of people involved in bullying (bullies, bullied and bystanders) and list the stages (latent, emerging and manifest).

It's changed because I now know and understand a lot more about bullying. I am now aware of the three stages ... all the different forms of bullying, where it may come from and what can come from it. (Year 9 student)

It's definitely heightened my Year 11s' awareness of the mechanics of bullying ... they were quite good at trying to use the forum theatre process to try and alleviate that bullying — try to stop the oppression of the victim by the bully. (Year 11 teacher)

In the final surveys and questionnaires, 87.2 per cent of all students involved in the project stated that they were more able to recognise when bullying was taking place, and 87.1 per cent believed that bullying

could be de-escalated or stopped. Asked if they were more likely to do something in response to a bullying situation in order to de-escalate or end it, 64 per cent of all students involved in the program replied 'Yes' and 33 per cent said they were not sure; only 3 per cent responded negatively. Asked 'Have you learnt how to manage bullying situations that you are involved in (as the person doing the bullying, the person being bullied or a bystander) better?'

70.3 per cent of students replied positively, 19.3 per cent stated they were unsure and only 10.4 per cent responded negatively.

The bully no longer holds the balance of power and by simply reminding the groups about the power of the bystander they continue to deny the bully that power and that opportunity. (Year 9 teacher)

When interviewed, a majority of teachers indicated that they had been empowered by their participation on the program, and were able to recognise bullying much more clearly, including the different types of bullying behaviour and the differences between genders. Over 80 per cent of teachers believed that the program should be a part of a whole-school anti-bullying program in their schools.

I feel this opened my eyes as to how students see different situations and the approach they were likely to take — being silent. This helped students to think of alternatives rather than silence being more like an answer to them. (Year 11 teacher)

Older students in particular demonstrated both concern and understanding about the impact of bullying, and also about coping with it.

Bullying can cause major physical and psychological damage. The victims in a bullying situation can suffer more than people realise. These people have the power to stop the bullying. If they don't let themselves be bullied or give the bully power it may stop. (Year 11 student)

In a number of the primary schools where the Acting Against Bullying program was implemented successfully from the neighbourhood secondary school, teachers were able to identify a greater awareness in their students of the nature of bullying and their greater confidence in being able to deal with it.

I think all students got to identify what constitutes a bullying situation and the different phases of bullying. For them to actually identify these phases and realise what bullying is, they realised they had been bullied in the past and maybe if they can catch it at a certain stage that they have been empowered with the ability to do something about it other than just taking it. (Primary teacher)

The impact on bullies in real life

As students developed an understanding of the nature and causes of bullying, their awareness of consequences and of their own role in creating consequences increased significantly. This was particularly true of students who had been responsible for bullying behaviour.

My attitude to everything's changed now; but I used to be a bit of a bully. I used to bully the younger kids who were in a group, but now I understand that, 'Hey it's not right. I shouldn't be doing this.' I've played the bully, I've played the bullied person — I know how they felt. So I try to be nicer to those people and generally we're getting along well now. (Year 9 student)

Perhaps the most potent experience for those students who were bullies when the program began was the role reversal that occurred when they portrayed the characters of students being bullied, both in improvisations and in the Enhanced Forum Theatre performances.

The interesting thing that we come across is the students who tend to be bullies, when they are acting out the scenarios, have taken sometimes the role of the bullied and it's very interesting to then speak to them about that role afterwards and they say, 'Yeah I think I know now, miss, how they feel and I know that it probably isn't a real cool thing to do.' (Year 10 teacher)

Teachers generally agreed they saw positive changes in the more problematic students' attitudes towards bullying after they had participated in the program. Interestingly, students who had previously displayed bullying tendencies often became the leading advocates of the program during the peer-teaching sessions.

Impact on students being bullied in real life

Having a conceptual understanding of the nature of bullying and the experience of experimenting with managing bullying situations proved to be effective in empowering students who were being bullied to take more responsibility for their situations. Both teachers and students identified this empowerment in children who were being bullied, and inevitably our classes contained youngsters who were currently being, or had been, bullied and bullies as well as bystanders — and many who were able to recognise that they had been both, or all three on different occasions.

By understanding the process of bullying, the bullied students were empowered to keep resisting the bullies and to seek support from bystanders. The other students realise their power position as a bystander and this also empowered them. I have seen a few cases of extreme bullying turn around through this. (Year 9 teacher)

It's definitely made my relationships stronger with the people in my class doing the project with me. Like, this one girl I felt very intimidated by her and we actually had to do a play together and she would bully me and then we had to swap the role around so we both know where each other stood then and now we're actually friends. (Year 9 student)

Impact on bystanders

The conceptual framework of the Acting Against Bullying research particularly emphasised the role of the bystander. When exploring bullying situations through drama, the students portraying bystanders were encouraged to experiment with strategies to de-escalate the bullying. In a survey of the 124 secondary school students involved in the program in three schools in 2005, 59 per cent identified the bystander as the person most likely to change a bullying situation, while only 20 per cent named teachers and 14 per cent the bully or the bullied.

I know you can actually make a difference by stepping in, like a bystander can actually stop the people fighting, understand what the people are doing. They can solve it. (Year 8 student)

The students involved in the program in four high schools in the previous year were asked at the end of the year what they were now most likely to do as a bystander in a bullying situation. Over 45 per cent stated that they would intervene to try to de-escalate the bullying, 38.5 per cent said they would report to someone in authority, while 10.5 per cent said they would walk away and only 1 per cent indicated that they would participate in the bullying — an interesting tiny percentage itself, but the team felt that following that up would put unethical pressure on those respondents.

I have stopped becoming a silent bystander and have intervened more. (Year 8 student)

If my friends are bullying, I tell them to stop being so mean or I just don't participate. (Year 9 student)

Impact of peer teaching.

The outcomes of the Acting Against Bullying research consistently indicate that students — especially secondary school students — are far more likely to become competent at dealing with bullying in their own lives if they are empowered to do so by confronting it through drama and then teaching what they have learned to their peers.

I really liked the fact that we can teach them — and despite the teacher being there, students were more relaxed and willing to open up and stuff like that and I really liked that fact. I just liked the fact that we could really make a change even though we are just students — we can make the change for the next students coming into the high school. (Year 9 student)

Impact of Enhanced Forum Theatre

Enhanced Forum Theatre performances consistently demonstrated significant improvement in the students' ability to understand the causes of the behaviour being enacted in the performance when hot-seating was used. There were also significant increases in the ability of the audience members who intervened after thought-tracking to make valid and authentic changes to the behaviour of those involved in the conflict being represented, and to empathise more fully with people involved in bullying situations.

Limitations and constraints

Baseline data

The lack of reliable statistical information on bullying within individual schools was a fundamental problem throughout the research when it came to measuring the impact of the use of the drama and peer teaching. Only one of the high schools involved kept comprehensive records of incidences of reported bullying, and this only commenced after the research had begun. However, the project's numerous questionnaires provided extensive information about behaviour related to bullying, and confirmed the wealth of overwhelmingly corroborative anecdotal evidence provided by the other data, such as the interviews and focus groups of both students and teachers, and the field-notes and journals of the research coordinator and all other parties.

Systemic support

At a systems level, a lack of continuity in management within the participating state education department made effective communications and the provision of ongoing support for the schools and teachers involved in the research very difficult to sustain.

It became clear by the end of the first annual cycle that, not surprisingly, the teachers needed the trained in-service support which the research coordinator provided to give them understanding, confidence, basic drama skills and ownership of the program, as well as a level of stability that transcended the endemic staffing upheavals. This level of support proved essential to sustain the program once the research phase was over.

Implementing the program across schools

In the second cycle, at the suggestion of a focus group comprising participating primary school principals, the program was implemented directly in five schools without receiving any peer teaching from the neighbourhood secondary schools. There were both educational and logistical reasons for this.

Implemented normally, by the time the peer teaching reached the primary schools and activated them in the project, it was already over halfway through the academic year, and these schools had been waiting, unable to start. Moreover, indications from other cycles showed that the program was much easier to implement in terms of timetabling in primary schools than secondary schools. The capability of middle school students in relay classes to take a highly capable and competent lead in peer teaching had long since been demonstrated in earlier cycles, and the research team was interested to see whether they could take a lead as key classes. A potential snag was that few of the primary schools used drama and none had a drama specialist (unlike the secondary schools, where a drama-trained teacher involved in at least the key class was a requirement for participation). Nevertheless, the primary principals were so enthusiastic and emphatic about their ability to support the program that we began it in five of those schools.

However, as we had feared, it proved difficult to establish the program in primary schools using this model. The experiment was not expanded in the third cycle, and by the time the research finished, none of the five schools was still running the program, nor had a whole-school approach to bullying using drama been established. The experiment provided useful data, however, which revealed that many primary teachers lacked confidence in using the drama techniques, and this was the main reason for the limited application and even more limited sustainability of the project. A number were also wary of overtly addressing bullying in their classrooms, sometimes for fear of exacerbating rather than ameliorating the incidence of real bullying. Some of those expressed or intimated to the research team what we interpreted as an atavistic fear of drama, much like that expressed by Plato (*Republic*, Book 3), that imitating evil behaviour in a dramatic fiction was likely to encourage the participants to practise it in real life. By comparison, the administrators, teachers and students in the primary schools surveyed all acknowledged that they were more motivated and felt more competent to engage in the program when it was introduced by a high school.

Conclusions

The summative evidence from action research clearly indicates that the combination of peer teaching and Enhanced Forum Theatre can assist individual students to deal more effectively with bullying in their own

lives.

Other significant evidence of the positive impact of the action research on the schools themselves continues to emerge in schools where the program has effectively become established. One school initially became involved in the research in 2003, as a result of an ongoing series of serious bullying incidents in the school that attracted the attention of the state education department and the press. During the period 2004–08, the Acting Against Bullying program was established in the school as the centre of their behaviour management program. In this period, the school began to keep accurate records of the incidence and seriousness of bullying behaviour throughout the school. In the past two years, the school records have indicated a significant decline in reported bullying, and the teachers and school management report the disappearance of major bullying incidents as a behaviour problem. Unfortunately, the project has not been able to access sufficient ongoing funding to examine this cheering phenomenon more closely.

The data from all cycles of the project from the inception of primary peer teaching in 1999 consistently indicates that students as young as eight years old found no difficulty in remembering the parties to bullying and the terminology of latent, emerging and manifest bullying. Early primary students involved in the research were also able to describe the nature of each party to bullying and the key features of each of the three stages, and could discuss their representation in specific scenes in improvised plays they created or watched.

The more than 300 questionnaires administered during the three years of the research recorded a consistent rate of 99 per cent in students' ability to remember and define the three stages of bullying, and identify these stages in their own drama work within the project and beyond. As a result, a clear outcome of the research has been that almost all students recognised the need to intervene in bullying before it became manifest, and students were able to articulate a valid understanding of the nature and implications of bullying. The majority of students surveyed also identified the bystander as being the party most able to intervene to change a bullying situation.

Confirmatory evidence is supplied by the longitudinal data collected in Sydney in 2007 as part of an ongoing evaluation of the outcomes of the earlier Cooling Conflict project carried out by the research team, and managed by the Industry partner, the Multicultural Programs Unit of the New South Wales Department of Education and Training. This data indicates significant positive changes in the whole culture of some schools running the program for five years or more, with improved student relationships and a decline in the incidence of conflict in schools.

The current implementation of the Acting Against Bullying program in a large, all-girls school has also produced further provisional evidence that the combination of drama and peer teaching is equally effective in empowering older adolescent girls to deal with the complex and often invisible manifestations of relational aggression. The early data from the project suggest that making this hidden form of behaviour visible through improvisation and enhanced Forum Theatre is particularly appropriate as a strategy in reducing the incidence of covert bullying.

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