

**CYCLES OF HARMONY: Action research into the effects of drama on conflict management in schools**

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**Abstract:**

This paper follows the action research position paper 'Rough Treatment: teaching conflict management through drama' published in Teaching Education Vol 9.1. This paper describes the first five years of an ongoing action research project (1996-2000) investigating the possibilities of using a combination of drama techniques and peer teaching on a whole-school basis to help school students explore the causes of conflict, and develop strategies for conflict prevention and mediation. The project, which took place in a Brisbane Secondary School, then a rural school in New South Wales, and now in four city schools in Sydney, is part of a larger international study, the DRACON Project, co-ordinated by the Peace and Development Research Institute in Gothenburg, which also includes research studies and projects in high schools in Sweden, Malaysia and South Australia. The authors worked with students at several different levels, using a range of techniques. During this period, the relationship between conflict and drama has become clearer. A number of principles relating both to conflict management and to drama, together with a tentative pedagogy for using dramatic strategies and techniques have emerged. These are elucidated, and the project and some of its provisional findings are described. It is anticipated that a third paper will be submitted dealing with the implementation of the program in the current four Sydney schools, and a further six during 2001.

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**Article**

**PEER TEACHING IN ACTION**

**The setting: A year 9 English classroom, with a group of six year 12 students peer-teaching the class in understanding the causes of conflict, using drama techniques.**

*"I've an idea. Can I?"*

*"OK Sherryl, go for it. Who would you like to take over as?"*

The Year 12 drama students were running a piece of modified 'forum theatre', depicting a confrontation between siblings - of the sort only too familiar to most of the year 9 students. The conflict was manifest, a bitter dispute made deliberately as problematic as they could devise. Into this the Year 12 controller of the enactment - the 'Joker' - invited the Year 9 English class to intervene and make suggestions as to how the scene could have been

avoided or mediated, which the drama students would then act out (with the Year 9 students taking over a role to demonstrate - if they were game). Using this technique permits the students to trial mediation and possible solutions, which can be tested in action in the situation and also examined by the audience. There are two constraining factors: that the other actors will be making the situation as hard as possible, and the audience is also empowered to stop this intervention if they believe that it strains credibility... by calling out "Magic!" (invariably with the relish of outwitting the too-smart). These constraints ensure that facile solutions are avoided, and the situation is explored at length in its complexity - which nearly always means that a full resolution is not found within the length of a school class period!

This technique has been in use in drama education for many years, and a version was given the title 'Forum Theatre' by Augusto Boal, who used it to help Brazilian peasants identify and combat oppression in their lives. (Boal 1979,139)[1]. In his version, the audience could intervene only as the protagonist - to emphasis that the responsibility for dealing with oppression lies with the individual who feels oppressed. We were using a variant of Boal's technique, to give the students more flexibility in dealing with conflict - the audience could intervene as any one of the parties in conflict or the bystanders, to mediate, or ameliorate the situation, by identifying what could be re-thought, re-negotiated or traded off. And by having the actors ready to enact the suggestions, the technique did not demand that the audience members - who were not drama students - put their own head on the block, unless they wished to, by acting out their proposal - though the majority in fact chose to.

The Year 12s knew that their conflict scenario was virtually insoluble. After all, they had been backgrounding it, shaping and tying the Gordian knot, for two weeks. Then year 9 audience member 'Sherryl' stepped in, with a solution so breathtakingly effective that all the class spontaneously and enthusiastically applauded. So did the year 12s - till they realised that Sherryl, by ending the conflict, had also effectively ended the drama and their lesson planning, with half an hour to go! By that stage, however, the year 9s were so rapt that it did not matter. The year 12s were bold and confident enough to re-group, and move into organising their juniors to create their own forum theatre, which then took up several more lessons. Even the very few in the four year 9 classes who did not enjoy the drama itself (we were only able to identify one) so enjoyed being taught by their older peers that in two weeks, there was not one instance of misbehaviour in any of the classes. It must be said, however, that there were some spectacular real life conflicts among the experts in conflict management, the year 12s, in their own lesson planning for these encounters!

[1] Boal, A. (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press. p.139. A similar technique is also described earlier by one of the authors, O'Toole, J. (1977). *Theatre in Education*. London: Hodder & Stoughton. p.80

## **DRAMA AND CONFLICT**

It is really a truism to state in a drama journal that drama is the art form which most explicitly mirrors and explicates human conflict. Conflict is part of the basic business of drama, which exists to depict and explore human relationships. By nature it depicts human beings in dialogue and action. Furthermore, all the areas of situation and relationship that are explored by dramatic action are central to real-life understanding and stable relationships. As the corpus of writing on classroom drama in the last twenty years - including our own writings - outlines, the improvised forms of classroom drama such as process drama, forum theatre and playbuilding exist to provide realistic and experiential models of human behaviour, that can be played with, modified, and seen from a variety of viewpoints [1] . The classroom context can be suspended and contexts, situations, characters and behaviour from beyond the classroom and beyond the students' direct experience invoked for exploration, experiencing, reflection and analysis.

If one looks at the language of conflict resolution, one can find some useful parallels. Drama and conflict resolution share several key words and concepts: a central element of drama is tension, and the impetus towards

the final resolution of that tension. Dialogue, action, opposition, negotiation, argumentation are all employed in the drive towards resolution of tension. Conflict mediators use drama's terminology: protagonist and antagonist, appropriated from Greek drama. And coincidentally, Greek tragedy is where we ourselves started our explorations two years ago - for no better reason than that was what was on the syllabus for the senior drama class we had targeted.

Our explorations are part of an ongoing international research project - DRACON - into the possible application of drama in conflict management and resolution in schools, with particular emphasis on cultural elements. DRACON is co-ordinated by the Peace and Development Research Institute at Gothenburg University, Sweden, and also it incorporates other practical investigations in Sweden and Malaysia, as well as Adelaide, Australia. Starting with some reservations about the direct use of drama in conflict resolution - which are discussed below - we in Brisbane decided to investigate through action research some of the possibilities of using drama to raise awareness of the causes of conflict and of where mediation is possible and appropriate. While teaching drama education in Universities for over twenty years, we had been using drama techniques in various contexts redolent with conflict, such as Police human relations and communication training, which gave us some starting points into possibly effective strategies.

## **The action research project**

**a. Our vision** Action research - or the model we were using, derived from among others Zuber-Skerritt (1998)[2] and Kemmis & MacTaggart (3rd edition 1988)[3]- must start with a problem or a vision, involving intervention and change. We had both: a vision springing from the enormous problem of conflicts in school students' lives, and their relative powerlessness to manage them. Our initial vision was to use drama to help give a few students understanding of the mechanisms of conflict, with which they might be empowered to manage their own conflicts better, and perhaps mediate in others' conflicts. By year 3 this vision had expanded to very specifically develop a grass-roots approach to changing the conflict management agenda of schools through the use of significant numbers of students in a combination of drama and peer-teaching. With effect from year 7 we shall be expanding the vision further to both empower teachers better to assist this student-led empowerment, and to change the very conflict management policies of schools themselves, from mainly top-down, co-curricular models of conflict resolution and direct prevention, to policies incorporating the students in the ongoing management and maintenance of healthy approaches to conflict, in line with recent Australian research in the field, such as Healy (1998)[4], Rigby (1998)[5], Tatum and Tatum (1996)[6]. In this work we have been assisted by our University, together with the Australia Council and both the Queensland and New South Wales Departments of Education.

[1] E.g. Burton, B. (1988). *Living Drama*. P. vii. O'Toole, J. (1992) *The Process of Drama*. London: Routledge. Chaps. 1, 2, 5

[2] Zuber-Skerritt, O. (1991) *Action Research for Change and Development*. Aldershot UK: Avebury/Gower [3] Kemmis, S. & MacTaggart, R. (1988, 3rd Edition). *The Action Research Planner*. Geelong Aust: Deakin UP.

[4] Healy, K. (1998) *Bullying and Peer Pressure*. NSW: Spinney Press.

[5] Rigby, K. (1996) *Bullying in Schools and what to do about it*. Melbourne: ACER.

[6] Tatum, D. & Tatum, E. (1996). In McCarthy P. Sheehan M. & Wilkie W. *Bullying: From Backyard to Boardroom*. Alexandria NSW: Millennium Books.

The currently fashionable way of involving students in schools' conflict management is through peer mediation, where students are trained in simple mediation techniques for use outside the classroom. Studies like Johnson et. al (1994)[1] have claimed outstanding success with this. However, a major review of nine peer mediation programs carried out in four US states (Powell et. al. 1994)[2] questioned the validity of these findings. In primary schools,

reported incidences of conflict declined, but there was little evidence to show that the students actually learned to manage their conflicts better, or that conflicts were genuinely de-escalated by the peer mediators. While they developed a valuable understanding of conflict management themselves, there was no evidence at all that the rest of the students in the school were similarly empowered, especially in secondary schools; bullying in the classroom continues unabated. Most alarmingly, in some secondary schools the incidence of unresolved conflict rose. This corroborates Rigby's (1998) finding that secondary students in particular are reluctant to participate in or use peer mediation, not trusting their serious problem to their peers, who are seen as 'mediation cops'.

So how to resolve the apparent contradiction: to involve the students in the conflict management agenda of schools, but not to involve them in mediation? Powell et al. provide a clue: they found clear indications that where all the students of a school were taught themselves about conflict management, bullying in that school was reduced. In other words, **teaching about** conflict, to give students a cognitive and reflective understanding that they might apply to their own conflicts, might be better than direct involvement in conflict resolution.

We only discovered this evidence in retrospect, in corroboration of our drama-driven hunches. Right from the start of our project, we decided that we would not try to use drama in actual conflict resolution and mediation, but following our instinct as drama teachers and trusting the power of fiction and the dramatic model to provide just that kind of cognitive and reflective knowledge referred to above, hoping they would be able to transfer it usefully to assist them in resolving their own life conflicts. We both have grave reservations about the usability of drama in actual conflict resolution. Essential for any participation in drama are two qualities, the 'dual affect' referred to by Vygotsky [3]: namely, the ability both to **empathise** (to step into another's shoes) and to **remain emotionally distanced** from the events being dramatised - and to move easily between each of these emotional stances. Empathy with one's antagonist and emotional distance from the situation are the very qualities that are lacking in a real conflict; therefore to involve protagonists in real conflict in fictionalising it both invites failure and risks entailing the protagonists in exposing themselves rather than (as dramatic fiction should) protecting them.

However, we figured that you could probably use drama well to teach students about conflict, to explore the bases and dynamics and perhaps give them some idea of theory of conflict, and of how and when mediation may be appropriate. Then we hoped: 1. if this proved true, it might empower them to use the knowledge to help understand and manage their own conflicts 2. since adults are not necessarily significantly better at dealing with conflict than youngsters, these 'conflict-educated students' might be able even to take a lead within their school community in creating and sustaining a positive conflict management agenda.

We did not have a clear idea of how this might be achieved, at first, though in the back of our mind was the possibility of some kind of peer-teaching - but NOT peer mediation, for the reasons outlined above.

We also wanted to incorporate the conflict management work somehow within the curriculum. The official conflict resolution networks tend to operate outside the classroom as a co-curricular structure. Conflict management in the classroom is usually left to the teacher as part of her behaviour management, with the unspoken assumption that conflict should not impede or impact upon the curriculum itself - and the further assumption that the curriculum is somehow conflict-free. However, common observation will clearly show that the curriculum and the students' attitudes towards learning it are full of contestation, latent or manifest.

We had another sub-text of our own, to try and help de-fuse racial and inter-cultural conflict by again giving the students some control over that agenda in the school. We are concerned about some standard school-based initiatives in this area, which seem to us to be too direct - too obviously slanted - worthy focus groups attending dutifully to the teacher's agenda: "All right, let's have a discussion - nobody here is racist, are they?" The Director of the NSW Whole School Anti-Racism Program[4] herself agreed with our concerns, and invited us to bring our experiments in drama and peer teaching under the wing of this program .

Peter O'Connor, a drama practitioner employed in both race relations conciliation and mental health awareness, notes that there is a major debate in the scholarship on discrimination about the most effective ways of combating it - between those who favour one form or another of 'racism awareness training', maintaining that changing attitudes will change behaviour, and those who espouse 'equalities training', believing that changing behaviour is the first step to changing attitudes. There is beginning to emerge some evidence that drama might help to deconstruct this knotty polarity.[5] Drama can be an oblique method of exploring attitudes and stereotypes, giving protection to those whose attitudes may not fit the orthodox or 'right' ethos. We figured, moreover, that this cultural agenda of ours would be best served by NOT privileging it - that cultural conflict issues would inevitably crop up naturally among other conflicts, and we could deal with them in that way, without seeming to isolate them. This proved to be the case.

[1] Johnson, D. & Johnson, F. (1994) 'Effects of conflict resolution training on elementary school'. *Journal of Social Psychology* Vol. 134 no. 6. [2] Powell, K. et. al. (1994). A review of selected school-based conflict resolution and peer mediation projects. *Journal of Social Health*. Vol. 65. No. 10. [3] Vygotsky, L. Quoted and usefully explained in Bolton, G. (1979) *Towards a Theory of Drama in Education*. London: Longmans. Chapter 3. [4] Coyle, S. & French, D. (1996) *Whole School Anti-Racism Project*. Sydney: NSW Department of School Education. [5] O'Connor, P. (2000). *Into the Crucible*. Paper presented to the 3rd International Drama in Education Research Institute, Ohio.

## **b. The action research**

The first three annual projects took place in the same Brisbane city high school, using Senior (Year 12) Drama students as our key classes of participants and co-researchers. The anecdote above comes from Year 2 (1997) when we first introduced the concept of peer teaching. Years 4 to 6 moved to New South Wales, firstly to a country area still within range (three hours drive) of Brisbane, then to Sydney and central new South Wales - quite a different kettle of fish: 700 miles away.

Each year's work was conceived of as a cycle in the action research. We collected extensive data from the teachers and students at all levels - journals, questionnaires, focus group interviews, individual interviews (including with ALL key class students, and samples of focus class students chosen on observation of a broad range of responses). We also gathered data from external observers including at various times post-graduate student research

assistants 'planted' in the classes, education department officials and school administrators, multicultural consultants and local community members. From year 2 onward, most of the peer teaching episodes were videotaped and scanned for particular criteria emerging from the data. In years 5 & 6 this has been expanded to include the primary students. Of course, all the schools took part voluntarily - initially with careful negotiation, and latterly by applying to join the program - and nearly all the teachers, though one or two with misgivings, or insufficient understanding of the necessary commitment. The students invariably joined in with alacrity, and written permission was obtained from all participants and their parents. In one case where two students showed reluctance - whose parents actually wanted them to participate - their reluctance was respected and they took no part in the program. Only one of to date twenty four proposed peer teaching episodes did not take place, owing in the first place to a long delay in organising the primary class, and a resultant insecurity and loss of motivation by the peer-teachers, together with other factors specific to that class - the only instance so far of negativity to the project.

At the end of each year's program, the whole team looked at all this data, and planned the developments. In most cases these were self-evident, or had been foreshadowed throughout the year. Each year involved at least one

major development. Year 2 introduced peer teaching. In year 3 the funding temporarily dropped severely, but this gave us the opportunity to move laterally into community TIE, foreshadowed since year 1. By year 4 it was time to trial what we were discovering in a different school environment where we did not have all the odds stacked in our favour - in a multicultural, middle-class school with a strong conflict management policy, an exceptional drama teacher, sophisticated and drama-wise students. So we moved to a country town, to a school and an area with many socially disadvantaged students, a history of serious racial problems between established anglo-celtic farmers and indigenous people. The school happened to have a good drama teacher, but one not familiar with the techniques we were using. In this school we also took the peer teaching to another level: asking the younger 'focus class' students who had themselves been taught by their peers not us, to teach primary students. The spectacular success of this year, in the teeth of considerable obstacles the students faced, emboldened us in year 5 to move the project further from Brisbane (to Sydney, where we had to be mainly at arms length), and into four differently profiled schools. Year 6 consolidates this, and raises the schools to eight. For the first time too, the primary schools are incorporated as full program members, and the primary students themselves peer-teach younger students (Year 3-4s) - taking the peer-teaching to a third remove from us. We will wait to see the results of the new, more longitudinal interviews and surveys we are doing, to decide the direct future of the work in these schools. However, we are also considering another change of direction, dictated by some of the emergent findings, which are described below in our projections forward to years 7 and 8.

We have been extremely fortunate in two factors:

1. Personnel: we selected the original class for the experiment partly to give ourselves a good chance of success, using what we predicted would be a 'good' drama class taught by an experienced and expert drama teacher. They were indeed. Coincidentally, while the year 1 cycle was operating, the class also had a very talented student teacher of ours on school practice. This student went on to get first class honours with a dissertation connected with our project, and join the team as a Ph.D. student, ethnographically researching the cultural components of the program. Her research is nearing completion, and has already given the program considerably more substance. In year 2, the class teacher was sucked into it too, and is now completing her own Ph. D. based on the operation of the elements of dramatic form in the project during its first three years - a move to a senior drama lectureship in the UK has precluded a longer continuity for her with the program. Of the other research assistants we have used, one is now also a senior lecturer in the UK, and her replacement is a distinguished community theatre worker, concurrently engaged on using forum theatre with indigenous adult groups to deal with problems of oppression and conflict.

2. Finances: to begin with the University gave us a seeding grant. Since then it has become clear that education systems are deeply enough concerned about conflict and bullying to want to pay for improvement. Generous funding over three years from the Multicultural Programs Unit of the NSW Department of Education and Training encouraged the Australian Research Council (ARC) to match it. Now Queensland Department of Education is queueing up to come to the party in 2002 and 2003, providing the ARC will again assist.

## **Year 1 - 1996**

In Year 1 (1996) we worked with the students within their senior drama syllabus studies. A unit on Greek Tragedy provided sufficient pre-text, seeking to teach them through drama techniques about three phases of conflict (*latent*, *incipient* or *'brewing'* as we preferred to call it, and *manifest*), and exploring the causes of conflict and communication breakdown.

We quite deliberately used a talented Senior Drama class - to give ourselves every advantage, if, as we supposed, drama students are pre-disposed to empathising. The simple categorisation that we gave them of three stages of conflict - latent, incipient (brewing) and manifest - actually proved to be a lovely holding form dramatically, as we

could pick a situation and move backward and forward through these three stages identifying and exploring the causes. It also provided a neat structural start for the pastiche Greek tragedies that the students' syllabus demanded that they had to compose - It gave them a *prologue*, *exposition* and *crisis*...

Then our neat plans to use this unit to teach about conflict mediation, which had been going swimmingly to that point, broke down on the inconvenient fact that mediation is exactly what does not happen in a tragedy. The gods make sure of that. If you get the conflict mediated - you don't get tragedy. Since the students' assessment depended on them producing a tragedy, our clever plans broke down - a minor tragedy for us, which did have the effect of apparently demonstrating what Augusto Boal said about Greek tragedy being the theatre of oppression.

In tying in our conflict work with the Greek tragedy unit, we got a dramatic surprise that is probably very significant. We started with contemporary tragic situations drawn from the media - the Susan Smith child double murder case in the USA, as an analogy for Medea. However, neither the students nor ourselves could get beyond soap opera, and they quickly became frustrated, being a high achieving drama class. So we started with potentially tragic situations from their own experience (rather nervously - but enough of the students were familiar with situations that they were willing to disclose and share). This produced much more genuine and authentic preliminary improvisation, but then we all got stuck, severely, in the domestic mode, when we were trying to transform them into the stuff of classic tragedy. More concerned about their assessment exercise than our conflict project, we imposed some very artificial constraints upon them - to push them beyond the naturalism that could not get out from round the kitchen table. We made them use chorus, percussion and masks. This worked theatrically, and their final efforts were quite acceptable as pastiche tragedy. To our surprise, though, the students strongly insisted that these theatrical constraints had helped them to deepen their understanding of the roots and motivations of the conflict they were portraying. Somehow the symbols of form acted transformatively on their understanding of the theme and its meaning for them.

## **Year 2 - 1997**

This first tentative experiment gave us the confidence to expand, seriously, and try something more ambitious. The possibility of peer teaching, approved in discussion with the previous year's students as an exciting possibility, was embraced warmly by the students' class teacher and principal, and incorporated into the design. This school's timetable gave us the opportunity to use four English classes who were coincidentally doing a theme-based unit on - yes, conflict resolution! [In the years since, we have not had such a fortunate congruence of timetables and subjects in any of the program schools].

The following year, we were able to work the Year 11-12 Drama class for a whole term on the project (no Greek Theatre or other external syllabus-driven goals to diffuse our concentration on the project). For four weeks we used three sets of drama techniques to explore with the students the nature of conflict, and the basics of mediation: *process drama*, *forum theatre*, and *group playbuilding*.

Then these students were split into four groups, each of which administered a questionnaire that we had written for them to a class of Year 9 English students, on their attitudes to conflict and concerns about it. Those students (whom we labelled the four Focus Classes) were going to do a module on conflict resolution in their English class, during weeks 8-10. The drama students were quite fearful about this contact, and we needed to give them considerable moral support. However, they were fascinated to read what the younger students had written, which gave good energy for the next bit - where the drama students spent three weeks devising either a process drama or a forum theatre piece.

Interestingly, the four groups each chose a different one of the four major conflict areas we had identified in the questionnaire - conflicts within the family, conflicts with teachers, conflicts within the community and conflicts

with other school students. Two groups chose to work in Forum Theatre, two to work in process drama. They became a bit lost and de-focused during this period, and there was quite a lot of real group conflict evident! Particularly interesting, from our point of view, were the power tussles between the Year 11 and the Year 12 students: in these preparatory stages, the Year 12 students who had been involved the previous year assumed all the power and control - most of the Year 11s accepted this, but there were a few battles. When we got into the actual classwork it was quite a different story. This was the part of the project we handled least effectively, too - the students really needed a lot more support and help in learning teaching and planning skills than we gave (a twenty minute explanation by their teacher had to do the job that we find hard in four years teacher training!).

However, ready or not, after three weeks each group had to take responsibility for teaching their class of Year 9s. For two whole weeks the students took alternate English lessons (originally five were planned), running their Forum theatre or process drama work. We or the English teachers took the intervening lessons, while the seniors licked their wounds and worked out what to do next. Following the two weeks, the Year 9 students were unanimous about how much they had appreciated being taught by the seniors (one Year 9 class became the faithful little helpers of their Key Class group, and took to hanging round the senior drama area every day. Adolescent hero-worship is a useful discipline tool!) Among the Key class drama students, the power shifted - the Year 11s really came into their own. We deduced that there were two reasons for this. Firstly they were nearer in age to the Year 9s, and seemed to know better what was wanted - some of the Year 12s were a bit lofty! Secondly, by this time the Year 11s had been 'in-serviced' by the Year 12s sufficiently to feel empowered.

The change in the teachers was perhaps the most spectacular shift in the whole programme. From the start, we had met unexpected resistance from two of the four English teachers - we'd had an extremely difficult in-service day, which we had organised to brief them and negotiate what part they would play, as well as to demonstrate some of our drama methods. It turned out that they weren't the willing volunteers their Head of English had indicated; they were deeply distrustful of our university status, assuming that we couldn't possibly know how to teach real children, so they were very territorial and equally deeply distrustful of drama. They were unwilling to take on the role of informed observer we'd hoped they would, and didn't believe the Key Class students would be able to control the class - in short, they thought we were talking out of our hats. Well the story has a happy ending: all four English teachers ended up unreservedly enthusiastic. The teacher who started most negative and insecure of the four willingly gave over her whole class for an extra lesson to a particularly enterprising Year 12 student, who took the lesson by herself mainly using the sophisticated technique of teacher-in-role - which the real teacher joined in with like a lamb. Both of those previously antagonistic teachers spent the whole of the next week continuing the drama techniques with their classes. A follow-up interview two years later with three of the teachers showed strong and warm memories of the project, and that originally most negative teacher now using drama quite frequently and confidently in her class.

The results of the ensuing interviews and journals appear to show that drama is a very successful method to introduce and explore conflict management with students. Even more revealing, perhaps, are some other findings. At the end of the joint sessions, the year 9 students were mostly very enthusiastic to become involved themselves in official mediation procedures in the school - this contrasts strongly with other research material that states that at this age students are very reluctant to do exactly that (Bagshaw 1997)[1]. Furthermore, a significant number of the year 9 students had demonstrated in their encounters with Forum Theatre and Process drama, that they were capable of mediating some levels of conflict quite effectively.

[1]Bagshaw, D. (1997) Unpublished results of school survey on conflict mediation in Adelaide Secondary Schools. School of Social Work and Social Policy, University of South Australia.

Most excitingly, in our interviews with the senior students, who were also uniformly positive about the experience,



we confirmed what we thought was becoming evident earlier, but had not really expected: over half of these students were attempting to apply what they had learned in the drama work to real life conflicts in their own lives. In some cases, this was quite spectacular:

'Laurel' found herself using her mediation techniques with her family rather than her previous usual behaviour of responding antagonistically, especially after having run away to Sydney with her boyfriend. On her return she remembered her mediation training, and worked strategically, consciously trying to read her parents' position and empathise with them.

'Varya', the child of very strict traditional European parents, had been locked in conflict with her parents over their attempts to get her to marry a young man they had chosen for her. She also used drama to defuse the anger and allow the problem to be dealt with in a more reasonable way - though it was still unresolved, she felt that this strategy had helped her parents see her point of view.

'Selina' broke up a fight between her parents by sitting them down and talking to them about brewing and manifest conflict till they bewilderedly stopped her with 'We don't know what you're talking about - where do you get all these words from?' which broke the tension and stopped the argument in laughter.

This gave us the confidence to continue, and expand. The results were affirming our decision not to use drama to actually interfere in conflicts. Drama appeared to be empowering the students beyond the drama. 'Laurel' again, for instance:

"If I know there's going to be an argument with my mum, I'll just walk off, and I'll just think of a few things to say, and then I'll come back with a few different points. And I've talked to my sister about it and stuff like that. She's in Year 9. I've used some of our techniques on her - thinking of things she could say to a student instead of going in fighting."

In-servicing her sister! When they're all in-servicing their parents and siblings, we'll know it's working.

### **Year 3 - 1998**

Though keen to pursue and interrogate further the connection between peer-teaching and drama, financial and curricular constraints demanded a sideways shift in year three. We decided to explore theatre-in-education performance as a possible method of empowering the students to take a pro-active role in conflict management in their own community beyond the school.

The Key class - which again incorporated about a third of the previous year's students - started once more by exploring or revising the causes and categories of conflict, then worked with a selected community group to identify aspects of conflict common to that group, collect some experiences that could be fictionalised, and prepare a piece of interactive theatre to present to that group. One of the most interesting and lively sessions was in the first week, where the students brainstormed some of the possible groups within their community that might have difficulty with conflict, that might be amenable to the presentation of some theatre to address it. A robust and diverse range of suggestions was made, including Police, old people and several specific ethnic-cultural groups. Eventually, the students decided on something closer to home - literally - and closer to their own concerns: the conflicts within families connected with young people leaving home. They could have researched and based the play on themselves, but they responded to the challenge to provide a service for others in the community, and identified Year 12 students from three high schools widely different from their own and each other as their target audience. They visited these schools, gathered information from the students relating to the categories of conflict that were their theoretical underpinning, and prepared work. Eventually four unfinished stories were fashioned,

composites of their informants' stories (and in some cases mirroring closely areas of conflict within the family life of the key class itself). With the aid of a professional writer and director of theatre-in-education, these were woven together into a complex piece of interactive theatre, based loosely on forum theatre structures. The classes and parents from the participating schools were invited as the main audience (and of course the key class's parents). Theatrically the evenings were effective and the audiences joined in enthusiastically. The data from this is still being analysed both in terms of its dramatic effectiveness, and the relevant cultural elements.

The year added another dimension to the work, and judging by the interviews, gave the students the sense that they might be in a small way 'making a difference' in their community.

#### **Year 4 - 1999**

In 1999 the receipt of a grant from another state - New South Wales - permitted the work of year 2 to be consolidated, verified and developed further. Another conceptual and pedagogical element was added, too: the grant was in association with the state's much- admired 'whole-school anti-racism program', and so we had to develop a stronger focus on cultural and inter-cultural sources of conflict. The funding body, initially with reluctance, agreed to our request not explicitly to dwell on cultural conflict. We believed that this might be counter-productive - the cultural questions would inevitably be raised, and the project teachers could unobtrusively feature or privilege these, without students' defensive attitudinal responses being triggered.

The project moved to a school with a very different cultural and socio-economic mix (a country high school in an area with a history of problematic and contested race relations, and a lower profile of drama, and less drama-teaching expertise, in the school). The project used the same techniques, modified to the different ages and concerns of the school and its students. The Key class was again Year 11. The Focus Classes were a year 9 Aboriginal Studies Class and a Year 8 English class specially arranged for the Project, consisting of the thirty-odd Year 8 students with the greatest difficulties in handling problems! This was not our choice, and we feared a kind of 'rump' feeling of being behavioural problem students would pervade the group. Fortunately, the level of excitement in the school about the project ensured that the students (apart from two who refused to participate) felt privileged and 'special' in an affirming way.

We also took the project an exciting step further. The Focus Class students in these two classes, after being taught the conflict concepts through drama by their elders in the Key Class, were themselves asked to prepare simple drama structures to teach the same conflict management concepts to younger primary (elementary) students. These we labelled the "Relay Classes" and they consisted of year 6 students from two feeder primary schools who were participating in an induction day at the high school. We had little idea how this would work.

The strategy we aimed for was to 'take a back seat' and let the school's own teachers teach and manage the program. We ran a two-day in-service, at a beach-resort which encouraged very high attendance of teachers from the school, and did generate a very positive attitude towards drama and the project from the participants - the great majority of whom had nothing to do with the project from then on (except indirectly, presumably, because the reputation of the project and the enthusiasm in the school, remained high). The Key class was very different from the Brisbane students. There were during the period of the project between 10 and 12 students, very much more tentative in their drama skills, much less socially sophisticated and with a very high absenteeism. In addition, the Key teacher had personal problems and school duties that did not permit him to give full attention to the students. The project was delayed so that the peer teaching of the Focus classes did not happen until the next term; the students became confused, demoralised and dispirited; in the planning phase, the project had to be rescued by visits from us on three occasions. Eventually, however, the two weeks' peer teaching happened somehow, and the Key class students rose to the occasion. One group used forum theatre, one group process drama over two weeks. The responses from teachers, Key class and Focus classes were uniformly enthusiastic. One of our observations

interested us: that the two most motivated and confident students, who had led all the classwork and planning sessions, were absent for the peer teaching on another school representative event; seamlessly two new leaders, previously quiet and passive students, took their places without fuss or apparent explicit discussion. When one of those was absent during the sequence, another, previously even more timid student, again stepped up and demonstrated equally calm, intelligent, confident leadership.

Then the Focus classes were set the task of replicating the experience for the Relay class children. Again rescues by us were necessary, since the Aboriginal Studies teacher was too busy with administrative tasks to give his students assistance, and the English teacher who was notionally in charge of the composite class never appeared at all. Somehow, though, by osmosis, the students in both groups cobbled together some drama structures - one class using forum theatre, one using process drama, as they had themselves participated. The Induction day was also somewhat chaotic, largely distinguished by absence of supervisory teachers (for two of the five one-hour sessions that the Focus classes taught - the Year 9s three, the Year 8s two - there were no teachers at all supervising the classes of between forty and fifty year six students (except us, who were supposedly there as observers). The action was quite extraordinary: we had to bale the Year 8s out once, when they lost control, but for the rest of the time, the peer teaching and the drama, ran as the students had planned it.

We have not been able to gather any information on how much learning, about either drama or conflict, the Relay class children received or retained. However, the results from the Focus classes were quite spectacular. Throughout such planning as there was, two Year 8 girls, 'Carly' and 'Aisling' had taken a consistently positive, highly motivated approach to the drama, showing real leadership qualities, intelligence and resourcefulness. These two were noted to be the two biggest troublemakers in the school, both under threat of expulsion, and both with deep personal and family conflict problems. These two collared the Relay class sessions, and led them from start to finish, with flair and bravery. On the one occasion the drama stuttered to a halt - partly because of lack of adult supervision - so that we were forced to intervene, 'Carly' became quite distraught, convinced that the breakdown was her fault. Reassured before the next session that this was not so, she led the second session with complete panache and iron resolve. We were open-mouthed with admiration.

Again, a happy ending. In follow-up interviews 'Carly' and 'Aisling' both declared that the experience had changed their whole approach to school, and to their families. Teachers unanimously noted a marked change for the better in the behaviour of all the Year 8 Focus class children, and especially of 'Carly' and 'Aisling' to the declared bemusement of some. In further follow-up, over six months later, their improved behaviour had continued; both were articulate about why, and the impact the program had had on them. 'Carly' confessed that she was in a serious current conflict, but had consciously used the concepts about conflict that she had learned in DRACON to help her manage it, instead of, as previously, resorting immediately to violence.

In the Year 9s, the story was equally gratifying. Three Aboriginal students were all noted for their timidity and passivity. One, a boy, took a lead in the drama from the first Key class lesson, and maintained his leadership to the end of the Relay sessions, coherent, smart, confident and a fine organiser. With the girls it was different. Neither of them was observed to speak a word in public (or participate other than absolutely minimally in the drama exercises) throughout the Key class sessions or the planning. During the Relay classes one of them came to life, and ably managed a group exercise with a large group of the Relay students, speaking confidently and managing the drama ably. The other, 'Dora', stayed quiet and withdrawn, until another group became unstable - the very big, blustering Year 9 boy, 'David' who was leading the group, started to lose control of them, and more or less gave up. Totally unobtrusively and without any prompting, 'Dora' went over to the over-excited and by now naughty Year 6 students and very quietly started talking to them. Within thirty seconds, like lambs they were doing the exercise that 'David' had been trying without success to lead.

Following this experience, we consolidated the materials we had used and wrote a complete school handbook for implementing the project independently. A large proportion of the handbook consists of arrangements and instructions for the teachers. This handbook contains

Step by step all the structures and drama techniques that we used, for the teachers, and where necessary the students - including exemplars, checklists and even palm cards for use in the drama by either students or teachers  
á a theoretical background for conflict, the use of drama, and the cultural components  
á Full instructions for the school administration on mounting and maintaining the project  
á Detailed instructions for the Key Teachers and the Focus Class teachers on managing their phases of the project  
á Ways of structuring the work into the senior drama syllabus (for Key classes), and a range of junior secondary syllabuses - English, Studies of Society, Aboriginal Studies, Health and physical education etc. (for Focus classes).  
á Specimens of the relevant questionnaires, parental agreement letters etc.

### **Years 5 and 6 - 2000-2001**

In 2000 the work has now shifted into a capital city location, Sydney, where this handbook is being piloted in a group of four contrasting schools, and the results evaluated. The schools were identified jointly by the NSW Senior drama consultant and the Anti-Racism Program Co-ordinator, to provide a diversity of school profiles. This time, we have withdrawn from the centre of the project to become the evaluators. As last year, we have started the project with a joint in-service for all the schools and participating teachers, and also, this year, all the regional multi-cultural and creative arts consultants, who are already proving to be a strong supportive network. We also have ensured that the research assistants attached to the project are themselves capable drama teachers entirely au fait with the project, who can if necessary step in and give either moral or pedagogical support to the participating Key and Focus Class teachers. This is predictably proving necessary in one case at least. We are keen to see if the project materials can stand on their own without our intervention. Our next paper will continue this story.

### **Years 7 and 8 - 2002-2003**

The next direct phase, the direction the Sydney project takes, will very much depend on the results of the data being gathered during these two years, particularly the longitudinal analyses. However, an interim overview of the project already suggests three lateral moves, as 'new' problems are revealed: 1. The project has been concentrating for some years on intercultural conflict, but much of the content thrown up in the drama really addresses the broader implications of bullying. Meanwhile, the educational community is currently very concerned with bullying, so we are considering focussing the research specifically on bullying.

2. Some of the observations in this paper may seem critical of the teachers. We have been very aware throughout of the problems the teachers in state schools face, and the demands this program makes of them. Many of them have expressed that they feel ill-equipped to deal with either the drama skills, or the class- and time-management challenges. The great majority are nonetheless very supportive of the program. In the end, when we withdraw our specialised drama experience and ability to 'pick up the pieces', the program will stand or fall on the skills and the will of the teachers. Accordingly, we are considering the development and evaluation of a teacher professional development program in the area.

3. The education systems are themselves seeking ways of encouraging grass-roots initiatives in the area, and recognising that policy changes need to happen at the macro- and micro-levels. We are interested to see whether our program can lead to, or be incorporated within such policy changes.

The last words should be with 'Carly' and 'Aisling':

"Yes [DRACON helped me to learn about cultural conflict] and I think they should continue doing it in other schools because it is really helpful and understanding - I used to be really violent. Like, I'd fight a lot to solve all

my problems, but that wasn't the best thing to do· it just makes it worse. Now I try and talk about it and if that doesn't work I just leave it.

Now if I am angry I just change into someone else and forget my old self until I am happy again."