

# **AN ARTS-BASED APPROACH TO TEACH SOCIAL JUSTICE: DRAMA AS A WAY TO ADDRESS BULLYING IN SCHOOLS<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

In this article, I examine perceptions about bullying and arts-based learning reported by elementary students, their teachers, and pre-service teachers after participating in an anti-bullying drama initiative. Recent literature on this topic suggests that using an interactive drama approach to address bullying in schools would enhance student understanding of this pervasive issue. Therefore, it was anticipated that an appreciable change would be identified in the responses between what elementary students knew and felt about bullying prior to partaking in the anti-bullying drama project and after. The research aimed to test some of the theories and assumptions suggested by moral and drama educators, in an effort to discover whether or not the

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier and shorter version of this paper entitled "Using drama to achieve Social Justice: Anti-bullying project in Elementary Schools" has been published in the IDEA 2004 Ottawa international conference proceedings.

drama and interactive activities would alter stated student beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying. And, if so, was it noteworthy? The research also set out to examine what the differences were between the stated responses from the production and the playbuilding group. Because the time spent with students during the production component was on average 90 minutes (30 minutes for pre-activities; 30 minutes for the play *You didn't Do anything!*; 30 minutes for post-activities), in comparison to over twenty hours with the playbuilding group during a period of three weeks, different results in terms of understanding and learning about bullying through drama were foreseen. If the findings were different, were they significant enough to suggest that more time spent working with students through drama yields appreciable perceived attitudinal change?

### Key words

Drama, bullying, practicum, schools, teachers

## RESEARCH BACKGROUND

The decade 2001-2010 has been proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations as the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the children of the world (United Nations, 2003). The proposed initiative calls for innovations and developments in curricula, pedagogy, inclusionary practices, and the promotion of wellness, all in an effort to create a world-wide culture of peace. Safely ensconced in the relatively peaceful Western world, it is tempting to infer that this declaration applies only to war-scarred countries such as Afghanistan, Angola, El Salvador, Guatemala, Iran, Mozambique, Namibia, or the Philippines. There is no denying that the victims of war, especially the children, need the world's compassion and support, and must be of utmost concern to all global citizens. However, educators everywhere must face the difficult reality that many of the children we teach also face a war, except it is a more covert conflict that thrives in secrecy, and where casualties are broken in spirit and mind. This war is sanctioned by a tacit accommodation of so called typical childish misbehaviors, where "boys will be boys," and "that's just the way girls are." This is the war of interpersonal violence in our schools, and it falls under the

relatively innocuous, indeed, even benign term of bullying.

Bullying is a widespread and serious problem in schools. O'Connell et al. (1997) surveyed a group of 4,743 Canadian students and found that 15% of them had been victimized more than once or twice in the preceding six weeks. Whitney and Smith (1993) investigated a group of American school children and reported that 27% of them claimed to have been victimized at least once a week. Vail reported that each day in the United States, 160,000 students stay home from school because they are afraid of being victimized (1999). Craig and Pepler (1997) found that in Canadian schools, bullying occurs once every seven minutes on the playground and once every twenty-five minutes in the classroom. In Britain, Glover et al. (2000) found that, in a school of 1000 students, 70 of them were likely to experience physical or verbal bullying in any given week. Clearly, bullying is an entrenched element in our schools, and these statistics cannot be ignored. Pepler and Craig, the lead researchers at the LaMarsh Centre for Research in Violence and Conflict Resolution in Toronto, point out that, for the good of society, bullying must not be ignored because school bullying may be a predictor of future violent behaviours ranging "from sexual harassment, date violence, gang attacks, marital abuse, child abuse, and elder abuse" (2000, p.5).

In a number of studies, researchers have pointed out that it is during the elementary years when bullying is more prominent; and, on a more positive note, it is also during these years when children seem to be able to empathize more with the victim (Olweus 1993, Rigby, 1994; Slee, 1995). Consequently, it would appear that bullying intervention programs are more likely to succeed during the elementary years when students are more empathetic towards the bullied. Therefore, it seems fitting, and, indeed, pressing to investigate what kinds of intervention strategies may positively impact an awareness and reduction in bullying behavior in elementary schools. This article examines an initiative in Prince Edward Island, Canada where drama was used to address bullying in elementary schools.

Drama as a means to address social and moral issues in schools (which includes bullying) has been explored by various researchers (Basourakos, 1998; Beale, 2001; Belliveau, 2004; Bouchard, 2002; Colby, 1987; Courtney, 1980; Edmiston, 2000; Henry, 2000; Winston, 1998). Although they refer to

different issues, populations, and approaches, these researchers all assert that drama can serve to educate and stimulate the social and moral development of students. One of the primary goals of using drama in schools, according to O'Neill (1995), is to help students better understand themselves and the world they live in. Using drama as a means to explore moral dilemmas can stimulate student sensitivity toward the issues and allow them to reflect critically on what they are witnessing or experiencing through role playing (Basourakos, 1998). Henry (2000) suggests that by improvising and role playing younger students develop emotional intelligence, negotiating skills and the ability to translate ideas to a new situation. Drama is unique in that it allows participants to imagine without having to live with the consequences of the actions they imagined taking (Edmiston, 2000). Therefore, it provides a safe approach to learning, and, according to Bourchard (2000), "drama creates a distance between individuals and their real-life situations through the characters and situations being enacted" (410). What it is more, the process of drama encourages/allows participants to shift positions, which invites multiple perspectives and points of view to be represented. The dramatic role playing process allows participants to experience vicariously that which the other (e.g. the bullied) may be living through.

A study in the United States highlights the potential of drama to effectively address and reduce bullying in schools (Beale 2001). Beale's report indicates a significant reduction in bullying incidents in an elementary school after the dramatic production of *Bullybusters*. The play was created by elementary students with the assistance of a drama teacher and school counselor. The piece was initially presented to the sixth grade students of that school during an assembly; however, due to its enthusiastic response, the production went on to be presented for various grade levels as well as several other elementary schools within that district. The research based on this anti-bullying initiative (primarily interviews and observations) points to positive changes in student behavior due to the drama intervention.

## UPEI DRAMA PROJECT

In 2004, I led twelve pre-service teachers from the University of Prince Edward Island (UPEI) in eastern Canada in an anti-bullying drama initiative with grade six elementary students. The social justice project featured two significant components centering on drama. The first had pre-service teachers create then present a thirty-minute anti-bullying play as well as pre- and post-activities to elementary schools across the province of Prince Edward Island (PEI). The second component saw pre-service teachers work closely with four elementary classes over a three week period, assisting the elementary students in developing their own anti-bullying plays. The research behind this social justice initiative did not aim to compare how drama increases learning about bullying over other methods. Rather, it attempted to address questions such as: What kind of an impact (if any) did the UPEI drama project have on the elementary student participants? If the project had an impact, how and why? What do students report they learned? What do teachers and pre-service teachers report about the process? What, if any, are the residual effects?

School administrators, counselors, and teachers often spend a great amount of energy trying to change the negative behavior of bullies; however, research suggests that developing effective methods for coping with bullies is perhaps time better spent (Roberts & Coursol, 1996). To this end, the anti-bullying drama project aimed to inform and empower elementary students by suggesting that bystanders (witnesses, observers) and bullied individuals can do something in a bullying situation.<sup>2</sup> Student feedback from the UPEI drama initiative suggests that the key messages - to be proactive and that bystanders can make a difference - were understood. In this article, the central focus is an examination of the changes in beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying reported by elementary students, their teachers, and the pre-service teachers after participating in the drama initiative. Before looking at some of the data findings, I provide a context of the project as well

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<sup>2</sup> The use of the term bullied is purposely chosen over the commonly used term victim. To be bullied means that something is done to you, something you do not seek. Whereas victim has connotations of it being partially that individual's fault, as if they were somewhat responsible.

as some of the specific drama strategies.

The majority of teacher education programs in North America consist primarily of course work and teaching placements in schools. The teaching placements or practica generally have pre-service teachers spend anywhere between two weeks to three months in a classroom working with another teacher learning the skills of the profession. At UPEI, pre-service teachers must complete four teaching blocks (or practica) of five to six weeks duration spread across the two-year program. One of these blocks is an alternative placement, meaning that pre-service teachers can opt for another teaching context other than the traditional placement in a classroom. Twelve pre-service teachers were selected to partake in an alternative placement that involved addressing bullying in schools through the use of drama. Candidates interested in the drama alternative placement made an application explaining why they wanted to be part of this initiative. Over 25 of the 60 eligible pre-service teachers applied. The selection of candidates was based on criteria such as prior success in teaching, willingness to work in a group, motivation to promote social justice, and willingness to take risks. From the twelve participants selected, only two had any prior theatre experience, and the group included pre-service teachers from various levels (primary, intermediate, and secondary) and disciplines (Science, English, Social Studies, French).

In January 2004, with my guidance, the twelve selected participants began collectively writing their anti-bullying play - *You didn't Do anything!* - with a grade six audience in mind. My role was to facilitate and guide the process by first organizing the meetings, establishing their roles and responsibilities, and finally leading the collective playwrighting and rehearsing. *You didn't Do anything!* is set in a Junior High, and it follows six pre-teens over the course of a day - beginning on the bus, moving to the lockers, cafeteria, bathroom, back to the lockers, and finally returning home on the bus. The six principal characters jostle for acceptance and power, and they could quite readily be identified as bullies, bystanders, and/or bullied. The play depicts life-like situations, yet the focus rests on trying to empower the bystanders to do something in bullying situations. A chorus of six actors also interjects one-liners between scenes indicating first the

negative impact bullying can have on individuals (e.g., “When it comes to bullying, the effects go far beyond the actual event.”), then, towards the end of the play, on what can be done to decrease bullying (e.g. “When I see bullying I could try and stop it!”). It is worth noting that during the two-month playbuilding period, the pre-service teachers read a number of articles on bullying and drama education, but in an effort to find out first hand about bullying issues in schools they were also asked to conduct research by talking with elementary students and their teachers. The one-liners articulated by the chorus in *You didn’t Do anything!* are thoughts and feelings expressed by elementary students.

After two months of researching, writing, and rehearsing, the pre-service teachers began a six-week school tour - reaching 42 of the 44 elementary schools in the province of PEI.<sup>3</sup> The cast of twelve would alternate between being principal characters and chorus. For instance, in a given day the six actors/teachers who played the principal characters in the morning show would then play the chorus in the afternoon, allowing the other six members to play the principal roles in the afternoon. This double casting created the opportunity for all twelve members to have both principal and supporting roles.

Along with the production, the pre-service teachers developed some cohesive pre and post learning activities whereby the elementary students were given the opportunity to meet the cast members in small groups and do some interactive anti-bullying drama activities. The pre-activities involved a warm-up where the elementary students became physically and vocally involved in drama-based exercises. Selected props (e.g., chip bag, calculator, photos, ...) from the play were then exposed to the students, and in groups they created possible scenarios involving the particular props. The scenarios developed by the students (with the assistance of the pre-service teachers) would lead to possible bullying incidents, preparing them for what they were about to see in the production. Through role playing, strategies were introduced on how to change a bullying incident into an anti-bullying

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<sup>3</sup> A few productions were presented for intermediate schools (grades 7-9) on PEI, as well as for elementary schools in neighboring provinces.

incident, primarily by activating the bystanders. The post-activities involved focused discussions between the students and actors/teachers about what they saw and learned during the play. A bullyproof bus was also created for each school, where students from that school contributed to an art piece by adding peace signs with their written thoughts on how to prevent bullying in their school. These activities during the tour helped open up discussions about the play and anti-bullying strategies.

Another important element of the UPEI drama project consisted of the pre-service teachers (in groups of three) working intensely on an anti-bullying playbuilding unit with (four) selected elementary classes for 90 minutes per morning during a period of three weeks. (The touring of *You didn't Do anything!* during these three weeks only took place in the afternoons in order to free up the pre-service teachers for the morning playbuilding sessions.) The pre-service teachers led their respective elementary students through a variety of drama-based activities, culminating in the students collectively writing an anti-bullying script to be performed within their schools.<sup>4</sup> The playbuilding teaching component provided pre-service teachers an opportunity to apply their learning of collective drama creation and social justice with elementary students.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

In order to examine the impact the drama-based initiative was having on elementary students' attitudes towards bullying, data were collected throughout the project. Student, as well as teacher and pre-service teacher, responses in both the production component and the three week playbuilding process were sought in order to report on the perceived student learning. The pre-service teachers also kept a detailed journal during the two month playbuilding and planning period.<sup>5</sup> Based on the literature review, an

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<sup>4</sup> The four selected elementary classes where the three week morning placement took place were chosen primarily because of their proximity to the University and because they offered French Immersion possibilities. Six of the pre-service teachers in the group had French skills; therefore, two of the four classes selected were French Immersion and the activities and final scripts were conducted in both French and English.

<sup>5</sup> I have written an ethnodrama article, "Collective playbuilding: Dramatizing the process," which examines specifically the perceived development and transformation of the pre-service teachers during the collective researching and writing of *You didn't Do anything!*



underlying assumption in the research was that using an interactive drama approach to address bullying in schools would enhance student understanding of this pervasive issue. It was anticipated that an appreciable change would be identified in the responses between what elementary students knew and felt about bullying prior to partaking in the UPEI drama project and after. The research aimed to test some of the theories and assumptions suggested by moral and drama educators, in an effort to discover whether or not the drama and interactive activities would alter stated student beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying. And, if so, was it noteworthy? The research also set out to examine what the differences were between the stated responses from the production and the playbuilding group. Because the time spent with students during the production component was on average 90 minutes (30 minutes for pre-activities; 30 minutes for the play *You didn't Do anything!*; 30 minutes for post-activities), in comparison to over twenty hours with the playbuilding group during the three weeks, different results in terms of understanding and learning about bullying through drama were foreseen. If the findings were different, were they significant enough to suggest that more time spent working with students through drama yields appreciable perceived attitudinal change?

## DATA COLLECTION

To uncover the impact the UPEI drama project (production and playbuilding) had on elementary students' beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying, several methods of assessing outcomes were used. The research methods consisted of surveys (closed and open-ended), journals, and focus groups. The data collection took place between January and May 2004, with the analysis beginning immediately thereafter.

A large sample of elementary student responses regarding their beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying was obtained through the Student Survey on Bullying. The Survey was initially developed by Morrison (2000) to provide base-line information on the extent of bullying in PEI elementary schools and its effects on learning. With only slight modifications, the instrument was adopted to suit the drama project needs. The Survey contained two sections, consisting of 11 questions each. Section One

included general information about bullying such as, “Have you ever been bullied?” YES NO NOT SURE; whereas Section Two looked at beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying using a 4-point sliding scale: STRONGLY AGREE AGREE DISAGREE STRONGLY DISAGREE. (see Appendix 1)

A sample of 913 grade six elementary students throughout PEI completed the Survey on bullying - 450 before and 473 after the production and activities.<sup>6</sup> The sampling of 913 represents 54% of the grade six student population in the province, providing a respectable sample. The sampling was random and it consists of students from rural and urban schools and the gender percentages were 52% girls and 48% boys.<sup>7</sup>

The Survey was piloted in four randomly selected classes of grade six students (n=91). After completing the pilot, student feedback as well as comments from teachers, counselors, and administrators within those schools was sought. The pilot enabled a preliminary analysis of the data to be conducted, which assured that valid results could be gleaned from the Survey. Slight modifications were made to the instrument as a result of the pilot feedback and analysis. In addition to the Survey, the elementary students who participated in the three week playbuilding unit completed an open-ended questionnaire at the end of their project (n=74). These same grade six students also wrote journal responses about their learning during the three week process. Their comments, along with the open-ended

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<sup>6</sup> The same students did not respond to the survey prior and after participating in the drama initiative. It was felt that validity would be diminished if these same students would respond to the survey twice within a two hour interval.

<sup>7</sup> Both PEI English school boards, as well as individual school principals, gave their consent for the anti-bullying project, and any child not wishing to participate in the written Survey was free to decline or withdraw at any time. The majority of PEI elementary schools ask parents to sign a consent form at the beginning of the year which states that their child may be asked to fill out surveys, write provincial or national tests, ... Prior to this project a letter from each school principal was sent home notifying parents that their children would be seeing an anti-bullying play and that their child may be asked to fill out a brief survey as part of the activities. If parents had any concerns they could contact the school, and if the parent or child desired, they would not have to complete the Survey. (There were no particular issues in this study.)

questionnaire responses, were coded and analyzed for reoccurring themes.<sup>8</sup> These comments reinforced the Survey findings, and provided a deeper understanding as to how and why the playbuilding group felt the anti-bullying drama project impacted their beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying.

To offer another perspective on the drama project's impact, two focus group sessions were conducted with elementary teachers: the first involved the four teachers in whose classes the pre-service teachers taught the playbuilding unit for three weeks; the second group of teachers (8) were randomly selected grade six educators who witnessed the touring production with their students. In both cases, there were four open-ended questions on which teachers could comment on perceived student learning, plus time to add any other feedback. Their comments were recorded, coded, then analyzed for re-occurring insights about perceived student learning from the drama project.

For their part, the twelve pre-service teachers involved in developing/touring the drama production and teaching the playbuilding component completed an open-ended questionnaire at the end of the project. As previously mentioned, they kept a journal using semi-focused questions over the preparation and implementation period. Their perceptions on elementary students' learning during the production tour and playbuilding process are examined.

## FINDINGS

### Survey results

A random sampling of elementary students completed the Survey prior to seeing the play (n= 450), and their responses provided base line data on attitudes towards bullying from the perspective of grade six students in PEI at the time of the drama project. It should be noted that each elementary

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<sup>8</sup> The researchers, acknowledged at the end of the chapter, read the comments independently to look for reoccurring themes. Then, common themes among the four researchers were used to make generalizations about the recorded data.

school in PEI has an anti-bullying program in place; therefore, the majority of students would have been exposed to the vocabulary and issues around bullying prior to the UPEI group’s arrival. Overall, there was an appreciative difference in understanding about bullying in the post-production Survey responses from both the elementary students who witnessed the production (n=399) and the playbuilding group (n=74).

### Section One

The pre-production Survey reports 41% of students saying YES when asked, “Have you been bullied?” The post-Survey results from students who witnessed the production indicate 58% responding YES to the same question, and, of note, 82% of the playbuilding group stated YES to being bullied (Figure 1). This finding suggests that the drama initiative, particularly the playbuilding unit, enabled students to become more aware and sensitive of what bullying can involve through the production, activities, and discussions. To the question, “Have you ever bullied another person?” 56% of the students in the pre-production Survey stated NO, yet after seeing the

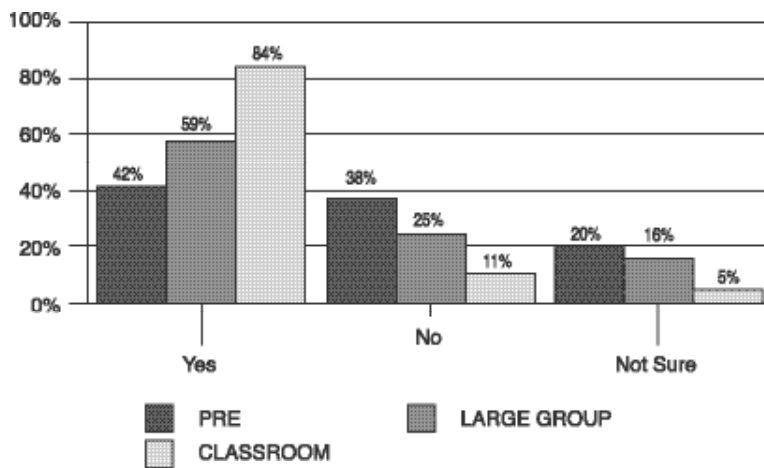


Figure 1: Have you ever been bullied?

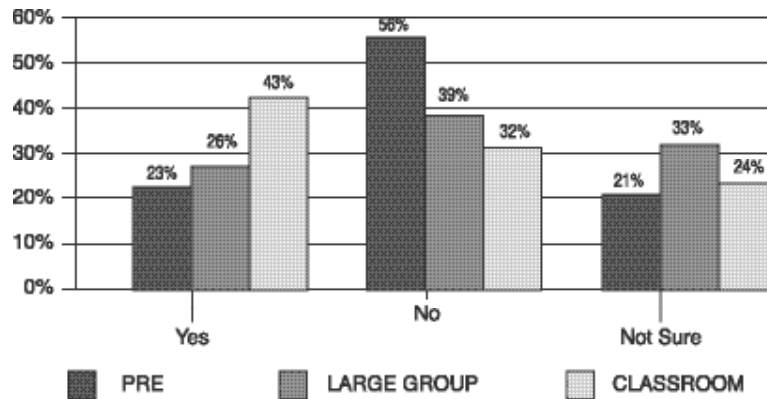


Figure 2: Have you ever bullied another person?

play 39% of the audience who saw the production, and 32% of the playbuilding group, responded NO (Figure 2). This decline indicates that individuals may not have realized that what they were doing (on occasion) could be considered bullying and hurtful to others. In the pre-production Survey, 71% of the girls indicated NO to having bullied, with 47% of the boys saying NO. In the post-Survey results (production audience and playbuilding group combined), these numbers decreased to 45% of the girls saying NO, and 31% of the boys. The 26% change in girls' responses points out that the production and activities opened up new awareness of bullying behavior, such as gossiping, exclusion, and laughing at someone, which are not always recognized as bullying.

### Section Two

Most responses in this section showed notable changes in beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying between the pre- and post-production Survey. The most pronounced difference between the pre- and post-Survey responses was how students felt "Other students can help" in a bullying situation. The pre-production results indicated 34% of students strongly agreeing that others can help. After the production students reported slightly higher with 38% strongly agreeing; however, 81% of the playbuilding group strongly agreed that others can help (Figure 3). In response to "There is

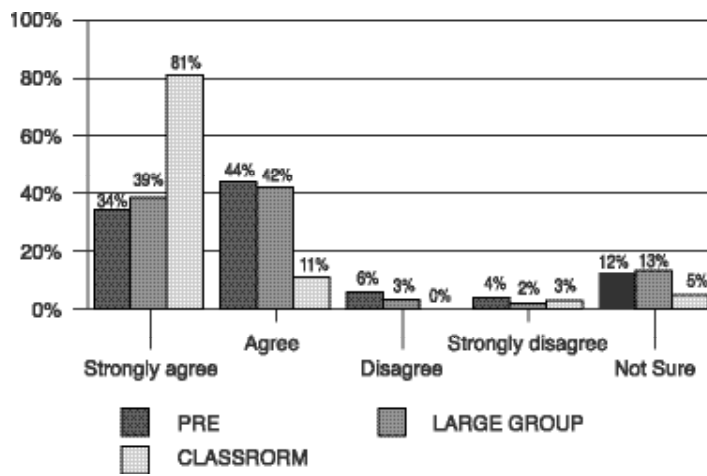


Figure 3: Other students can help in a bullying situation.

something I can do to stop bullying,” 68% of the playbuilding group strongly agreed, and 53% of the group who saw the production, compared to 37% in the pre-production Survey (Figure 4). The belief that students can reduce bullying and help others, suggested in the Survey responses, supports the aim of the post-production activities and the lessons used by the pre-service

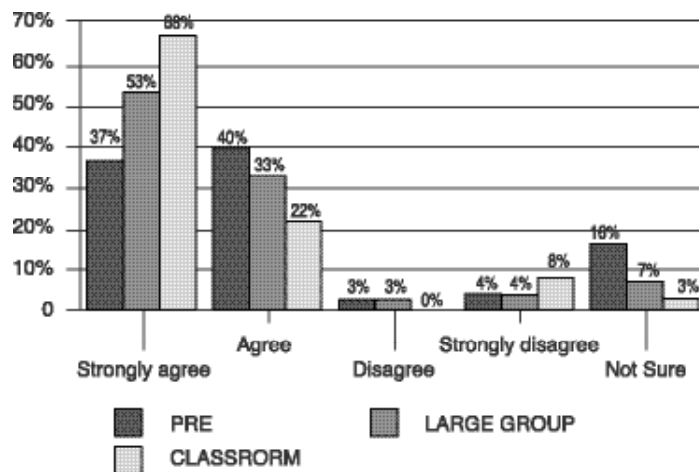


Figure 4: There is something I can do stop bullying.

teachers to guide the three week playbuilding process.<sup>9</sup>

In response to “Bullying can affect my self confidence,” the numbers increased from 46% who strongly agreed in the pre-production Survey to 52% in the post-Survey (production and playbuilding combined). However, what is notable is the gender perception: 68% of the girls in the post-Survey responded that bullying can affect their self-confidence, in comparison to 49% of the boys. The production presented a victim of each gender whose confidence may have been affected by the bullying, yet girls seem to have identified with the situation more empathetically. Conversely, when asked if “bullying can affect my learning,” 35% of the boys in the post-Survey (production and playbuilding combined) indicated YES, whereas only 22% of the girls in the post-Survey felt that bullying could affect their learning.

The playbuilding group strongly agreed (62%) in the post-production Survey that teachers can help stop bullying, compared to 49% of those who only experienced the production, and 46% in the pre-production Survey (Figure 5). Also, in response to who holds the most power in a bullying situation, 50% of the playbuilding group said the bystander, whereas only

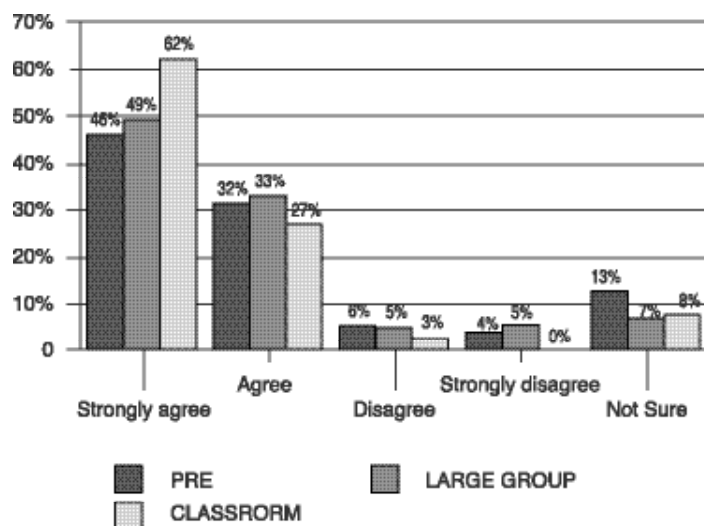


Figure 5: Teachers can help stop bullying.

<sup>9</sup> The anti-bullying drama lessons used by the pre-service teachers during the three week playbuilding process can be obtained by contacting the author.

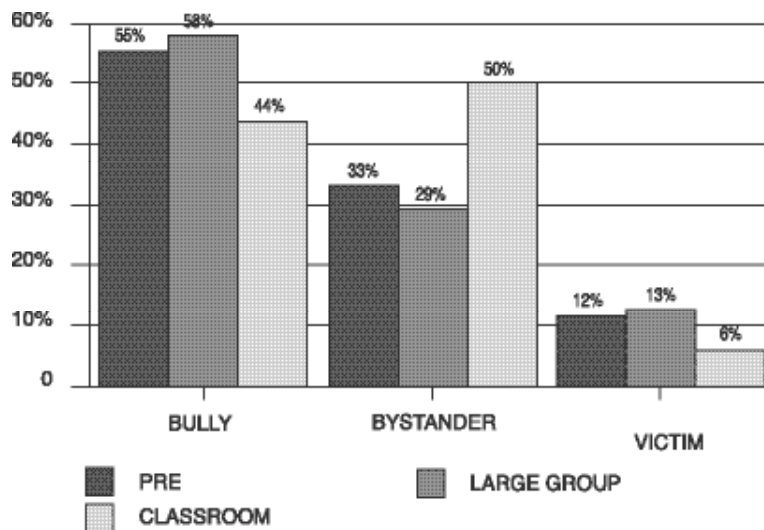


Figure 6: Who holds the most power?

29% of the production audience said the bystander, and 33% in the pre-production results (Figure 6). The increase in awareness and the ability to make proactive choices among the three week playbuilding participants points to the benefits of the more sustained drama initiative.

#### Questionnaire - playbuilding group

All 74 participating elementary students responded to two open-ended questions at the end of the three week anti-bullying playbuilding project. To the first question, “What did I learn about bullying?” three categories reoccurred in the student responses:

Perceived reasons why bullies act the way they do in school.

Selected student examples:

- Bullies just want to show off and get attention.
- Bullies may have a hard life at home so they take their anger out on other people.
- Bullies get power from bystanders.

A number of activities within the three week anti-bullying unit asked students to think, write, and role play from various perspectives (bully, bystander, and bullied), which enabled students to empathize and better



understand bullies as well as the various power dynamics.

There are various types of bullying, and they all yield negative effects.

- Words hurt just as much as getting hit and they stay with you almost forever.
- Bullying can hurt a person's self-esteem.
- Excluding is bullying.
- Sometimes we bully without knowing.

Through brainstorming activities, the students discovered the complexity of bullying and the various facets of power imbalance. The more subtle ways of bullying (excluding, gossiping ...) were investigated through role playing to offset the more obvious acts such as physical force or verbal abuse.

Different strategies or ways to prevent bullying from happening.

- Being a bystander, you can change everything.
- You should just walk away from bullies.
- Put yourself in the place of the bullied and you would not bully anymore.
- Tell an adult or someone who cares.

Within the safety of the drama activities, students were able to reflect on ways to be proactive.

To the second question, "Was drama a positive way to learn about bullying?", the dominating categories of responses included:

The drama-based, experiential approach used in the playbuilding unit made learning meaningful.

- Acting out helped me to learn about bullying because we experienced it.
- By doing drama I will remember it more than writing it down.
- Drama helped me express my feelings in a different way and to learn about others.
- It was like real life situations and it helped us to know how to cope.

The students were eager to play out their thoughts in the process of playbuilding, and because a safe environment was created by the pre-service teachers it appears that many of the elementary participants felt comfortable expressing their ideas vocally and physically.

The project created a team building environment, which made learning positive and safe for everyone in the class.

- Creating a play is working together as a group and making sure everyone feels comfortable.
- Everyone worked together and no one was left out.
- We all put our thoughts in to it.
- Teamwork, everyone wanted to participate.

The written comments in the open-ended questionnaire personalized the data, and the comments cited above provide student voices to support the impact the playbuilding project had on their attitudes towards bullying. Over 75% of the written comments suggest that students' awareness about bullying was raised and that they learned a number of strategies to address the issue through the interactive drama process. As well, the majority of students indicated they had a better understanding of bullying behavior, its effects, and how to deal with the problem, after the three week project.

#### Journal responses - playbuilding group

The number of journal entries written by the individual classes and students varied from two entries to over twelve; nonetheless, each group responded to a variety of classroom activities. The journal responses, initiated by the pre-service teachers, included creative writing where students wrote short stories and poems. As well, personal thoughts were expressed in response to class activities, where their feelings about bullying and using drama to address the issue were the focal points. From analysis of the data, four categories were identified.

The perceived student learning taking place during the playbuilding project.

Selected student examples:

- I'm learning more about bullying and where it happens.
- Learned about being a bystander, bullied and bully.
- I think people bully because they have been bullied before.
- I'm learning how to help people who are bullied.
- Bullies have problems of their own.
- I realize I am a bystander.

- Everyone wants to be accepted.
- Words are powerful.
- Our discussions make me think about how people being bullied feel.

The sustained and more extensive (interactive) activities and discussions on the issue allowed students to reflect more deeply about bullying issues.

What is my role? What can I do to decrease bullying around me?

- Send “I” messages, like, I don’t like when you stare at me.
- If we all stand together, we can help stop bullying.
- When we walk away from bullies, we take away their power.
- If you don’t answer a bully, they’ll lose the satisfaction of you being hurt.
- We should all work together.
- Tell someone, like an adult.

The journaling and small group work asked students to find solutions, to change a bullying scene into an anti-bullying situation. This seems to have allowed the students to (more) safely express themselves and stand up for themselves and others.

Feelings students experienced during the drama-based anti-bullying activities.

- The songs we listened to made me feel empathy.
- The role playing made me think about the way I treat people.
- I felt unwanted as a low status person in the drama activity - sad, embarrassed, alone.
- The role play made me think how people who are bullied must feel. I feel for them.
- Being a bystander is hard because you don’t know if you should get involved.

The various drama-based activities appear to have helped students tap into their affective domain, which allowed them to feel what someone may experience in a bullying situation.

Personal stories shared by students about their experiences of being bullied, witnessing bullying, or bullying.

- I was bullied because I was short and some days I wouldn’t want to go

to school. What was worse was I never told anybody so the bully didn't stop.

- I used to be a bully. Once I got caught. I felt bad and cried because I was ashamed.
- There has never been a week I wasn't bullied by one person. I tell people and let my feelings out. I even talked to him. Now I have solved it. When he decided to tease me, that's going to be his problem.
- I went through a really hard time with bullying and life at home. My doctor had to put me on Zoloft, an antidepressant. So I know what it's like to be bullied. I used to not want to go to school because of bullying. It got to the point where I was in the hospital overnight because I tried to kill myself.
- I've been a bystander 3 times. These times make me feel kind of angry and scared every time. I didn't do anything because I was afraid that the bully might hurt me and if I tell a teacher the bully could find out and go after me instead.

These journal comments provide personal and revealing examples of student attitudes towards bullying. A sense of trust is apparent in the entries, in that the majority of students wrote copiously and they were able to express themselves in an honest and sincere manner. The three week time block seemed sufficient to allow for rapport and trust to develop between the pre-service teachers and students. The prolonged drama activities also enabled the students to find comfort in the role playing and discussions, so they could then reflect upon their feelings more openly. A clear awareness of the seriousness of bullying in schools comes through in their reflections. Equally as revealing is the students' willingness to address the problem.

#### Teacher focus groups

##### Teachers from playbuilding group

The four elementary teachers who opened their classes to the twelve pre-service teachers during the three week playbuilding initiative responded to guided questions. Listed below is a synthesis of the re-occurring comments made by the teachers during the focus group session. Their reflections are in response to three of the questions from the focus group.

How do you think the anti-bullying drama project benefited your students?

- The drama project helped struggling students to express themselves in different ways.
- My students gained tremendously from the hands on, interactive process. Through the doing they absorbed much more on the topic.
- Many students let go and laughed. Some of the students had never released this joy in class before.

Can you comment on the playbuilding process?

- Everyone was involved in the process, and the ideas of most individuals were valued and shared in the process.
- Kids were highly motivated during the entire project. They wanted to be there. They wanted to participate and learn.
- Students became more aware of bullying - the play they developed has become reference point for discussions.

Other comments about the process?

- The activities reinforced some of my beliefs about integration and using different teaching methods.
- Project could have lasted longer. Perhaps more time for debriefing. Once the production was done, the pre-service teachers had to leave, leaving a void.
- This type of initiative is how to reach students on sensitive topics.

The four teachers unanimously reported that this project had a very positive impact on their classes and that their students developed a cohesion that has lasted beyond the three weeks. One of the features of collective playbuilding is that all voices are included in the process, and the students generally find common links with one another through the creative work. The teachers emphasized how all students were able to get involved and participated, taking pride in their drama work. They reported that students often mentioned how the process was so enjoyable that they were forgetting they were actually learning.

Teachers who observed the touring production

The second focus group included eight elementary teachers, randomly selected, who shared their perceptions about the value of the play production. The teachers had all witnessed the pre- and post-activities and the production of *You didn't Do anything!* at their schools with their grade six classes. A selection of re-occurring comments on three of the questions is recorded.

How do you think the anti-bullying drama project benefited your students?

- The project reinforced what we're doing in schools, offered another voice, another approach to the topic of bullying.
- The UPEI teachers helped develop ideas for our students' own plays/skits about bullying and peer pressure.
- The project sends the message that dealing with bullying issues should be a part of teaching and not only seen as punishment.

Can you comment on the production?

- Drama was a powerful way to convey the message. It reinforced things we're trying to do with the students.
- The elementary students were completely engaged, so were teachers, and it provoked lots of discussion in the days, weeks following the play.
- The play looked at issues outside the classroom where bullying often takes place - playground, bus, bathroom, cafeteria. As well, it addressed gender issues and different types of bullying, such as gossiping, laughing at others ...

Other comments about the process?

- A follow-up one month later, to keep the pro-active idea fresh would be a good idea.
- Talk to more teachers about what they think the bullying issues are in their schools.
- The UPEI anti-bullying project is helping our school system - it's getting everyone talking and on board to tackle the issue.

Overall, the eight teachers were enthusiastic about the production and activities. They felt their students heard the message and were now more aware of bullying behavior and possibilities for reducing it in their schools.

They also reported that the project encouraged more teachers to talk about the issue within their classes and in the staff room.

#### Pre-service teachers' perceptions on student learning

The twelve pre-service teachers who participated in the project responded to the following open-ended question after the playbuilding unit: By using a drama-based approach to address bullying in schools, what did you notice about student learning and attitudes towards the issue? A number of themes emerged in their responses; however, I highlight two categories that seemed to dominate the responses.

Meaningful and stimulating learning can be fun.

- The students had fun, learned and were on task. They were always eager and excited, and that is the way a classroom should be. Students who look forward to learning are students who will give and get the most out of it. Their final product not only looked good, it sent a message about bullying to all who saw it, and it gave every student involved an amazing sense of empowerment.
- Not only did the use of drama help the students express themselves and learn about bullying, but it also allowed them to look at this kind of learning as “fun”! The material was not forced upon them. It was brought to them in interesting ways, enabling them to learn about the different types of bullying through the different teaching methods.
- The three-week process has proven to me that learning can be fun. In using drama, our students were able to clearly demonstrate through writing and performing their understanding and feelings towards the issue.
- The project proved that learning doesn't have to be painful, and at one point the students' wondered if they were learning since we were having so much fun with all the activities. However, their journal reflections indicate how they were able to tap into all our objectives and learning outcomes about bullying.

Cooperative learning, teamwork, and learning by doing.

- Grade six students are perfectly capable of doing productive small group work, and of solving differences in opinion without teacher

interference. They need to have expectations, yes, but beyond guidelines, I think students thrive on being able to create something new, on their own.

- The anti-bullying play gave everyone an equal chance to talk, and I noticed that both the outgoing and the quieter students worked together to discuss the best way to display a scene.
- Every student was equally important within their productions, and they really responded to “doing” what they were learning about which really made the important parts stick out. They put the play together themselves with us only guiding them.
- All students were involved in each activity. And not only did they learn about the various types of bullying, but they also learned about solutions. One student commented that she had been told about solutions before, but never had she actually applied them in role play. She thought that now that she had done the action and said the words out loud, it would be easier to do it for real.

The pre-service teachers had a great deal to say about their perceptions of student learning during the process; in addition, they all felt that their own beliefs about using drama as a method to address bullying were validated and reinforced through the process. They noted that not only did the students respond positively to the lessons, but that they were able to show their learning of the social issue through their journal writing, their group work, and the final play. The pre-service teachers also commented on the positive impact that team-teaching had on their professional growth, and how it provided a model for the elementary students to work cooperatively.

## DISCUSSION

Learning through drama is not always immediate. In fact, a rich drama experience often takes time to become internalized, and the impact the process and/or product has on a participant may only emerge some time later. Therefore, the repercussions of the UPEI anti-bullying drama initiative are difficult to fully measure. Nonetheless, this snapshot of students’ stated beliefs, feelings, and perceptions on bullying at a particular time, which in this case was soon after the drama project, offers insights to educators and



policy makers. The study indicates a clear difference in elementary students' stated attitudes towards bullying in the pre-and post-production comments. And, although the long term effects are not clear, the immediate impact of the drama project (production and playbuilding) on student beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying suggest a positive change.

The recorded comments surrounding the production component of the project, which enabled over 3000 students to witness *You didn't Do anything!*, indicates that the anti-bullying message was understood. This broad outreach element of the project appears to have positively impacted the elementary students who witnessed the production and activities. However, the deeper change in attitudes towards bullying seems to come from the three week playbuilding process. This component was more focused and in-depth, because more time was allowed to absorb and apply the anti-bullying drama-based activities. A community seems to have been developed in the four selected classrooms, where teamwork and respect was fostered among the elementary students. The process itself of working in groups through drama activities seems to have reinforced and supported the anti-bullying lessons. Most often, anti-social behavior such as bullying comes from a lack of understanding, and drama often opens up these misunderstandings or at least helps people appreciate and explore other perspectives (Basourakos, 1998; Bouchard, 2000; Winston, 1998). The one-off attempts such as the anti-bullying production hold value and benefits to students; nonetheless, the findings in this research project suggest how the in-depth treatment of bullying, through the three week process, provides a deeper and more meaningful impact on student perceptions of the issue.

The four teachers who shared their grade six classrooms for the playbuilding unit were able to observe the dynamics of their students from another angle during the process. They commented on how they saw different strengths in particular students, strengths such as collaboration which they had not noticed before. The pre-service teachers, for their part, had experienced the playbuilding process as they created their own collective drama *You didn't Do Anything!*, yet their responses clearly indicated that it was only while leading their grade six students that they truly and fully appreciated the learning that occurs when using drama as an approach to

addressing a social issue. It is evident that other benefits, aside from attitude changes towards bullying, were gained from the project. For example, a number of recorded comments suggested that the drama-based approach fostered a respectful team environment, generating a more conducive learning milieu. Consequently, pedagogical gains were achieved through the initiative, and teachers, pre-service teachers, and elementary students respectively pointed out the value and power of drama as a way of learning and knowing.

In a number of studies, researchers from various disciplines have pointed to the positive effects on student learning when drama is used as a pedagogical approach or as an intervention strategy (Conrad, 1998; Eisner, 1998; Kardash & Wright, 1987; Rose, Parks, Androes & McMahon, 2000; Wagner, 1998). As a result, it is perhaps not surprising that student and teacher responses in this drama project suggest a positive change in attitudes towards bullying. Carefully considered drama initiatives more often than not increase both cognitive and affective learning, creating opportunities for academic enrichment and positive social development (Basourakos, 1998; Bouchard, 2002; Colby, 1987; Courtney, 1980; Winston, 1998).

Through this project, I have begun to uncover perceptions about social development when drama is used as an intervention with elementary students. Thus this study complements and expands the existing literature in drama and social justice. The results from this study suggest the following implications for future research:

- To further assess the efficacy of drama as an approach to address bullying in schools, it would be helpful to test a control group who would be provided with the same information as the playbuilding group yet the lessons would be presented in a non-dramatic approach.
- Following the project, student beliefs, feelings, and perceptions should be re-assessed at intervals to see if change is maintained.
- The research could look at whether changes in student attitudes about bullying lead to behavioral changes.
- The inclusion of counselors, psychologists, and sociologists would enrich the team's expertise in future endeavors.
- It would be interesting to compare how, and if, changes would occur in

student beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying if music, visual art, or another arts-based approach were used in the process.

- To look at different grade levels participating in a similar project as a comparative method would deepen the research.

## CONCLUSION

One of the most pervasive problems in schools continues to be the existence of bullying. The problem has been around for many years, and will no doubt continue to rear its ugly head in the future. However, schools, with the help of students, teachers, and particular initiatives, can address and likely lessen the problem. Just as, effective initiatives about littering, smoking, drinking and driving, protecting the environment, to name a few, have helped change behavior, we can make a difference with anti-bullying awareness programs. The UPEI anti-bullying drama project illustrates one example where an initiative targeted at elementary students has found stated changes in attitudes. The supporting evidence within the study indicates that the drama project had a positive impact on students' beliefs, feelings, and perceptions about bullying. Whether the initiative will succeed in changing behavior towards more peaceful and respectful interactions among students is difficult to fully predict; nonetheless, discussing and addressing bullying issues through creative drama lessons has allowed elementary students to tap into both their cognitive and affective domains, increasing the chances for positive change. In fact, raising awareness is often seen as the first step in changing behavior.

We can only hope that student comments such as “put yourself in the place of the bullied and you would not bully anymore,” and “we can make a difference by intervening” will translate into action and behavioral change to help reduce bullying within schools and society. Every child has the right to feel safe and be able to learn without fear of being harassed or bullied inside or outside of class. Therefore, every effort is worth the time and energy.<sup>10</sup>

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