

Using Theater to Address Bullying

Acting out personal experiences with bullying fosters compassion and empowers all students—bullies, victims, and witnesses—to stand up for what's right.

Jo Salas

In a school music room, a 6th grader is telling a story. The room has been arranged into an informal, intimate theater, with a cleared stage area and curving rows of chairs for the audience. A visiting theater company has come to listen to and act out the students' stories about bullying.

Kelly,¹ a heavysset girl with a blonde ponytail, sits at the side of the stage beside the emcee, or "conductor." "I get teased every day, on the bus and at school." Kelly's voice drops and she looks at the floor. "Because of my size."

"Kelly, choose one of the actors to be you, and two actors to play the other kids," says the conductor.

Kelly points to one of the actors. "She can be me." She looks hard at the others and chooses two to represent the bullies.

The actors take positions on the stage. Then, without discussion or planning, they act out Kelly's story. At the climax of the story, the actor playing Kelly speaks aloud her anger and hurt.

The students in the audience watch with riveted attention. Some of them are the bullies in Kelly's story. Others have witnessed the bullying. And some have

been on the receiving end of cruel name-calling themselves.

Kelly nods as her story comes to an end.

"Is that what it's like, Kelly?"

She sighs. "Yes, just like that." We stay with her story a little longer, exploring how she can react to such

based on audience members' true stories—joyful, poignant, funny, or tragic—and operates on the belief that any sincerely told and competently enacted story contains important meaning, both for the teller and for the listener. This exchange of personal experiences forges connections,

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bullying and—equally important—how other students might support her.

Kelly goes back to her seat, smiling a little. Friends welcome her as she sits down.

Playback Theatre

This interactive approach is called *playback theatre*. It takes place in schools, public theaters, and community agencies in approximately 50 countries around the world. First developed in the Mid-Hudson Valley region of New York State in 1975, playback theatre is

promotes dialogue, and provides a forum for often-unheard voices. The extensive training that playback theatre actors receive focuses not only on theater and story-shaping skills but also on gaining deep listening skills and the ability to respond to any story—no matter how sensitive—with compassion, understanding, and respect. Playback theatre leaders also learn to guide the process in a way that fosters safety, inclusiveness, and the special atmosphere of vision and possibility that comes from the presence of art.

Schools in particular have recognized the power of playback theatre in addressing the problem of bullying, fostering an appreciation of diversity, and helping students realize their own potential to stop bullying.

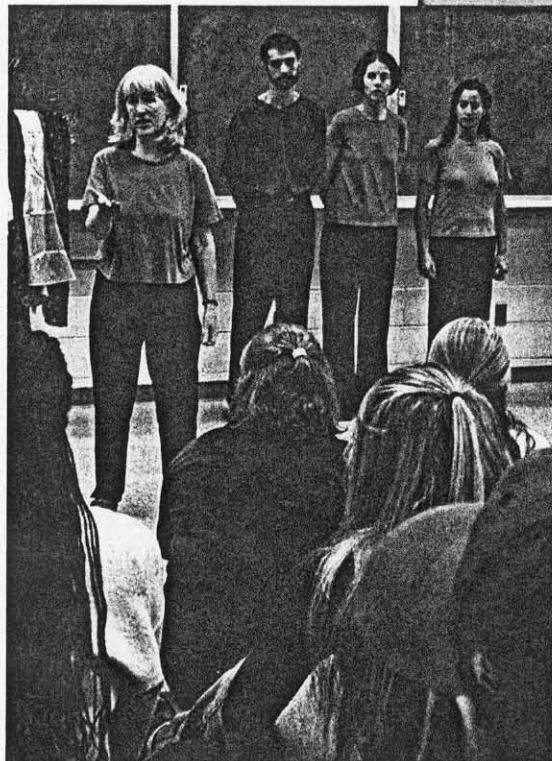
Addressing Bullying

Playback theatre interprets personal experience in a creative, nonconfrontational, and nonjudgmental way, demonstrating to students that the playback stage is a safe place where they can be heard by their classmates and teachers. All kinds of students—from high achievers to students with special needs, from the popular kids to the outcasts—have come forward to tell their stories.

Since 1999, Hudson River Playback Theatre, based in New Paltz, New York, has conducted anti-bullying programs with more than 15,000 students. As director of the program, I have seen how profoundly important it is for students to be able to express themselves without fear of being judged or disparaged. Seeing their stories acted out helps many young students understand their own experience in a new way. In addition, their peers in the audience may realize for the first time what it feels like to be called racial slurs or physically hurt by a bully. Students may respond to one another's stories with a story of their own, or an expression of their desire to help.

In our shows, we first raise the topic of bullying by asking, "What's it like when you see bullying happen?" Most students' observations are variations on "I feel bad about it, but I don't know what to do"—an expression of empathy that is the kernel of change. We then ask students what it's like to be bullied. We often hear from students who are currently being victimized, sometimes in a very serious, chronic way. Once we had a boy who, with palpable despera-

Jo Salas engages in dialogue with a 10th grade student while playback theatre actors listen (below). Next, the actors enact what they heard—a brief story about spreading rumors (right).



PHOTOS BY LAUREN THOMAS

tion, described the persistent bullying he had experienced for several years and the complete lack of support he received from adults or peers. In this kind of case, we make certain to bring the student's plight to the attention of counseling and administrative staff.

It's less common for someone to speak up about being a bully, but it does happen. During one program, a 7th grader related the humiliation and pain he felt after being shoved down a flight of stairs. A few minutes later, another boy raised his hand. "Can a bully tell a story?" he said. "I was the one who shoved him. Now I feel really sorry." He looked at the other boy and apologized directly to him. This moment of honesty and rapprochement made a strong impression on the other students.

After hearing a number of these brief

statements, we invite students to come to the stage and tell longer stories. The teller sits at the side of the stage with the conductor and recounts what happened, choosing actors to play key roles as he or she goes along. Sometimes we invite other students to help act out the story—playing, for example, kids in the cafeteria or an adult who intervened. As with Kelly's story, the teller watches as his or her story is enacted and then has an opportunity to comment.

Playback enactments vividly portray the humanity of bullied students, demonstrating to their peers that these students are real kids like them, not faceless victims. Paul, a boy with dwarfism, told a story about being trodden to the ground as other children scrambled to get off the school bus. The actor playing Paul portrayed him with both dignity and poignancy. It was a deeply satisfying moment for Paul and an important lesson for all those watching.

After acting out a story that is unresolved or particularly painful, the conductor might invite the teller to imagine a different outcome and then watch as the actors play it back in a "transformation" scene. It can be both healing and empowering for students to observe a gesture of strength in the face of disrespect, to see the actors say or do what they wish they had been able to in real life. It is not simply a comforting fantasy but a way to both assuage the

pain of a hurtful experience and rehearse a more effective or satisfying response to similar situations that may arise in the future.

Appreciating Diversity

Stories about bullying are often stories about intolerance of differences—in ethnicity, sexual orientation, or ability, for example. Personal stories about prejudiced behavior provide an opportunity for tellers to let others know who they are as people rather than as stereotypes. The stories can also radically change the outlook of those who may be hearing for the first time what it feels like to be the target of discrimination.

Maria, a Puerto Rican student, told a story about being insulted by some older boys because of her ethnicity. Her classmates, mostly white, were shocked by the boys' cruelty and Maria's obvious anguish. We played Maria's story as it had happened and then asked her how she would like it to have unfolded. Drying her eyes, Maria said, "I would like those boys to ask me about where I come from, and really listen when I tell them how beautiful it is in Puerto Rico." We acted out the imagined scene she described, with her tormentors now curious and respectful. After the scene was over, Maria was surrounded by students offering both comfort and admiration.

One 15-year-old student was treated brutally because he was gay. Other kids had told him outright that they were trying to drive him to suicide. He was just counting the days until he could leave school. Telling his story was a gesture of survival, a way to expose the cruelty to which he'd been subjected and to gain support from others who had not known of his situation.

A 9th grade girl talked about being called a slut by her peers because of her "Goth" style of dress. "No one really knows me at all," she said. When we asked her what she would like others to know about her, she said, "Well, I love to sing, and I have a good voice." The other students applauded her warmly

AIMS OF EDUCATION

A word as to the education of the heart. We don't believe that this can be imparted through books; it can only be imparted through the loving touch of the teacher.

—Cesar Chavez

and urged her to sing for them.

Through these kinds of stories, audience members learn the importance of respecting their peers and gain an appreciation of their school community's rich diversity.

Realizing the Power of the Witness

One 2nd grader told a story about befriending an isolated black classmate. After his tale was performed, he stood facing the class, holding my hand tightly. "I just want to stand up for what is right," he said.

We have found that this sense of altruism is not unusual. Students of all ages make it clear that they would take

action to end bullying and intolerance if only they knew what to do—and if only they weren't afraid of being picked on themselves. Hearing one another's stories in playback theatre shows them, quite dramatically, that they are not alone in longing for justice and respect in their school.

One of our goals is to help students realize the potential power they have as witnesses. The climate of passivity in the face of bullying that prevails in many schools thrives on the assumption that other students accept or condone it. Constrained by fear of physical attack or of being scorned and excluded, most students are simply not willing to act alone. But when students learn that many of their peers share their altruistic concern, the picture changes. In a moment of tension on the bus or on the playground, a young person is far more likely to step forward to help if she is confident that others share her indignation and will support her.

This sense of solidarity can build a culture that challenges bullying. In our shows we often explore some of the witnesses' options—telling the bully to stop, making friends with the student who's being picked on, telling a teacher, and so on. Alicia, a 4th grader, told a story about feeling helpless to protect a classmate on the bus. After she had seen the story enacted, I asked her what might have made it possible to stop the bully. She thought hard for a minute. "If other kids had told him to stop, not just me." I asked her exactly how many kids she thought it would have taken. "Five," she said. "Four plus me." At my sugges-

Further Reading

■ *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination.* (1990).

By Robert Coles. New York: Mariner Books.

■ *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do.* (1993). By Dan Olweus. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

■ *Open Minds to Equality: A Sourcebook of Learning Activities to Affirm Diversity and Promote Equality* (2nd ed.). (1997). By Nancy Schniedewind and Ellen Davidson. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

■ *Improvising Real Life: Personal Story in Playback Theatre* (3rd ed.). (1999). By Jo Salas. New Paltz, NY: Tusitala Publishing.

tion, she chose four students from the audience to act out this new scene: a vivid illustration of how sheer numbers can make all the difference.

Some of our shows end with a particularly stirring moment. After an hour of telling stories and sharing strong feelings, we say to the students, "If you feel that you could stand up for fairness next time you see someone being bullied, we invite you to stand up right now." There is a pause. Then one child stands, and another, and another, until the majority of the students are on their feet. In this moment, at least, they mean it with all their heart.

Preparation and Follow-Up

Classroom preparation and follow-up greatly enhance the effectiveness of a playback theatre program. Hudson River Playback Theatre provides teachers with simple guidelines for preparation and follow-up. Preparation guidelines

include small-group discussions on bullying, followed by a whole-class discussion to generate a definition of bullying. For example, a class might define bullying as deliberately and repeatedly making someone feel bad or targeting differences in others. The preparation lesson also communicates to students what to expect from the upcoming performance. Taking even 15 or 20 minutes to prepare students means that they come to the performance informed and ready to tell their stories. Follow-up is just as necessary; it's important to allow time for classes to address questions or issues that may arise from the stories.


In today's accountability-driven school environment, it can be hard for teachers to use precious class time to prepare for a playback theatre program and debrief afterward. A solution to this problem is for teachers to relate the content and the process of the playback

shows to academic subjects and learning standards.

For example, a social studies teacher may say, "Yesterday we all saw Angie's story about kids on the bus telling her to go back to the ghetto. How did you feel when you watched that? Did it remind you of anything we've read about?" The resulting discussion could explore racial injustice and civil rights—issues that exist not only in history books but also in students' daily school lives. In English class, playback theatre can be a stimulus to writing stories and examining how they express both personal experience and social commentary. Health classes can focus on the roles that respect and disrespect play in individual and community well-being. Because playback theatre presents a series of real-life, emotionally resonant experiences, it provides an opportunity for this kind of rich dialogue and in-depth exploration of curricular topics.

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Assessing the Program

The best way to assess the impact of the playback theatre shows is simply to observe the performances themselves: how many students speak up, the content and depth of their stories, students' responses to the enactments, and the way students are received by peers after telling their stories.

In addition, students fill out comment cards in their follow-up lesson. After a recent 16-performance series in four elementary schools, 253 of 316 respondents said they liked the show "a lot." Fifty-two liked it "a little" and 11 "not at all." Eighty-two students wrote additional stories about bullying on the back of their cards. In response to the final question—"How do you think you and other students might benefit from playback theatre?"—comments included the following:

■ I think other students would benefit from the show because then they would

understand what it feels like to get bullied around and they wouldn't do it.

■ I learned a lot. It helped me because my brother gets picked on a lot.

■ I won't bully people, and I learned I should stick up for me and other people.

■ I know I'm not the only one getting bullied.

■ We might stop bullying and stand up for what is right.

Hudson River Playback Theatre also seeks feedback from teaching, counseling, and administrative staff. We plan to conduct research to assess the long-term impact of the program when funding becomes available.

Creative Collaboration

Playback theatre has proved itself as an interactive, effective way to help schoolchildren deal with bullying. By telling stories and seeing them performed, young people gain an important opportunity to learn from experi-

ence—both their own and that of their peers. They discover that they are far from alone in wanting to make their school—and their society—a more just and respectful place. With creative collaboration between school personnel and the playback theatre team, the enactments of students' true-life stories can be a vehicle for lasting change in their lives and in the life of the school. ■

'All students' names have been changed.

Author's note: For information about training in playback theatre, visit the School of Playback Theatre at www.playbackschool.org.

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