Using theatre education as a medium for bullying prevention

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USING THEATRE EDUCATION AS A MEDIUM FOR BULLYING PREVENTION

by

Amanda N. Pioppi

An Action Research Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Master of Science in Teaching Degree of The Graduate School at Rowan University

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ABSTRACT

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USING THEATRE EDUCATION AS A MEDIUM FOR BULLYING PREVENTION
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Dr. Beth A. Wassell
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The purpose of this study was to educate high school students about bullying prevention through the use of theatre education. A unit was designed to enhance student discussion and interpretation of the issue. The use of student journals, discussions, and student work artifacts were used as data sources for this action research study. Along with this, students rehearsed and produced a play, *Bang, Bang, You’re Dead*, designed to create prevention awareness. The Advanced Acting class, eighteen junior and senior level high school students, went through a continuum of change during the study. There was a visible change in their discussions and interpretations during the process. The students took ownership of the information toward the conclusion of the study and created material to reach out to their school community. The data in this study show that students can use their skills and strengths to both comprehend the subject and produce understandings.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like my students, I have gone through an evolution of change this year. This journey has not been an easy one, and I’d like to thank the people who helped me along the way. Family, friends, and teachers are all a part of this picture. First and foremost, I would like to thank someone very special to me, Christopher Carlson: Thank you for always being a listening ear, keeping me sane with your weekend visits, and reminding me to get a job. My grandmother, Rita Beu: Thank you for constantly feeding me, supplying me with my daily needs, and pretty much taking care of me. Mom and Dad, I wouldn't be anywhere without your love and support. Philicia, you always lent a helping hand when I needed it most. Victoria, your beautiful, inspirational artwork remind me why I want to be a teacher every day. Jina and Collin, thank you for the much needed weekend getaway. Special thanks to my supervisor, Professor David Sullivan, for his help all throughout my student teaching. My M.S.T. Cohort (Club R.U.M.): Thank you for your encouragement and friendship. Your unique personalities kept my spirit up throughout this process. Last but certainly not least, Dr. Beth Wassell, thank you for working closely with me to enhance the quality of my research and for always being there. This action research would not be the same without you.

A year ago I did not know what to expect or what challenges were ahead of me, but I lived through it and here I am. Now, it is time to move on as a teacher and a researcher and make it happen. As they say in my favorite musical (Wicked), "Because I knew you, I have been changed for good."
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Bullying is a major issue in schools across the country. Students are facing this problem on a consistent basis and live with the effects for years to come. Bullying can often be a neglected issue once students reach high school. The prevention programs available for schools tend to incorporate activities that are more powerful for younger students and are looked at by many high school students as irrelevant and unrealistic. Many schools do not have the resources for students of that age group nor the techniques needed to address issues related to bullying.

Sometimes students do not see the potential risk factors caused by bullying due to the lack of proper programming. Many do not know that bullying is a significant problem in their school. In fact, students may take part in bullying without even realizing their actions. The students in my Advanced Acting class do not think bullying occurs frequently in their school nor do they think the school is taking the right actions to prevent the bullying that does take place. The students do not realize that they can make an impact on their school’s bullying issues by using their theatre skills.

Story behind the research. The students in my class are motivated to perform theatre and strive for ways to show their abilities in class. They have mentioned that they would like the class to have more challenging plays as well as those that produce dramatic events. With this in mind, the play I introduced to them is titled Bang, Bang.
You're Dead, which is dedicated to the prevention of school bullying and school violence. The events in this play do not take place in chronological order like most plays; instead, they take place in a tormented student’s head, visually illustrating the consequences of his actions with flashbacks and voices of the students he hurt. My students had not yet performed a play so in-depth nor had they dealt with performing such a serious topic.

My reason for wanting to do such a project is to have theatre students discover how their performance can affect an audience and to help them gain knowledge about the risks of bullying and school violence. Being a part of this process could potentially strengthen the students as performers and critical thinkers. Since a majority of the students did not believe bullying is a problem in their school, I felt it was necessary to help the students challenge their assumptions. It became important for the students to discover if they were right or wrong about bullying in relation to their school after learning about the topic and its statistics.

I wanted to find out if theatre can be used to produce awareness for serious subjects in a productive way. Considering that my students had only performed plays with happy or unrealistic endings, I wanted to explore a different type of theatre with them. Also, I was curious to determine if the play would challenge them and if their opinions changed through the process. I believe schools need to see the major impact theatre education has on the individuals involved. In this study, I wanted to see if theatre education could bring about awareness, challenge students to process the information, and create reactions to the events introduced in the play.
Significance of the Study

As a theatre education teacher, I am investigating meaningful ways to give drama purpose while enhancing students’ education. Even as a newcomer to the education world, I have noticed that theatre education is not considerably looked upon as a necessity to furthering students’ education. I feel the urge to be an advocate for the subject, and with this study, I hope to create somewhat of a coalition between education and theatre. If it is possible for this study to have a purposeful and positive outcome, schools may find ways to incorporate drama into programs addressing bullying and issues like it.

Purpose of the Study

This study was performed to combat a very serious subject through the teaching of theatre. It was developed to enhance my teaching by examining how I can use theatre to teach prevalent issues. This action research was also carried out for students to respond positively to an issue that is affecting them and their school. I was curious to find out if the students would discuss how bullying affects them and their school or if their perceptions would change throughout the process.

Questions

In this study, I explore the following research question using an action research framework: How can a unit on bullying prevention in theatre education enhance student discussion and interpretation of bullying? Along with this, I have included a supplementary question: How can theatre be used as a medium for bullying prevention?
To begin discussing the topic, the students wrote and verbally described their ideas about bullying. Included in this, the students provided examples of events they perceived as bullying. The students’ ideas were then challenged by statistics and examples of other real life examples that I provided. Then, the students used what they knew about bullying to role-play in improvisational exercises about bullying. This part of the process began to incorporate their creative thinking skills by developing solutions or possible outcomes.

After the introduction of the theme of bullying, the students engaged in rehearsals of the play *Bang, Bang, You’re Dead* written by William Masterosimone. The class strategized several ways to produce the play about the prevention of bullying and school violence. Throughout the process, the students recorded reflections in their journals. I posed several questions during this time about the impact of theatre as well as the topic of bullying. The students were also responsible for collecting information and creating a hallway showcase presenting bullying prevention and their play. The end of the process concluded with a performance of the play. At that time, the students participated in a live discussion with the audience about the issue. Also, an audience feedback form (see Appendix D) was created with questions developed by students in the class. The last part of the process was to discuss the performance and the student’s perceptions of the audience’s reaction.

The purpose of these actions was to collect data about the progress of the students as well as to demonstrate their interpretation of the issue. Each lesson was created to
build upon the previous information given, therefore, challenging the students to
construct meanings concerning the issue. With this, the students could create purposeful
work that gave insight to what they understand. A full list of the actions implemented
throughout this unit can be found in Appendix A.

Assumptions and Limitations

In my study, there are potential biases. It is not easy to minimize potential biases
in action research due to the nature of the research. My intention was to remain neutral
while explaining my action research. One potential bias was my personal feelings toward
the play used in this research. The meaning of the play, *Bang, Bang, You’re Dead*, has
stuck with me from the moment I read it. I saw it as an inspiring, resemblance of truth
that is hardly discussed with students. Being an advocate for this play may have some
influence on my reflection of the unit by looking for the positive results when attempting
to answer the research question.

Another potential bias was my belief that every student would benefit from this
study. Knowing many of the advantages to theatre education, there are several ways to
automatically think that the students will all find something to connect with and improve
their ideas about bullying. In reality, the students did not respond to each task with the
same outlook I had in mind. Did this prevention method work as a major factor toward
bullying prevention? I believe it did. Students’ opinions toward bullying seemed to
change after the completion of this study. My assumptions were that every student would
be changed in some way by this experience.

Since the action research was held over a short period of time, it affected the
prolonged participation of the study. The outcome might have been different if there were
more time to complete the study. Literature from other prevention programs similarly state that programs that last over a longer period of time may encourage students to change their views or habits. The time constraints were a burden to the process as the class was forced to move quickly through rehearsals.

Along with the lack of time, the end of the school year became difficult to manage rehearsals. The school designated many days for trips, half days, and spring break. Many students mentioned they found it hard to focus on class with all of those designated days. Rehearsals in drama are a necessity for scripted plays. Without a sizeable amount of students, a rehearsal cannot be affectively carried out. This limitation in the study created weaknesses in sections of the play that needed more time. With this, the students were unable to properly practice the critiques given during rehearsals.

Also, there were limitations on the performance of the play. The students performed the play for a “Scene Night,” which is held after school for anyone who is interested in attending. With nights like this, the same people usually attend. The students did not get to present to their entire school, therefore, there was the possibility that the meaning would seem lax. Since the play should be performed to reach out to an array of people, the students were frustrated with the lack of school and administrative participation. Although this was a limitation, it also assisted the students in their discussion with others such as family and friends.

Definitions

Throughout this thesis, there will be key terms addressed. In this paragraph, I provide the definitions of each term. “Action research is any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in
the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn” (Mills, 2007, p.5). My topic, *bullying*, is indicated by Whitted and Dupper (2005) as “the unprovoked physical or psychological abuse of an individual by one student or a group of students over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse” (p. 168). *Bang, Bang, You’re Dead* is a play written by William Mastersimone that is dedicated to the prevention of school bullying and school violence. *Conflict resolution education* refers to a range of processes that search to find peaceful ways to solve problems. *Theatre or Drama Education* includes a curriculum designed to use theatre/drama discipline to educate students while enabling personal, intellectual, and social development through a variety of multiple intelligences. Lastly, the *hallway showcase* is a bulletin board display presented in a hallway of a school.
CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Although there are many sources that discuss the power of drama, not many reflect its purpose in education or why it is so relevant to prevention programs. Although this is true, I found numerous sources used skills or even activities developed in a drama program in their bullying prevention programs. Some sources argued about the correct type of program, but they all related to using theatre-based activities in their programs. The sources explain why bullying is such an important issue to enervate as well as exemplify the impact of theatre education.

The sources have provided insight to the research of this study. They incorporate many common themes and skills to use in prevention programs. Helping students to see the consequences of their actions is a significant part of this study. In various sources, students learn to handle negative situations in productive ways. Through this, the sources have shown some relation to the aspects that are seen in a theatre class.

Bullying and School Violence

Bullying is a hot topic in education today. The problems that are reoccurring in many school districts around the country are hurting both the students as well as the communities they reside in. The search for the proper and most effective prevention techniques is a goal for many of these school districts. Many researchers argue about the correct approaches that need to be taken to stop bullying. There have been many studies
concerned with stopping the bully or bullies, but, what about victims, the bystanders, and the school in which these incidents take place? It seems as if schools need to design a program to provide help to all the individuals involved.

What is bullying? Whitted and Dupper (2005) best describe bullying as “the unprovoked physical or psychological abuse of an individual by one student or a group of students over time to create an ongoing pattern of harassment and abuse” (p. 168). The individuals involved in bullying continue their behavior for long periods of time. In a sample of a cross-national research project developed by the World Health Organization, researchers reported that 10.6% of students bullied moderately while 8.8% of students bullied on a weekly basis (Astor, Meyer, Benbenishty, Marachi, & Rosemond, 2005, p.19). Bullies do not see the harm in their actions; they are terminating others’ well-being as well as deferring their own.

There are two types of bullying: direct, which includes verbal and physical attacks, and indirect (e.g., name calling, insults, threats, rumors) (Whitted & Dupper, 2005). Both types are prevalent in schools today. The victims usual have some type of vulnerability that the bully or bullies use as an advantage. Both the victims and bullies are at risk for having problems socially and emotionally.

Students need the opportunity to confront these issues in order for them to handle the situation productively. Researchers found that three out of ten students are habitually a part of bullying as either a victim or bully (Cornell, 2006). This research shows that bullying exists in students’ lives. It is an issue that needs to be discussed and dealt with before students are pushed to extremes. According to Cornell (2006), studies performed by both the FBI and the Secret Service indicated that two-thirds of the students involved
in school shootings were triggered by the desire to seek vengeance on their classmates due to some form of bullying, which entails that this issue is current and happening on a routine basis.

Many students who are not a part of bullying have the mindset that school violence could never happen in their school or that bullying is not a big issue. Cornell (2006) points out that even after the tragedies at schools that feel victim to shootings, many staff and students had trouble recognizing the relentlessness of bullying that occurred before the incidents. This attitude may be due to ignorance to the many sides to bullying and because of the lack of prevention programs offered.

*Programs*

There have been many studies performed to determine the success of the programs offered to students, schools, families, and their communities. There is no “one size fits all” approach to the programs since ever school has its own design with different needs (Astor et al., 2005). Although through my research, I have found that many of these programs have similar features and techniques. For instance, Sexton-Radek (2005) and Cornell (2006) both mention the PATHS program, also known as Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies, which includes getting students to learn “problem-solving, self-control, and emotional regulation skills” (Sexton-Radek, p. 65; Cornell, p.133). Other programs with related goals include Responding in Peaceful and Positive Ways (RIPP) and Second Step (Cornell, 2006). These three programs include alternate ways to handle problem situations, and building social skills, empathy for others, and problem-solving skills.
Sexton-Radek (2005) discusses some of the features seen in these programs and how they relate to the whole self of the individual. From early childhood to middle adolescence, students are presented with activities that feature many of the same goals for the students provided with different procedures. Sexton-Radek (2005) states that they:

typically employ three general approaches: (1) the teaching of cognitive, social, and emotional skills thought to aid nonviolent conflict management, (2) the promotion of prosocial attitudes and values, and (3) instruction in the risk factors or triggers that can lead to violence (p. 26).

Another similarity in these programs is that they should be “developmentally appropriate and be meaningful and enjoyable for the students” (Whitted & Dupper, 2005, p. 172). These programs enable students to think for themselves by making clear judgments about serious issues without the fear of rejection. For instance, the LEAP program has a section known as the Quarrel Shop “which enables young people to take responsibility for resolving their own disputes to tackle bullying and violence for themselves and make creative use of the conflicts in their lives” (May, 1997, p. 62). The program is designed to solve the current issues group is facing as they work together with their peers.

Bullybusters, a program that uses drama as the medium for prevention, has been a success at numerous schools around the country. The students were introduced to activities where they could use their acting skills while learning about ways to handle bullying and conflicts. As part of the Bullybusters program a community is established in the classroom with positive networking relationships where they develop problem-
solving strategies and have an open forum to share with one another (Horne, Bartolomucci, & Newman-Carlson, 2005).

The Bullybusters program is beneficial to both bullies and victims. The bullies gain understanding and skills from instruction in the following areas: “anger and impulse control, empathy, cognitive skills, and social skills” (Horne et al., p.246). The victims, on the other hand, also benefit from the experiences of the program as they gain confidence in themselves. The victims learn to see the positive attributes that exist while changing the things that make them seem helpless (Horne et al., 2003). Both groups work together to solve problems without feeling negativity to their actions.

The drama put into practice in the Bullybusters program can also be known as psychoeducational drama. Psychoeducational drama is intended to “stimulate discussion among audience members” in that it resembles real-life situations shown in a limited time span to produce its desired impact (Beale, 2001, para.14). The middle school students involved in this program learn positive peer interactions and new ways of behaving. Beale (2001) explains, “because they have fictional referents on whom they focus their discussion, students are not personally threatened and are more likely to respond spontaneously” (para.17). The students feel comfortable while exploring many ways to solve problems during performance and discussion.

Like the other programs, Bullybusters encourages students to work together and become active members of a community. The students can focus on solving problems together with role playing activities and discussion. The profit of this program concluded with a decrease of 20% in the middle school’s bullying incidents during the first year of the program where Bullybusters took place (Beale, 2001). The advantages of using
psychoeducational drama can pay off. The students in these programs learn from observing and participating in theatre. In these situations, theatre has a meaningful purpose to change the lives of those involved.

Using Drama

Drama is an exceptional tool that is used to help students feel comfortable socially as well as build problem-solving skills. Johnson and Johnson (1995) discuss the excellence in role-playing for character education and bullying programs. The students are able to act out situations without feeling the burden of their consequences if they fail to succeed. Johnson and Johnson (1995) state, “this tool allows students to experience a conflict, identify effective and ineffective behavior, gain insight into their behavior in conflict situations, and practice the procedures and skills required to manage the conflict” (p. 93). The elements of drama are helping students analyze situations they may be facing or that they may encounter one day. By allowing students to make their own decisions in a pseudo conflict, it is forcing them to challenge what they think and prepare for the right choices.

Grady (2000) discusses numerous ways in which theatre can build awareness in the classroom through theatre interaction and discussion. Similarly, Holloway and LeCompte (2001) explain that there is an increase in “academic achievement, creativity, fluency, and originality in thinking and feelings of self-worth” through participation in the arts (p. 388). In the safety of the environment, students can express themselves without risk and they can establish their identity while finding their voice (Holloway & LeCompte, 2001). Jones and Compton (2003) describe the experiences theatre offers as “conflict discovery, a process of reflection and increasing awareness about one’s
orientations to and reactions to conflict” (p. 147). The school becomes a community exploring ‘conflict resolution’ and respect through the arts (Jones & Compton, 2003).

While researching sources, I found three main forms of theatre have worked for prevention issues such as bullying. One of the forms, psychoeducational drama, was explained earlier within the review. The other two forms include sustainability theatre (theatre of development) and forum theatre (presenting theatre that leads to discussion) (Housten, Magill, McCollum, & Trevor, 2001; Clark, 2008). These forms all take on realistic issues concerning the people of a particular community and produce ways to prevent the issues. For example, forum theatre has the potential to affect students by allowing them to identify with the characters they see onstage (Housten et al., 2001). This, in turn, makes students question what the reasons were for the characters’ actions and if the actions were appropriate.

Theatre education can make a difference in the transition process to make students successful. Educators should build students awareness of how these roles affect people and how students can lighten the pressures (Grady, 2000). McGregor (2005) describes this process as an opportunity for students to experiment by using hypothetical situations with a variety of reactions and responses. While increasing their understanding of other people and their situations, students conclude with a change in the students’ perceptions of how to react to real situations. McGregor (2005) makes a similar point by stating that children “can learn to become more aware of the complexities of human situations and possibly even start questioning certain preconceptions and prejudices” (p. 31). Most of the research seems to relate back to the same clear concepts including the power of drama education.
Theatre is beneficial to the students within these prevention programs due to the impact that drama has on not only the actors but the audience as well. Levy (2005) explains that theatre education teaches a plethora of lessons including making a disinterested audience question what is presented to them. That is, they are given a choice to make a decision about their feelings relating to the subject or even to challenge a concept. Theatre teaches the actors and the audience to take a stand, and it does this by using comedy to exaggerate behaviors (as foolish or vicious as they may seem) or by using drama to make those behaviors so real that they cause an impact (Levy, 2005).

Ultimately, theatre allows bullies and victims to find their identity through the many ways of expression and decision-making theatre has to offer. For instance, students learn “skills crucial to high levels of performance, including accountability, collegiality, responsibility, risk-taking, self-direction, independence, and discipline” (Holloway & LeCompte, 2001, p. 401). By representation and role-playing, students become aware of the possibilities that are available for them. Using theatre as a prevention tool can teach students to contribute to a community with their peers, challenge ways of thinking by creating new situations, and develop a sense of self by experimenting with their identity.
Chapter III
Methodology

Action Research

In Mills (2007), action research is described as “any systematic inquiry conducted by teacher researchers, principals, school counselors, or other stakeholders in the teaching/learning environment to gather information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how well their students learn” (p. 5). The research then transforms from more traditional to more practical. The objectives when gathering information include gaining insight, developing reflective practice, effecting positive changes in the school environment, and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved. The process of action research helps the professional disposition of the teacher in their classroom and their professional life. Mills (2007) breaks down the process of action research into four steps: 1) identify an area of focus, 2) collect data, 3) analyze and interpret data, 4) develop an action plan. In my study, I implemented the process of action research and used Guba’s criteria for trustworthiness to strengthen the value of my work.

Trustworthiness

For my research, I followed the principles in Guba’s Criteria for Validity of Qualitative Research (as cited in Mills, 2007). Guba believes that credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability can be used to determine the trustworthiness of qualitative inquiry.
In terms of credibility, or breaking down the complexities that exist, I debriefed my ideas with colleagues through discussion. Peer debriefing is a good way to reflect on the work taking place. The alternate perspective of another person helps to identify the areas that may seem unclear to the researcher or to recognize those areas that might be overlooked.

The transferability of my work refers to how this study can be associated with a broader picture. With transferability, the details within the study may be used by others to test the findings for that particular group. I collected detailed descriptive data that will allow the information to be compared to other potential contexts. Part of the data I collected will be the work of my particular group of students and the learning environment that we have created, which may differ if the study were repeated.

Dependability determines the consistency of the data that is being collected. It is a method used to address the stability of the data. Overlapping methods, to balance weakness of one method to the strength of another, is one way to attend to this criterion. I balanced my data by gathering different forms of work completed. For instance, the recorded discussions and the student artifacts created in the hallway showcase gave different materials to analyze. By doing this, I was able to better understand the students’ intentions for their work. It also helped me conclude if the students grasped the information provided in their education toward bullying.

Guba’ last criterion is confirmability or the neutrality of the data being collected. Confirmability can be established by practicing both triangulation and reflexivity. Triangulation is a method for the researcher to cross-check data being collected; it can also be used for credibility. With the data being collected, I compared the success and
breakdown of each. Reflexivity, on the other hand, is a method to reveal biases and underlying assumptions held by the researcher. By practicing reflexivity, I will explain my own biases through the explanation of my observations, writing, and background story.

Context of the Study

School and community. The school where my research took place was in a community where the total population was 32,832 people. The majority of those people are White Non-Hispanic (84.8%) followed by African American (11.2%) and Hispanic (2.7%). Other races in this population include Asian (1.2%), American Indian (0.2%), and two or more races (1.5%). The median income for a household in this area is $50,037. More than 34% of those households have school-age children (“American FactFinder,” n.d.).

The public school district where my study was conducted serves a population of over 6,000 students. The high school currently consists of 1811 students with diverse backgrounds. The school’s diversity consists of 74.6% Caucasian, 20.4% African-American, 3.2% Hispanic, 1.5% Asian, and 0.2% American Indian/Alaskan students. A large majority of the students in the school speak English (99.8%) as their first language. The students with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) make up 16.5% of the population in the school. The graduation rate of students at this high school is 85.4% (Department of Education, 2008).

Classroom. The classroom consisted of a large open space with tiered seating. The room was designed to assist with theatre lessons and performances. There was a

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1 Pseudonyms will be used to refer to all individuals and places described in this study.
stage curtain in the front of the classroom to create a mock stage for performance opportunities. With this curtain students were hidden from the audience while waiting for their next entrance. The students in this study rehearsed and also performed the play *Bang, Bang, You’re Dead* in the classroom.

*Participants.* When developing my focus for this action research, I wanted the study to meet the needs and interest of the students. I selected my Advanced Acting class since the students had at least two years participation in theatre arts classes at the high school level and an interest in performing a play that was dramatic rather than comedic. Due to the students’ experience, I felt they were the most appropriate class to participate in this research. Being in upper grades, I wondered if their age group might have an impact on the study.

In my Advanced Acting class, there were eighteen students. Sixteen of the students were Caucasian and two were African-American. The class consisted of seven eleventh graders and eleven twelfth graders. The majority of the class was girls along with only four boys. One student in this class had an IEP but it did not affect the student’s involvement in this study.

*Data Sources*

There were three main sources of data used in this study: student journals, discussions, and student work artifacts. This data was gathered to triangulate the research performed in the study. With the data sources, I was better able to analyze the students’ responses to the research. Having the students write, verbalize, and visually show their understanding of the subject assisted my interpretation of the data. A list of the actions implemented and data sources collected can be found in Appendix A.
The students were given prompt questions to reflect on in their journals on a weekly basis relating to bullying. Then, I collected the journals for review before returning them. The journals, as a source of data, allowed the students to share their opinions and ideas about bullying and school violence. The students were not limited to share their opinion and could express their thoughts without fear of rejection. Similar to bullying prevention programs that use drama principles, this data source gave students an outlet to make sense of the materials provided to them without conflict. Students who were not as comfortable speaking up in discussions were able to voice their opinion through writing. This was one way of cross-checking data; it strengthened my study by enabling each participant to express his or her opinions related to the topic.

With discussion, the students could actively respond to one another in a safe environment while talking about such a serious and prevalent issue. By using discussion as data, the students could start to process bullying as a key issue. Assuming that the students might differ in their opinions, they would be able to construct their own meanings. This piece of data was extremely necessary due to the basis of my action research question. Since the question asks how a theatre education unit can enhance the students’ discussion, it was imperative to have multiple discussions to use as data. The discussions collected impacted daily lessons, the progress of the unit, and relevance to their lives all relating to the topic of bullying and school violence.

The student work artifacts were documented as the unit progressed. The students engaged in numerous activities to focus on the prevention of bullying. The work established in this unit forced the students to make decisions about the topic. In these activities, the students implemented ideas and constructed meanings about bullying and
how if affects them. Throughout the unit, the Advanced Acting students engaged in activities that demonstrated their interpretation of bullying. For example, in the beginning of the unit, students were given a picture prompt (see Appendix B) about bullying to perform rather than giving a written response. The students worked in small groups to prepare then present their interpretation of the picture. The students’ class work during these activities exemplified their interpretations of bullying.

This way of working together to interpret and make meaning progressed gradually throughout the unit. The group intervention activity applied the students’ acting skills to improvised characters from varying age groups that were involved in bullying as a bully, victim, or bystander. An activity like this allowed the students to role play problem situations and problem-solve solutions. Also, the students produced their ideas of a successful production by creating the play in rehearsals during class time. They worked collaboratively to construct the play.

One piece of data that included their collaboration and development toward the play was a hallway display case (see Appendix C). The display case was a way to reach out to the school community. It was used as an advertisement for the play as well as an awareness message. The students all contributed to the creation of the display.

The final student work data collected was the performance of *Bang, Bang, You’re Dead*. In my opinion theatre doesn’t have meaning unless there is an audience. Although the students worked on the play in rehearsals, the audience would provide another dynamic to their performance. This data was followed by the students’ discussion with the audience.
The three sources of data were intertwined throughout the unit. The students did a lot of reflecting on activities and discussions. With this, the data formed themes to answer the research question. The patterns that existed became evolutionary as the students started to produce the play. With the audience as their main focus, the students started connecting the subject to prevention and the realization of the problem that exists.
CHAPTER IV

Findings, Analysis, and Interpretation

While looking at the data, I noticed that the students' involvement in the study enhanced as the unit progressed. Also, the students' interaction and commitment in the study transformed. In this chapter, I will describe the data as a continuum of change for the students. The details of my findings and analysis will be described in a chronological timeline. I will sometimes refer to the data collection as an “evolution.”

The data showed an evolution of student interest in the unit. The students' attitudes and understanding toward the topic of bullying in general changed as the lessons in the unit unfolded. Once the students felt control in the final production, their awareness for the subject matured. They began to connect how bullying affects them and their surroundings. In some ways, they began to make sense of what they were already experiencing at their school.

Seeking relevance. In the beginning of the study, students were open to the discussion of bullying but felt that it had no relevance to their school. They discussed how there were only minor cases of bullying that took place and that the school did nothing to prevent them. One student mentioned that she was a peer mediator but was never asked to mediate any student problems. She also stated, “I don’t think peer mediation does anything for anyone because students are too embarrassed to speak up” (Lindsey, class discussion, 2/17/09).
The students felt bullying prevention was unnecessary and did not make a difference. This attitude may have been due to the lack of programs provided by the school. The students described a lack of practical programming available to the students, and also displayed anger about this problem. The students did not know about the many forms of bullying or the potential ways to prevent it. Due to this, their perceptions of bullying were naïve.

Other students mentioned that they had seen bullying taking place but did nothing to help the victim or even contributed to the bullying unconsciously. This idea of bullying was somewhat clear during the initial picture prompt activity. Many of the interpretations of the picture prompt were comedic and made a joke of the situation taking place. They did not perceive bullying as an important issue. For instance, there were two groups that interpreted the story using slapstick comedy. The scenarios consisted of situations that could potentially be serious issues in real life, but the students approached them in a laughable way. They did not see bullying as a threat to their well-being. One out of the four groups created a mock bullying situation that led to a positive solution. The students were still on a beginning level at this point; they did not see bullying as a real issue.

The group intervention activity was an improvisation where the students acted as specific characters involved in bullying. The students impressed me with their role-playing; their interactions with one another were well performed. They used each other to create stories for their characters. In a journal entry, one student wrote, “The activity we did was fun, I think it is possible for a bully to change and become a better person. We showed how in this activity.” The students attempted to demonstrate realistic solutions
for the characters, although some resolutions were formed as “jokes” rather than as positive outcomes.

The students’ development at this stage was visible. They assumed the tone of the improvisation through their knowledge of interventions. The students challenged each other to play opposing characters interacting in a serious situation. When they added jokes, they kept the situation from falling into a depressing mode. The jokes benefited their understanding in this activity compared to the picture prompt.

_Rejection._ The first time we read the play _Bang, Bang, You’re Dead_ as a class, the students were shocked with the material. They had never performed a play with the serious issues of that nature. In many student journals, there were comments mentioning their distaste with the play. Some students described the play as “depressing” or “overdramatic.” The students were not afraid to share their dislike for the play in their journals. Some students wrote critiques similar to, “This play is a little too dramatic. I think the playwright went overboard when trying to write about the effects of bullying” (Charlene, journal entry, 2/25/09). Another student claimed that “nothing like this could happen at our school” (Jimmy, discussion, 2/25/09). The students felt overconfident that although bullying took place, it was not enough to cause the violence presented in the play.

The introduction of the play was unsuccessful because the students did not understand the purpose. They were not accustomed to performing plays with this type of content. They saw the play as depressing because it portrayed a subject that seemed taboo to discuss in school. The students did not see the potential the play could have on both
themselves and their audience. The more the content was discussed and understood, the more each student saw real life examples to connect the content to their lives.

Real life stories. In the play, three schools were repeated in a chant numerous times. The students did not know the relevance of these schools; therefore, I introduced a book by Cornell (2006) titled *School violence: Fear versus facts*. The book describes numerous accounts of school violence and bullying and the negative effects from the incidents. The students were shocked to hear about the many incidents from all over the country. They passed the book around and read it to each other.

In a discussion following the introduction of the book, a student shared, “It’s helpful to hear the examples from other schools. We don’t realize that it happens everywhere” (Felicia, discussion, 3/11/09). Students started to share examples of possible “scares” caused by bullying at their school as well as those nearby. With this, the students started producing their own examples for their classmates’ awareness. Without being assigned, students brought daily articles detailing bullying and school violence in the news. This meant they were thinking about the issue outside of class and making connections.

The students were more considerate to the topic and its relevance to their school context. Rather than discerning what bullying prevention could do for them, the students determined ways it could help their audience. In the students’ journals, they explained their hopes that the audience would take responsibility for their actions. This is representative of the journal entries provided by other students:

Our production will influence the audience in that they will be more aware of how their actions—intentional or unintentional—affect the people around them.
Perhaps they do not know anyone who has been bullied, but they will learn that their words and deeds do not live in a vacuum and cause/effect does exist (Chelsea, journal entry, 4/17/09).

The impact unit significantly changed when the students heard real stories of students who were bullied. The differences in each event helped them see a broader scale of the problem. With this, the students recalled incidents in their own lives that could have taken a negative turn if not stopped. The connections were slowly beginning. The subject was important to them since it was happening around them; they now saw it as a part of their world.

_Taking ownership_. Once the students started to look for outside sources and stories related to bullying, their progress progressed once again. With each lesson and rehearsal, students began to take ownership of the play and their characters. In a character analysis of their characters in the play, the students distinguished the reasons for each character’s actions. For instance, the student who played the lead role (the victim) wrote, “I think Josh acts this way because he wants everyone to think he’s okay. He is really hurt and asking for help in his own way” (Adam, journal entry, 3/13/09). The students took responsibility by creating an identity for their character. They made purposeful actions for their characters to help the audience define them. In a journal entry to describe an acting objective, a student wrote:

In pages 41-43, my character’s attitude toward Josh (the main character) changes. I am now worried about his mental health. Josh’s actions get me upset and I am fed up with his attitude. I am much more aggressive toward him and am also less
trusting of him. I take action and make sure Josh is punished for his attitude (Pete, journal entry, 3/19/09).

When the students started to take ownership of the play, they saw it as a chance to reach others. The students wanted other students and members of the school community to know what they were doing and why they were doing it. They wanted their production to be a success, and they understood how it would reach out to others. This production developed as their project. They were using their skills and strengths to bring awareness to a taboo subject. As a result, their goal progressed to obtain whole school involvement. They were gaining pride for the production as they perfected their characters and their hopes for the show.

The students wanted to present the play to their audience in the most effective and meaningful way. During rehearsals, they produced many ideas and examples to help the play become more powerful. There were many times when the students took charge of rehearsals and created sections of the play. They made decisions about costumes and blocking and even created their own improvised section of the play. Along with this, students wanted to reach out to the school by raising awareness and promoting the play. They organized an awareness day as well as a hallway display.

The students participated in a Day of Silence in which they wore awareness pins and did not speak to bring about awareness for bullying. Many students commented that they felt their silence was ineffective. In a journal entry a student wrote, “I think that a day of being silent doesn’t work to get the point across. It was actually pretty normal for me. It would be better if we could talk about it to spread the message” (Kelly, journal entry, 4/29/09). Other students felt similarly about the Day of Silence. Another student
expressed her feelings by stating, “I think speaking out is always a far more effective way to increase awareness. Silence makes people (and causes) blend into the background” (Melanie, journal entry, 4/29/09). Through their journals, they made decisions about the best way to make people aware of the issue. They felt empowered to speak about the issue using their knowledge of the subject. The students were now making choices and critiquing their actions.

The students also created a hallway display. In a recorded discussion, each student provided at least one idea for the display. Students mentioned adding statistics, quotes from the play, and drawing the main character (the victim) in the hallway of a school. They discussed how the display would grab the attention of their school community. These ideas were then laid out to configure a display. Almost every idea was used to create the display. The students designed the display together in class, and some volunteered to stay after school and finish the display.

The night of the performance, the audience was invited to stay for a discussion with the students. In the discussion, the students became the leaders of knowledge. They shared information they learned in class and their opinions about bullying prevention. The students exceeded my expectations by producing a captivating discussion. One audience member mentioned that they did not see much bullying in the play. A student commented, “This (play) isn’t the classic definition of bullying. It’s more like the psychological effects you can have on somebody as a result of your actions” (Andrea, audience discussion, 5/5/09). Numerous students said individual discussions about bullying and school violence continued with family and friends after the performance. “My friends told me this play needs to be presented to the whole school because it was so
powerful” (Gina, class discussion, 5/6/09). The play and the discussion promoted other students to become activists for awareness.
CHAPTER V

Conclusions

Conclusions and New Understandings

Theatre education can enhance student discussion and interpretation of bullying. The data show that the students used their skills and strengths to both comprehend the subject and produce understandings. The students’ interpretations were enhanced with the activities performed in class. As they took ownership of the play, the students constructed their own ideas for bullying prevention and awareness.

With the introduction of activities focused on bullying, the students used their skills needed for role-play. The role-play allowed the students to connect to the subject and experiment with various characters that would be involved in bullying. They had to make decisions about the characters actions in both the activities as well as the play. This decision-making facilitated student discussions about bullying.

Using examples of real life incidents in class gave the students insight into the subject. It contributed to their interpretation of bullying. The students’ discussions evolved after this activity since they were taking the initiative to share with each other. They used the past life incidents discussed in class as references when talking about their character’s emotions. The students combined both theatre and the facts provided in class. The end result was a prolific production that disseminated information and awareness to their audience.
The discussion following the performance was the catalyst for the students’ discussion and interpretation. As actors, their adrenaline intensified, and they were engaged and motivated to heighten the audiences’ experience with the discussion. With the audience, the students shared their interpretations of bullying from the beginning of our rehearsals and how their perceptions changed since then. They also interpreted the key message of the play. The students answered questions provided by the audience and commented on points made in the play.

The students generated a discussion that continued in individual discussions with their family and friends. I overheard families discussing the play with each other as they left the room. The next day, both students in the performance and those who viewed the performance informed me about conversations they had with their family and friends. A student told me, “My mom told me my sister was being bullied. I didn’t know this whole time. Mom said it (the play) was so real. We talked the whole ride home” (Adam, class discussion, 5/6/09). These discussions were about the performance, which incorporated the critique of theatre. By producing these critical conversations, they used theatre as a medium to discuss and interpret the subject.

The final discussion provided subsequent data that helped confirm the results of this study. During the discussion, the students conversed about the activities that facilitated their understanding of the effects of bullying. They mentioned how the role-playing helped them grasp facts and concepts. They also shared many of these facts with the audience. The students discussed their anger toward administration for not attending the performance. It seemed as though the students felt they had put effort in to make a difference in the school community and had no support from the faculty. The students
also promoted a continuation for awareness by extending the discussion with their families. The students wanted people to know what they did, and they were proud to be the leaders encouraging change.

**Implications**

Theatre can create student awareness of serious issues and develop critical thinkers. Through a variety of activities, students have the ability to challenge their perceptions. They become critical thinkers and problem solvers through role-playing and discussion. Through theatre, students can interpret conflicts and design solutions to prevent them.

Both students and theatre teachers can benefit from this type of unit. Their students will strengthen the classroom community by considering the results of their actions. Schools, in general, should establish bullying prevention programs that use theatre to develop understandings. The skills produced in theatre will assist in the goals of a prevention program.

The use of journals throughout this unit has inspired me to include them in my classroom. The students’ reflections helped them think about the content in the class, and I can see this helping my future classes. By checking them weekly, I was able to see the students’ understandings. Overall, it assisted my communication with the students. This type of ongoing reflection with students is a healthy way to establish continual understandings.

The discussions were also a powerful tool that I plan to incorporate in future units. The students’ communication increased as they discussed the issue. This communication is important for a theatre classroom since the students are constantly
working together. It encouraged the students to listen to one another which improved the
purpose of unit. I can see it improving many units I create in the future.

The structure of the unit allowed the students to build upon previous knowledge.
The activities were a great way to introduce the unit. Once rehearsals began, I could see
that theatre can be used as a medium to discuss and interpret bullying. The students
proved this through their continuous use of productive dialogue and their work to create a
play that displays bullying realistically. The differences I saw in their demeanor were
compelling. They became advocates for change with their passion to involve the school.
They continuously mentioned their discussions with teachers and other classmates to
make the play a worthwhile experience.

Recommendations

If this unit were reproduced, I would introduce the examples of real situations
before the introduction of the play. The students seemed to connect to the play once
hearing the examples from various schools across the country. The examples were a
revelation for the students. It “hit home” as they realized bullying can happen anywhere.
With a wide variety of examples, they began to recall incidents that happened in their
own school.

There may be students who do not accept the play or issue at first. My students
thought the play was overdramatic and too harsh. They were not excited to begin
production. I suggest having patience with these students. Once they understand the
purpose and potential of their performance, they will start to appreciate the play. Students
need to feel that they are in a safe environment at all times when working with a serious
subject such as this. The communication you have with the students through journals and both formal and informal discussions will enhance this environment.

There are many possibilities for educators to apply this unit to the entire school. The play and the post-discussion can be molded to fit an assembly for students. It would be a great task to involve the whole school community. The advantages and challenges for the actors may be greater as well as the interpretations and pride. Adapting the performance to all could reach to students who might be dealing with bullying without excluding them.

New Directions and Questions

Since completing this unit with my students, there are many questions I ponder. What are some activities I can create to improve this unit next time? How can I incorporate bullying prevention awareness to the whole school? If I were to use this unit again, I would like to gain more support from the school community. Considering time was a limitation in this study, I believe more time with activities will help me involve the school.

A question I have contemplated since the conclusion of this study is, “How can a unit on bullying prevention be designed for other age groups?” Bullying takes on many forms and can affect students of all ages. I am interested to discover how a theatre prevention program can be adapted for other age groups.

How would this study be different if it were in another school district? Depending on the students’ environment, this research may produce other meanings. Could this study also include other issues related to bullying? Since there were other issues in the
play that added to the main character’s behavior, this may help the students understand other serious issues that teens deal with on a daily basis.

Going away from this study, I have a new understanding of the use of theatre. In my future classroom, I look forward to working with students to explore various issues. Theatre takes on a new meaning once you present topics that can engage but also benefit the students. How can I, as a theatre education teacher, use today’s issues to improve my teaching and further my students understandings? I will continually think of creative ways to help the students obtain this knowledge. This study has encouraged me to invite my students to construct knowledge around meaningful, interesting content that clearly applies to their lives. From what I have experienced in this study, theatre education has the power to develop students as seekers of change. As one student clearly noted, “We can make others realize the effects of their actions and hopefully change lives” (Tricia, journal entry, 4/17/09).
References


U.S. Census Bureau, *Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from

[website link]
# APPENDIX A

## Chart of the Unit Sequence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date of Action</th>
<th>Action implemented; Data collected in <em>italics</em></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 2009</td>
<td>Intro to Bullying- <em>Discussion</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2009</td>
<td>Define Bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Journal Entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2009</td>
<td>Picture Prompt – Images of school bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Journal Entry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2009</td>
<td><em>Journal Entry (Is it possible to make a bully understand another person’s feelings?)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2009</td>
<td>Improvisation Group Intervention Circle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Journal Entry (about activity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 2009</td>
<td>Read- thru of Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Journal Entry (Reaction to the script)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td><em>Character Analysis</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td>Read Playwright’s Note</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>* Journal Entry (Response)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td><em>Journal Entry (How does your character change physically, emotionally or in relation to others?)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2009</td>
<td>Recorded Discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2009</td>
<td><em>Journal Entry: Define rumors? Why do people spread rumors about others? Why are the negative effects? What was the purpose of the rumors in the play?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2009</td>
<td><em>Journal Entry: What could people have done to help Josh and prevent this situation?</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2009 – May 2009</td>
<td><em>Rehearsals Process</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2009</td>
<td><em>Journal Entry I’ll miss/ I’ll never’s 3 questions for the audience</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2009</td>
<td><em>Journal Entry: How is our production going to influence the audience?</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2009</td>
<td><em>Day of Silence</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 2009</td>
<td><em>Journal Entry: Reflection: What was the Day of Silence like for you? How did you feel? How did people react to you? Do you think it was affective? Did it raise awareness?</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2009</td>
<td><em>Hallway Showcase</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Discussion of Ideas</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Creation</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2009</td>
<td>Student Performance</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Recorded Performance</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Audience Feedback Form</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 2009</td>
<td><em>Discussion and Reflections</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX B

Picture Prompt
APPENDIX C

Hallway Display
APPENDIX D

Audience Feedback Form

We hope that our performance resonates something within you. Something that will lead you to discuss the issues that teens battle in schools every day in all parts of the country (even right here in our very school). The students in this performance created questions to hear your opinion. Please take some time to read these questions and provide us with some feedback about the issue and about our presentation today.

Have you ever been bullied either physically or mentally? If not, do you know someone who has?

Did you think of anyone you know personally when watching the show?

Do you think bullying was 100% the reason for Josh’s behavior?

How do you feel about this production?

Do you think this production has influenced you in any way?

What could have been done to make the performance better?

Is it possible that the situation depicted in the play can happen anywhere?