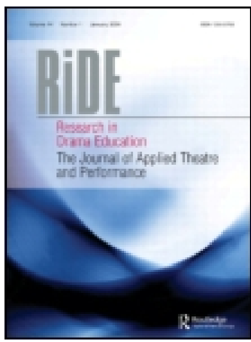

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Viewpoints

Extending the Possibilities: the use of drama in addressing problems of aggression

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After reading Balfour's article (*RIDE* 5:1) and James Thomson's earlier *RIDE* article (Thompson, 1998), my desire to understand the nature of aggression and the potential of drama-based programmes to effect change was triggered. I began, not with the drama literature, but by considering claims regarding the arousal of anger and aggressive response. I considered the link between the strategies we use as drama educators and those utilised by counsellors and psychologists in cognitive behavioural approaches to change. I contemplated the conclusions Balfour draws about his own work within the Pump Program and the value of adopting a pro-feminist approach to violence and anger. As well, I wondered if there were links between my tentative findings about the value of the play-making process with young people (Bundy, 1999) and the value of using a play-building process to extend a drama-based approach, intended to reduce violent response.

The following briefly (and perhaps rather simplistically) revisits theories of aggression and (like Balfour) questions commonly held assumptions regarding the link between violence and anger. I draw on the findings of Lefkowitz *et al.* (1977), reported in *Growing up to Be Violent*, to suggest that perhaps drama-based programmes intended to reduce violent response should be implemented in the primary school classroom. My suggestion is not that such programmes be used to directly address problems of violence. Nor do I suggest that the potential of drama-based programmes lies in the opportunities offered to model and practise different behavioural responses. Rather, I would like to raise, for the consideration of other readers, whether the potential of such programmes might lie in the impact of shared engagement in the dramatic process itself.

Theories of Anger and Violence

Lefkowitz *et al.* (1977, p. 4) describe three basic theories regarding the arousal of anger. The first is a theory of innate aggression: human beings are violent by nature. The second is neurological: human beings possess an aggressive drive engendered largely by frustration or by chemical or other neurological imbalance in the brain. The third is a social learning hypothesis of aggressive behaviour. In this theory, human beings are presumed to be born with the cognitive and morphological potential to act aggressively

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but whether or not they learn to do so is seen as dependent on contingencies in the environment (Lefkowitz *et al*., 1977, p. 202). The position of theorists regarding the arousal of anger and aggression determines the approach they are likely to take in dealing with the problems that can emerge as a consequence of uncontrolled or inappropriate anger response. Those who position the problems emerging as socially framed consider the broader influence of social/contextual factors and the broader range of response possibly activated by the same event in different persons.

Even so, most of the authors I read continued to link anger and aggression and (unlike Balfour) failed to recognise the significance of gender role stereotyping in violent response. Programmes designed to offer the possibility of change relied on a presumption that anger was a precursor to aggression, occurring because of biases in information processing systems. But, like Balfour, Howells (1998, p. 296) points out that anger does not necessarily lead to violence and neither is violence always preceded by anger. Drawing on Bandura's (1973) model of aggression and on their own longitudinal study of aggression, Lefkowitz *et al.* (1977, p. 202) conclude that 'emotional arousal can elicit a variety of behaviours in different people and at different times'. Their study showed that a tendency towards aggression and violence in adults was not only learned but was usually manifest in the child by the age of 8. As children, the aggressive adults had learned a range of responses that (to them) seemed appropriate in dealing with their lives.

How Do Children Learn to Be Violent?

A major finding of the longitudinal study conducted by Lefkowitz *et al.* (1977, p. 192) was that despite parental aggressiveness, IQ or other social factors, the best predictor of aggressive response in 19 year-olds was an aggressive response at age 8. Further, they found that while the nature of the stimulus was a contributing factor to aggressive response in children, this had become insignificant in the response of these same people as adults. Supporting Balfour's conclusions, they determined that as adults, aggressive response related more significantly to identification and sociocultural factors.

Lefkowitz *et al.* (1977) concluded that children learn aggressive behaviour by copying the manifest behaviour of the models they receive in the community, at home or on television if they identify with those models. They found that children were more likely to respond violently/aggressively themselves when they felt a strong sense of identification with the violent or aggressive role model offered to them. They noted that children who experienced or witnessed violence without identifying with the perpetrator were less likely to learn violent response. For instance, they noted that a child who identified with a violent father was more likely to learn to respond violently than a child who did not identify with his violent father to the same extent.

The role models with which children identified could be either fictitious (through television) or evident in the 'real world' life of the child. The findings of this study also determined that boys who were able to identify with feminine role-models (observed in their choice and style of play) were less likely to respond violently than those who identified strongly with more stereotypical and macho male role models. While debate continues as to the influence of television on the violent responses of young people, these

authors determined that the more alienated children felt in their real world, the more likely they were to model the behaviours of aggressive and glorified television heroes.

The Value of Drama

Balfour's findings within the British criminal justice system and the findings reported in *Growing up to Be Violent* (Lefkowitz *et al*., 1977) indicate the need to consider the potential of using drama-based programmes to address societal problems of anger and violence in the early years of schooling before the problems become manifest for the adult. Like Balfour, I suggest that a pro-feminist approach to such drama-based programmes might be of value. As he notes, several factors distinguish a pro-feminist approach from a more conservative cognitive–behavioural approach to change. Some relate to beliefs about the causes of anger and aggression. Recognising the influence of factors from the social, political, economic and cultural environment, the pro-feminists assert that anger and aggression are linked to a desire or need to exert power and control.

Other differences relate to the change approach. A pro-feminist approach positions the client as subject rather than object of the process and is premised on a belief that change in behaviour follows change in attitude rather than the reverse. A drama-based programme premised on a pro-feminist approach offers opportunities to explore the attitudes which underpin behaviour rather than being designed to offer opportunities to practise new behaviours.

In such a programme, it may not be necessary directly to address anger and aggression. Rather, the drama is designed to offer opportunities for the children (or adult clients) to explore a range of 'ways of being in the world'. The medium itself, and engagement with others in that medium, offers participants opportunities to view the world (and their relationship to it) in other possible ways. By engaging in significant drama experiences, children are offered opportunities to explore and interrogate society and social behaviour. Engagement in drama offers opportunities to explore the construction of identity.

As well as process drama/educational drama approaches (which utilise strategies such as those described in Balfour's article), I would like to suggest that group play-building processes may be of value in achieving the desired change both within the prison system and within the school. One of the findings of the longitudinal study was that children who experienced a lack of popularity and leadership opportunity were more likely to learn to respond aggressively as adults (Lefkowitz *et al*., 1977, p. 207). Balfour suggests that the men he works with seek violence to feel powerful. Anecdotal evidence regarding youth theatre involvement suggests that involvement in play-making processes offers opportunities for participants to experience popularity and leadership which might not normally be available to them. Perhaps the involvement of adults in play-building processes might also offer similar opportunities?

With careful guidance provided by the project facilitator (including the adoption of an approach which recognises and addresses the individual needs of all participants), sustained play-building projects may be valuable in addressing issues of violence and aggression. Such projects potentially offer participants opportunities to explore their

relationship to others within the group, their relationship to others within the greater community, as well as their values/beliefs in relation to the material explored (including exploration of masculine and feminine values). Simultaneously, participation in such projects offers opportunities to build self-esteem and self-confidence.

By observing the way participants engage with each other and the material being explored, the play-building facilitator is enabled to respond to the needs of individuals within the group. The workshops become not only diagnostic tools but also the means to change. Similar to Balfour's suggestion, such an approach would not be limited to an anger management programme but would explore the interaction of belief systems, the need for power and control, as well as potentially extend the range of appropriate behaviours available to participants outside the drama. I suggest this might occur, not as a result of direct skills training, but because of the impact of shared engagement in the dramatic process itself.

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New Horizons: higher education academic link between King Alfred's College, Winchester and the Universities of Dhaka and Khulna, Bangladesh

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I spent the month of February in Bangladesh on the first visit from the UK under the Higher Education Academic Link administered by the British Council on behalf of the