

## ***Picture Other Voices—A Conflict Transformation Drama Project***

**DAWN INGLESON**

LONDON SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY

### **ABSTRACT**

*This project explores how immersive and Forum Theatre can be used to help resolve conflict in school. Kate Beales and Dawn Ingleson worked with 8–11 year-old children from a London Primary School Federation. Inspired by the picture book, *Voices in the Park*, by Anthony Browne, workshops included applied theatre methodologies and drew on conflict resolution models including, *Nonviolent Communication* (Rosenberg, 2015), *Systems Theory* (Walker, 2012) and *Philosophy for Children* (Lipman, 1988, Glina, 2012) to create a simultaneous community of inquiry and practice using versions of Forum Theatre (Boal, 2019) and Process Drama (Taylor, 2005) via a journey of immersive practice.*

*The children were invited to resolve a conflict having chosen a character to follow. In immersive theatre, ‘Audiences must make choices about where they go, the characters they follow and the rooms they find. They choose the show they see’ (Higgin, 2017). The*

*experience involved the audience deliberately privileging some aspects of the narrative over others—just as participants would in a conflict.*

*This paper discusses the findings of the project demonstrating that the children could explore broader perspectives than those visible and express empathy in their reflections on character behaviour. Findings are valuable for Headteachers looking to improve school ethos, inclusion and inhibit social barriers to learning.*

## **PART 1: THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

Dawn Ingleson led this project with Kate Beales, a participatory arts practitioner, community mediator and conflict coach. The project used drama to explore conflict resolution in a school community that had issues of bullying and a lack of social cohesion. This was inspired by the author's own primary school teaching experience, studies using interactive drama to tackle conflict with older children in schools (Catterall, 2007; Burton, 2002; Malm, 2007) and the parallels found between social science and theatre methodologies focusing on the experience of the audience/participants.

This paper explores conflict resolution/transformation through both social sciences and (applied) theatre methodologies. The project discussed in part two is framed by the guiding pedagogy of Philosophy for Children (P4C) (Glina, 2013), and Systems Theory (Walker, 2012). The relationship between the audience-participants, the performers and facilitators has been conceived by drawing on Immersive Theatre (Machon, 2013) and Forum Theatre (Boal, 2009). Mantle of the Expert (Heathcote, 1995) techniques are leaned on, to a point, as is Process Drama (O'Neill, as cited in Taylor, 2005) as well as Stanislavski systems (Stanislavski, 2016).

As Caterall expounds in his study with teenagers, 'prominent theorists would agree that understanding grows through opportunities to try out, consider and revise one's thinking' (Anderson, as cited in Caterall, 2007). Using shared beliefs between P4C and applied theatre making we investigated what we needed to create a community of inquiry and practice with our audience-participants. Borrowing the term 'community of inquiry' from John Dewey, through Matthew Lipman, where Lipman has widened the definition of knowledge from 'being

embedded within a social context' to 'being embedded within a classroom', we applied Lipman's definition and extended it to include the idea of Wenger's community of practice (Wenger, 1998). This would encompass the children and adults creating and presenting work together and for each other to engender collaborative learning.

We used immersive theatre and Forum Theatre as our vehicles to create such a community. As in P4C, discussed by Beate Børresen, where 'philosophical activity is based on the recognition of ignorance,' and, 'the philosopher's thirst for knowledge is shown through attempts to find better answers to questions even if those answers are never found,' we used Forum Theatre to 'attempt to find better answers' even if they were elusive. Using these techniques, we asked teachers and facilitators, to, 'value mistakes and use them for better understanding' of, in this case, managing conflict situations (Børresen, as cited in Glina, 2013). Choosing to use immersive theatre, we embraced the encouragement of freedom, choice and empowerment for the spectator (our audience-participants). As Neild states, in Rose Biggin's book about Punchdrunk, one of the U.K.'s exemplary immersive theatre companies, 'both in epic and intimate forms' (Machon, 2013), immersive theatre is a theatre in which, 'the audience inhabit the space of the play alongside the actors', and, more importantly for us, in relation to Systems Theory and our conclusion in Forum work, the 'audience-participants shape and discover their own through-lines' (Biggin, 2017).

Systems Theory, a methodology used in social and conflict resolution work, was employed in a dramatic form. In social work, it is applied to social structures like a family. Here we explored it to discover characters' backstories and reasons for behaviour in certain circumstances (this paralleled more familiar Stanislavskian techniques of given circumstances and character work). As Walker cites from previous work, 'as individuals we will each have our own slant, bias, preferences or interpretation of the facts and it is more effective to share these in a family meeting' (Walker & Akister, as cited in Walker, 2012). We fabricated moments of theatre that would be missed while participants watched another scene happening at the same time, thus the 'family meeting' became the school hall when we all could eventually share our thoughts and disparate knowledge on story and characters. We were interested in the children experiencing, as John Bowlby explored in the late 60's, that 'there is an interconnectedness

of families, groups, communities, etc.,' (Walker, 2012).

## **PART 2: THE PROJECT**

The groups of 8-11 year-olds that we worked with attended the Shine-on-Saturday School. Shine is an education charity that funds the school giving the federation 60 disengaged 8-11 year-olds the opportunity to participate in a hands-on, creative learning experience every Saturday during term-time.

We worked with the group to create two workshops, each lasting 90 minutes, running twice. The workshops were 3 weeks apart.

Our objective was to create a piece of immersive theatre in primary schools to explore conflict situations and develop tools for managing conflict within and outside school. Renowned U.K. Theatre-In-Education (TIE) Company, Big Brum's artistic policy explains the potential power of good quality TIE:

TIE...is the point of mediation between the young people and the world they inhabit. Learning takes place through a dramatic situation that matters to the participants... They are free to make decisions and take full responsibility for their actions safely in the fiction of the drama... Through the imagination in action, playfully contested amongst peers, the participants test future possibilities, creating a different reality explored dramatically. (Big Brum Artistic Policy, 2021)

Inspired by Punchdrunk, we wanted to support children in conflict resolution/transformation in their lives plus see if they would make their own decisions in moments of drama. We wanted to give them the freedom to make choices, at key moments, of who to follow. Drawing on original concepts of TIE and elements of 'student in role' Process Drama, we wanted to explore what happens if individuals selected their own journey through the drama and were not guided by rules or a grown-up narrator role. This happens in adult immersive productions, for example *The Masque of the Red Death* at Battersea Arts Centre (Punchdrunk, n. d.; Biggin, 2017). This audience chose which rooms to enter and therefore which journey to go on, missing elements of the same story along the way, creating their own version of what was

happening. Like Helen Freshwater in Biggin's book, we wanted 'to know what a young audience can handle, what they bring and what they understand from the experience'. We did not want to, as some immersive theatre is accused of, 'intervene to police the spectacle' (Biggin, 2017).

Before we entered the narrative, we wanted to discover the stories this cohort was interested in, what kind of tales they told. Once they had shared this, we explored what was behind the decisions taken by their protagonists, what did other characters think about the action? How did it affect broader groups beyond the centre of the story? What happens to the story when we uncover all this invisible information? In other words, we were exploring backstory, perspective, and assumption. This approach aligns broadly with Systems Theory—a key tool in unraveling and understanding conflict through questioning narrative in relation to the bigger picture.

In our first workshop, the children improvised stories and developed characters and backstories. We began with a simple improvisation in pairs, asking the participants to create a character each. The dialogue had a level of realism and truth about it as it came from a direct place of some formed experience or knowledge: Child A knocks on Child B's door. Examples we gave included a sibling's bedroom door, a neighbour's door etc. A door perhaps suggesting a difference in the characters' perspectives and a potential conflict. From this 2-minute improvisation we built the full narrative with parallel scenes showing all the action of the story in which things happen simultaneously.

The children start to make their own judgements about the two characters they play as do the audience-participants (e.g., Child A (playing a child) is 'rude' and 'not listening', Child B (playing a neighbour) is 'annoyed' and 'doesn't care'). We hot seat them. We wonder, as a group, whether they should hear each other's answers to the questions—we discuss what the difference would be either way. We all want to know everything at this point, interestingly, this is the privileged, omnipresent point of view that we have when we sit watching traditional theatre unfold, but it is not what happens in real life. We conclude that they are not the only people who are affected by this 'knock on the door'. Other characters are built into the storyline, and we start to understand why the first characters were reacting to the scenario and the questions being asked of them in the mini scene as

the different but entwined narratives unfold.

Suddenly, we have all these perspectives (like the neighbour's boss who is waiting for some work and the sleeping mum who is ill). We therefore start to understand more about literally 'where they are coming from'. Before we had this knowledge, we had all made our own assumptions. Now, we see them in a different light. We wanted to investigate this further and see more closely how high the stakes were for these two characters to get their own way (*achieve their objective* (Stanislavski, 2016; Alfreds, 2007), by widening the narrative so we could see the connected scenes happening elsewhere.

Together, we not only use Stanislavskian techniques of analysing the world of the emerging play, but we also think about real world issues of actions and consequences, our responsibilities to others and how this affects how we behave. In both real life and in the drama, we start to understand what is at risk if characters fail to achieve what they want. The participants start to recognise that we are working on two levels:

You could use it [what we have learned today] when you're in the playground and then you accidentally hurt someone, and that person's friend comes and starts arguing with you.

You can use not just what we learnt but the acting skills as well.  
(Participants, *Picture Other Voices*).

After we have created another three or four scenes for each scenario that we choose to highlight as examples of the complexity of why people behave the way they do in situations (including a full fire engine team caught just before their shift ends being called to a house fire that has been set off accidentally by one of the characters in a different scenario), we end with a debrief. We discuss any useful moments and mistakes the characters might have made. We also ask the participants, 'how easy or difficult was it to see from the outside what to do?' We reflect on the experience and compare what happens when you are in it and when you are standing outside of it. We used this reflection to unpick whether they, as a group, understood that they had experienced different perspectives and we wanted to see if we all agreed on the central moment—the core of the story. The teachers agreed that they had grasped these concepts. "The children were

picking up the smallest things they wouldn't normally notice" (Shine Worker).

Simultaneously we were modelling nonviolent communication (Rosenberg, 2015) —a technique used to create empathy and support collaboration—and using non-judgemental language (Kohn, 2001). We did this by discussing the characters' needs and refrained from criticising or even praising them, a technique used by Bamboozle Theatre, a U.K. company that creates immersive productions for disabled children. Focusing on a character's needs is valuable in interpreting a drama but it is essential if we want to transform a conflict. In nonviolent communication, we aim to connect to the other person's need that is not being met, most times, this means that we must actively listen to and observe what is happening in front of us to discover what the need is—this may be hidden by feelings being expressed that are not helpful in these moments.

The children's stories were a combination of lived experiences, fantasy based on film and TV imagery. They could explore broader perspectives than those visible at first sight and they expressed empathy in their reflections on character behaviour. They were able to listen to the perspectives of others and assess their relevance in solving the problems presented by the stories.

In the second workshop, we used the picture book, *Voices in the Park* by Anthony Browne. The book is written in four parts, four different perspectives of what happens when two sets of children and parents go to the park and see each other. The dogs play easily together, the children are more tentative but finally play and become friendly and the mother and the father do not communicate. There are judgments made about all the characters, from all four voices that we hear at different times. The concept of Browne's picture books is that all his characters are apes, dressed as humans. There is a surreal quality to his artwork and his attitude to his books works well for our drama:

What excites me about picture books is the gap between pictures and words. Sometimes the pictures can tell a slightly different story or tell more about the story, about how someone is thinking or feeling. (Browne, as cited in Salter, 2009)

In the same way, we use drama to show us the needs behind the

words, like the images in a good picture book, there is more to a character than what they say. As Sarah Crown, in her interview with Browne states, there is an atmosphere of ambiguity and, “the implication that nothing, not even what’s before our eyes, can be relied on” (Crown, 2009).

In our piece, four actors played human versions of the book's characters. We adapted the story to include a conflict. The characters were, Mother, Charles (her son), Father and Smudge (his daughter).

One of our objectives was to discover how the children would respond to the openness of immersive theatre. We, as practitioners, already had experience in creating promenade performance, in which children are guided through the story and shown where to put their attention. A truly immersive experience, however, leaves the audience at liberty to watch where they choose, and involves deliberately privileging some aspects of the narrative over others—just as participants would in a conflict. As Pete Higgin, director of Punchdrunk Enrichment, the educational arm of U.K.’s Punchdrunk theatre states, “Audiences must make choices about where they go, the characters they follow and the rooms they find. They choose the show they see” (Higgin, 2017).

We created a simple immersive structure using the two families from the book and playing scenes from their homes in two separate rooms off the school hall. We used the headteacher’s office which looked like a flat with a living room area, a kitchen, plants, piano and a desk and chair. This was Mother and Charles’ home. The more lived-in looking classroom next door was the space we dressed to become Smudge and her dad’s place with an ironing board out, a kitchen table, washing up in bowl, sofa and clothes drying on radiators and the backs of chairs. The children were given the freedom to choose which space they entered in response to a theatrical “hook”—a sound from each room which stimulated their curiosity. We used a short burst of a tune from a trumpet from Charles’ house and a scream from Smudge’s. We wanted to observe how they would manage the initial decision-making process about what to watch.

This happened quickly and effortlessly. Although we had warned the actors to expect anything, including all the children going into the same room with their friends, the group split roughly in half without much discussion.

Once in their separate rooms, the children were in the homes of



the two families. There were no separate audience areas, so the children decided where to stand/sit in the characters' kitchens, and how to interact with the scene. Some children became absorbed in the activities of the characters, for example helping with Charles' jigsaw puzzle or Smudge's word search, while others simply observed.

We wanted the experience to be an egalitarian one. We did not want to push any mode of involvement to the forefront. It was an equally shared space between immersion, participation, spectating, witnessing, and facilitating change. However, there were children in the room that were more confident than others, had read the book we had adapted, had a different relationship to others in the room itself and indeed the spaces we were using. We tried to mitigate some of these imbalances by being clear about having no rules. They, despite everything else in place historically, were in charge of their own experience today and were invited to relate to anything they chose to watch (or not watch) in any way they wanted to. We needed the relationship between space, performer, workshop leader—Joker (for the Forum elements) and participant to be reciprocal. Unlike the 'creation of immersive experience for the 'absent, idealized spectator'', which, states Biggin, is 'how [immersive] productions are conceived, designed, and rehearsed,' part of this project was about problematizing the concept of audience/workshop participant and exploring the possible ways (without the shepherding and coercing from an adult in power) that the young people would naturally respond. This was important to encourage empathy and develop a sense of community in philosophical and practical terms. The children were very quick to understand the conventions of the performance. For example, when watching the scene between Mother and Charles, which began at the kitchen table, the children gathered around it. When Mother mentioned that Charles should practice the piano, they immediately moved to the piano in anticipation of the actors changing scene.

The scenes happened in the morning. Mother made breakfast and tidied it away. Charles did homework and music practice. The father looked for a job in the paper and Smudge made breakfast and talked about school. After 15 minutes, they were ready.

At a signal, the characters left to go to the park. During the scenes in the separate rooms, the hall was transformed into a park where all the characters meet (done quickly and quietly by a small group of project leaders/teachers). We used AstroTurf, plants, park benches, a

goal and football. This was met with much excitement. The actors played football among the children and sat on benches around the playing area. We were keen to see how the children would manage the freedom of sitting in the park and being inside the football game. They responded with full attention—passing the football only to return it to the actors. Some sat on the benches next to the actors but did not disturb the action.

‘Charles’ and ‘Smudge’ met and after some awkward first moments, talked and played football. The parents kept far apart. Charles had brought his expensive mobile phone with him (he had earlier been told not to) and without anyone seeing, it fell (during an energetic tackle from Smudge), and broke. There was an exclamation from Smudge and Charles (neither of whom blamed the other) and this brought it to the attention of the parents. The Mother seemed furious and blamed Smudge for tackling Charles. She also questioned why Smudge’s dad was busy reading the paper and therefore could not see what had happened. Angry words were said between the parents, and they were not shy in suggesting who was to blame.

After the conflict, the families returned to their separate homes and the audience had to decide who to follow. The choice was more difficult as the children had more knowledge, and some were clearly torn as to which room to enter. They were working out their ‘own through-lines’ and some were allowing the focus to ‘shift away from one protagonist’ (Machon, as cited in Biggin, 2017) to another. However, the transition was swift and without any disruption of the story. The two families played out a short response to the conflict which ended with both adults leaving Charles and Smudge alone. The audience remained to listen to their reflections. They both talked out loud and decided to write a letter apologising.

At the end of the performance, the children returned to the hall. Dawn and Kate led a discussion in which the children responded to what they had seen. The class was asked who should take responsibility for the conflict—the responses included all characters with reasons why. The children then created a list of questions—the actors returned in character to answer them. In each case, the answers led to a deeper empathy for the characters, even when the children had been mistrustful and had judged a particular character’s behaviour. For example, they learned that Mother was very anxious about Charles, whereas her behaviour had them believe that she was

antagonistic and judgmental. After the children questioned the actors and understood their motives more fully, they were invited to recreate the scene and construct a more positive ending. The actors played the scene several times, stopping and starting the action to incorporate the children's suggestions until a satisfactory outcome could be reached.

In both sessions, the children worked hard towards a positive outcome. In both cases, it depended on listening, exploring, and understanding each character's motivation, stopping the story before emotions became heightened, and solving problems using the knowledge the children had collectively about the two families.

The shared experience of Forum Theatre like P4C, 'emphasise[s] that understanding, and learning are processes in which we engage in together, with others and with help from others' knowledge, experiences, and ideas' (Walker, 2017).

One striking example of this process was the moment in which children urged Mother to give the Father the broken phone to fix. Children who had been in the Mother's house were afraid that the Father would steal the phone. We asked children who had been in the Father's house whether he was the sort of person who would do this, the answer: a resounding No. They had heard him talk with Smudge, be kind and thoughtful and equally important, he had a toolbox and was very good at fixing things! This enabled the whole group to advise the Mother to trust the Father to help her and led to a resolution of the conflict.

The children liked being able to rewind and rewrite the action—unlike in books. They also enjoyed being able to travel around the different spaces—unlike in a traditional theatre production. They were acting and thinking on what Monica Glina calls, in philosophy, a 'meta-level'. Together we were creating a better community (of inquiry and practice):

It made me feel like I was actually in the play.

The play...gave everybody a chance to speak so you can find out what actually happened if you weren't there.

Blame does not help—it just makes anger worse; people start getting sad and shouting.

Be honest or people won't trust you in the future. (Participants, *Picture Other Voices*)

In response to the question, 'From what you've learnt today can you think of any places where you could use this':

In the playground if you've got into a fight—ask why... and what really happened... like Smudge in the scene.

With your family. (Participants, *Picture Other Voices*)

The responses from participants and leaders communicated an understanding of what they had achieved. They felt involved in the story by proximity during it and by listening to the other children and, either discussing the questions to ask the characters and/or being involved in the drama with them.

The children started the forum by taking the role of director and telling a character what to say and watching to see if that had any positive affect on the scenario. After several attempts, (the actors made it realistically difficult for the participants to change the situation) the children had a go at taking over from the actors to change the affect that the broken phone had. Unlike a traditional Forum Theatre format, in our drama, the children could take anyone's place as we were trying to recognise that everyone in a conflict situation has a backstory and can be or feel oppressed in different ways. The way we responded to the performance therefore became a mixture of Process Drama, as pupils took on different roles, (Taylor & Warner, 2005) and Forum Theatre.

We gained our results from filming the workshops for further analysis and interviewing the children and teaching staff. We were lucky to have the rooms we had in this school, moving forward we must resolve how a project using strategies of immersive/interactive performance (in separate rooms) and Forum Theatre can be repeated. Does it become a Punchdrunk Enrichment school type residency fully staffed and resourced (and funded) from a design perspective, or does it develop with teacher training and teacher-in-role (Heathcote, 1995) sessions (or both)? We understand the profound impact of theatre, but more research needs to be carried out into how inclusive we can make this type of work so that it can be used as part of a bigger mediation

and conflict transformation scheme across a whole school community. We are exploring how we develop the pilot into a fully-fledged programme that can create a legacy in school. With teacher consultation, we want to explore the possibility of pre-performance teacher CPD, and pre/post-show materials which may involve input from other Conflict Resolution specialists (e.g., peer mediators and mediation services with specialist teams) working with children.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

Ingleson, D. (2021). Picture other voices: A conflict transformation drama project. *ArtsPraxis*, 8 (1), 185-199.

## REFERENCES

- Alfreds, M. (2007). *Different every night*. Nick Hern.
- Big Brum. (2021, February 14). [Our artistic policy](#).
- Biggin, R. (2017). *Immersive theatre and audience experience: Space, game and story in the work of Punchdrunk*. Springer International Publishing AG.
- Boal, A. (2019). *Theatre of the oppressed*. (C. A. McBride, M.-O. McBride, & E. Fryer, trans.). Pluto Press. (Original work published 1979)
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press.
- Browne, A. (1999). *Voices in the Park*. (A. Browne, illus.). Corgi.
- Burton, B. & O'Toole, J. (2002). *Cycles of harmony: Action research into the effects of drama on conflict management in schools*. Intellect.
- Caterall, J. S. (2007). Enhancing peer conflict resolution skills through drama: an experimental study. *Research in Drama Education: The Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 12, 2.
- Cohen, R. (2005). *Students resolving conflict: Peer mediation in schools*. Good Year Books.
- Crown, S. (2021, February 14.) [A life in books: Anthony Browne](#). *The Guardian*.
- Freire, P. (2017). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Penguin Modern Classics.

- Glina, M. B. (2013). *Philosophy for, with, and of children*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Heathcote, D. & Bolton, G. (1995). *Drama for learning: Dorothy Heathcote's mantle of the expert approach to education*. Heinemann.
- Higgin, P. (2021, February 14). [A Punchdrunk approach to making theatre](#).
- Jalongo, M. R. (1995). Promoting active listening in the classroom *Childhood Education*, 72 (1), pp. 13-18.
- Kohn, A. (2001). [Five reasons to stop saying "Good job!"](#) *Young Children*.
- Lipman, M. (1988). [Philosophy for children and critical thinking](#). *Thinking: The Journal of Philosophy for Children*, 7 (4), pp. 40-42.
- Machon, J. (2013). *Immersive theatres: Intimacy and immediacy in contemporary performance*. Palgrave Macmillan
- Malm, B. & Horst, L. (2007). Empowering students to handle conflicts through the use of drama. *Journal of Peace Education*, 4 (1).
- Punchdrunk. (n. d.). [The masque of the red death](#).
- Rosenberg, M. B. (2015). *Nonviolent communication—A language of life*, (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Puddle Dancer Press.
- Salter, J. (2009, September 17). [Anthony Browne, Children's laureate](#). *The Telegraph*.
- Shine Trust. (2021). [Shine Trust](#).
- Stanislavski, K. (2016). *An actor's work*. Routledge Classic.
- Taylor, P. & Warner, C. D. (2005). *Structure and spontaneity: The process drama of Cecily O'Neill*. Trentham Books.
- Walker, S. (2012). *Effective social work with children, young people and families: Putting systems theory into practice*. SAGE Publications LTD.
- Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

## **AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Dawn Ingleson is Course Director of Drama and Applied Theatre and a Senior lecturer in Drama and Performance at London South Bank University. She has also taught on BA, MA and PGCE courses in theatre, education and children's literature at Goldsmiths, University of

London. Dawn has directed and produced theatre in Britain and internationally. She has created work for young audiences for the National Theatre and has produced work for schools in Japan for the Setagaya Public Theatre. Dawn is a qualified primary school teacher and has taught, as well as trained teachers and performers to lead workshops.