Integrating Conflict Management Learning into the Curriculum

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Abstract

Teaching young people how to deal with conflict is rarely part of a school curriculum. Although, as social communities with humans of different ages, and levels of power and status, schools themselves are full of conflict, they are often reluctant for many reasons to acknowledge the fact, and more reluctant to give it an explicit profile by including the teaching of conflict management and transformation within the curriculum. Most conflict and bullying management in schools is reactive (i.e. after the fact), top-down (i.e. done to or with the participants by teachers and school leaders), and any training is extra-curricular.

Cooling Conflict was a ten-year action research project in Australia, part of the international DRACON project, investigating how drama can provide young people with the cognitive tools to resolve their own and other people’s conflicts, and to manage bullying for themselves. The program developed carefully structured drama pedagogy to give students knowledge and a vocabulary to understand the origins and structures of conflict, and to provide practice in the range of strategies available for resolving, managing or transforming conflict. The aim was to provide the students with autonomy and agency over this knowledge, and peer teaching became an important part of the program, which was (and still is) implemented in a wide range of educational settings internationally, formal and informal. From the outset and wherever possible, the program was deliberately integrated into standard curriculum time and programs, to embed the concept that conflict transformation and management can be learnt through experiential, integral learning. Over ten years, the project accumulated overwhelming evidence that, properly used, drama pedagogy is a valuable method for providing students with the tools they need to manage or transform their own conflicts, and themselves to take responsibility for assisting peers and younger students to do the same.
Keywords


Introduction

Schools are large, recognizable social units, that are created and organized – prima facie – for a very specific purpose: to teach young people the knowledge, skills and attitudes for their present, and especially future, needs in their contemporary society. They are an ongoing social community that includes humans of different ages, cultures and backgrounds, power and status levels, attitudes, personalities and interests (in both senses of the word: what entertains them and where their benefit lies). All the participants bring with them the conflicts that are part of their lives beyond the school, evolving daily. Therefore, by definition schools are full of latent conflict – defined as “clashes of interests, attitudes, power, rights and status, and of misunderstandings” (from Galtung 1969). The unity of this massive social unit is normally imposed and preserved by the expectations of all the participants, and the rules and the traditions of the organization. These include what the makers of schools (those traditions, the school policy officers and the curriculum designers) deem to be necessary knowledge. This is divided into discrete areas called ‘subjects’ or ‘learning areas.’ By implication, what is beyond those subjects is not necessary knowledge. This is all reinforced by a set of hierarchies, some formal, some more informal or tacitly acknowledged, of age, institutional authority and status, knowledge and experience. All depend on the complete acquiescence of all participants for there to be an absence of conflict.

Yet teaching young people how to deal with conflict is rarely part of a school curriculum. Schools the world over are often reluctant for many reasons to acknowledge the obvious truths above, and more reluctant still to give conflict any acknowledgment and an explicit profile by including the teaching of conflict management and mediation within the curriculum. Most if not all those involved make the tacitly agreed assumption that conflict is a bad thing that does not happen in school.

In 1996, my Australian drama colleague Bruce Burton and I were invited to join an international research project (DRACON) to investigate in practice the possible links between drama education and conflict resolution. Its leaders were Swedish conflict mediation specialists who had been impressed by some
drama workshops led by a Malaysian drama educator, so these three countries became the research sites.

There are, on the surface, many connections between conflict and drama, and while the cliché is not true that ‘all drama is conflict,’ clashes of status, rights, interests and power, and misunderstandings, do form a very significant proportion of the subject matter and the dramatic tension that fuels most drama, in Eastern as well as Western traditions (c.f. Aristotle c330 BCE, Natya Shastra c200 BCE).

For this deep exploration of conflict, we felt that educational drama could provide a complete pedagogy, similar to, but not identical with Integral Drama Based Pedagogy (IDBT).

Drama Education and Integral Drama-based Therapy

It is certainly true that the orthodox, atomized Western schooling that I described in the first paragraph pays little heed to theories of ‘innate knowledge that is inherent’ such as Wang expressed, or of the ‘evolution of integral consciousness and... educational reform on an integration of mind, body and spirit’ evoked by Aurobindo in [References to Ma and Subbiondo for Wang and Aurobindo p. 501]. However, kindred theories and alternative traditions of holistic and integral education have long existed in Western philosophy too, and the art form of drama has often been used as a learning instrument automatically linking mind, body, and spirit, from Aristotle onwards (See O’Toole, 2021) Nowhere is this articulated more vividly than by the sixteenth-century educator and – significantly – theologian Jan Comenius, who wanted to make his school curriculum and his whole school a theatre. He enthusiastically adopted the popular metaphor of ‘theatrum mundi – theatre of the world’ (Østern 2009). (In the context of my summary of Western education in paragraph 1, there is a certain irony that Comenius is generally known in orthodox Western educational theory as ‘the father of modern education’!)

Educational drama has emerged from this alternative Western tradition, and current practitioners have little difficulty in identifying with the ten themes expressed as underlying principles of IDBP by [Ma & Subbiondo. p. 504] – though there are some significant differences of emphasis.

In its contemporary form, educational drama is most directly derived from the work of British drama pioneer Dorothy Heathcote and her colleagues, from the 1960s onwards, which immediately resonates with Wang et al.
What she [Heathcote] does is ... a conscious employment of the elements of drama to... literally bring out what children already know but don't yet know they know... to plummet deep into feeling and meaning; this is her goal in drama... She works from the inside out. (Wagner 1976, p.13)

This vivid description of Heathcote’s practice nearly fifty years ago still encapsulates several of the basic principles of contemporary educational drama.

Many of these are identical with or run parallel to those of IDBP, and many of the practices too, so that most of the Professor Ma’s example of practice could be regarded as educational drama. The differences are often of emphasis only, or more often of primary purpose, so that the effects and outcomes for the students of similar activities might be viewed and analyzed differently.

There are a couple of important and connected differences of purpose however, both of which are vividly illustrated by our whole DRACON project.

- The first is about individual as distinct from social learning, and therefore, the significance (crucial to both) of the group process. As I understand them, Professor Ma’s example, and the age-old principles of integral development of the self that are described in the article, focus on each of the students’ holistic self-development and understandings of themselves. The group is there as a supportive catalyst to allow these personal understandings to emerge. For us in the DRACON project, the whole experience was about shared social learning, and particular cognitive and instrumental understandings that emerged within the drama and were thus shared by all the class. The addition of peer teaching to drama in our project (see below) reinforced that beyond our expectations.

- The second is that educational drama is about learning, and not therapy. Certainly, there might be therapeutic effects for particular children emerging as the result of drama’s peculiar capacity to reveal, re-experience or reflect on reality through the exploration of fiction. The primary purpose of DRACON, however, was to help all students not to heal, but to understand what in Heathcote’s words ‘they don’t know they know’, and from that to construct new cognitive understanding that could be quite instrumental to their future actions, not just their general self-development.

This we had to make clear right at the outset to DRACON’s Mediation experts, who had initially been aiming for a therapeutic approach to conflict. The drama educators insisted that the project would not be about learning ‘conflict resolution’ (resolving the students’ real life conflicts directly through drama)
but about ‘conflict management’ – providing the students with concepts and understanding of the nature and structure of conflict (and later of bullying), as well as some tools for them to apply that understanding to their own and others’ conflicts beyond the classroom.

This also implies a slightly but importantly different use of emotional protection than IDBP provides. Drama depends on:

– in the poet Coleridge’s words ‘the willing suspension of disbelief’ (1817, Chapter xiv),
– empathy – the ability to identify with the characters in the drama and to transfer that identification as required,
– being able to emotionally distance and step out of the belief at any time to reflect.

For the protagonists in the heat of a real conflict, none of those would be possible or sincere. To raise live conflict issues in a classroom is a recipe for escalation or inauthenticity.

An essential in any drama lesson is group trust and that voluntary suspension of disbelief, the group agreement of all participants to step into and inhabit an imagined world (O’Neill 1995). This world can be realistic, but, unlike the real world, it can be altered and played with, modified and experimented with. The world is necessarily fictional, because participants use real emotions as they empathize and identify with the situation and characters, so the fiction is an emotional protection, and they can step out with no consequences in the real world. The worlds imagined in drama can therefore provide a closely matching but safe verisimilitude for the study of conflict.

Starting Points

We observed, in a preliminary study for the Brisbane DRACON project, that the way many schools managed conflict had a number of similarities that were all based on assumptions that any student or adult who might think beyond those expectations and traditions referred to in paragraph 1 can see are patently false:

– ‘Conflict does not normally happen in schools’. So, conflict management was usually essentially reactive: any incident of conflict had to be dealt with as an aberration.
– ‘Conflict is always a bad thing’ (which needs to be suppressed or resolved as soon as possible).
– ‘Grown-ups and older people are better at solving conflicts than young people’. So, conflict management was invariably top down: those in conflict were referred to a higher, usually older authority – academic or pastoral – principals, welfare officers, prefects or peer mediators.
– ‘Learning about conflict is therefore not a necessary skill that must be integrated into the curriculum’ (except in occasional Health and Physical Education classes in some schools that touch briefly on it).

Our project set out to challenge all those specious assumptions, by using drama. In all our experience, backed up by the extensive literature of drama education, we know that drama can be used as

– a dialogical and democratizing pedagogy (see inter alia O’Connor 2010; Saebø et al 2017 – see note in References),
– an integrative pedagogy, that can be used in the mainstream curriculum to explore and give insights into any area of content in the curriculum (see inter alia Farmer 2011).

Two further preliminary studies by DRACON’s researchers in Sweden and Adelaide, Australia (O’Toole et al 2019, p. 129–133 and p. 161–163) identified that for nearly all young people, conflict is a frightening and confusing phenomenon, which they usually feel powerless to deal with. Since so much of drama is about exploring the nature, causes and effects of conflict, we hypothesized that drama would provide an ideal basis for giving students an experiential understanding of the structures of conflict and how it can be managed, escalated, defused or transformed. We wanted to provide the students with cognitive understanding, confidence, and the tools to analyze and manage future conflicts.

The Brisbane DRACON Project

The Brisbane DRACON project lasted for ten years (1997–2005), organized in annual standard action research cycles of ‘planning, action, evaluation and replanning’ (Kemmis & MacTaggart 1988, Zuber-Skerritt 1996). The mode of research was participant and participant-observer action research, with a wide diversity of data collected throughout, and a small measure of quantitative research, mainly in the form of student and sometimes teacher questionnaires.
Altogether about 8,000 students were involved from 63 schools in two States, Queensland and New South Wales (nsw). For both schools and students there were greatly varying levels of intensity and duration – for the schools from a few weeks through to three years, and for the students from one lesson to two intensive units of eight weeks and three weeks duration.

The first three annual cycles were largely eclectic and experimental; the middle three had an emphasis on cultural and intercultural conflict; and the last three (which spread into a fourth year) focused on bullying conflict. The breadth and depth of the cycles varied partly because of funding exigencies and funders’ priorities. However, we used the same set of conflict concepts, almost unchanged, throughout the ten years as our cognitive content. We used the same integrative drama principles and pedagogy, employing drama strategies and techniques that were congruent with each other (ie process drama techniques, and after Year 1, forum theatre – see below). The basic structural and organizational framework and key drama strategies emerged after Cycle 1, together with what became just as important to our hypothesis as the drama: the discovery of group peer teaching. By choice as well as necessity, we allowed the exact structure of the program, and the detailed delivery of the drama, to emerge organically, according to the particular school contexts within which we were operating, particularly within the first three years. Accordingly, the level of integration, the curriculum areas within which the project operated, and the breadth of coverage within the school varied widely.

Our optimistic vision of an ongoing program integrated into the whole school we only achieved partially in a few of our more deeply involved schools, and for a limited number of years only. One school was an exception, involved from 2003, that adopted the principles and the basic drama and peer-teaching framework as the basis of its conflict and bullying management plan, and is still doing so at the time of writing (2021). This was and is delivered by the drama department, and it still involves peer teaching into other curriculum subjects.

For our conflict theory, with the assistance of the DRACON mediation experts we developed a very simplified version of the ideas of Galtung’s Theories of Conflict (1958–73).

Cycles 1–3 – Brisbane

The first three years took place in a local Queensland urban high school with a strong drama department and tradition. Cycle 1 took place over one term. Observation, analysis and interview of the Cycle 1 students
(one combined drama class of 25 Years 11 and 12: 16/17-year-olds) identified that the students had comfortably mastered the conflict concepts and the drama techniques. They also unanimously endorsed the value of what they had learned (which was only very indirectly connected with their curriculum content – Greek Tragedy!). In a promising result for the research, over 50% – unsolicited in blinded interview – volunteered details of how they had personally used what they had learned in helping to manage real-life conflicts.

These three little findings encouraged us to take the next step towards genuinely democratic and dialogical teaching – asking students when they had completed the project to teach the conflict concepts, using the same drama

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**TABLE 1 Concepts of Conflict (the Cooling Conflict Project’s cognitive content)**

- **Conflict is natural and not always a bad thing**
- **Conflict results from**
  - clashes of interests, rights or power
  - misunderstandings, misplaced expectations or attitudes, or stereotyping
- **Conflict arises in three stages:**
  a. **Latent** – conditions for conflict and tension (clash or misunderstanding) exist but are not yet explicit or acknowledged
  b. **Emerging** – there is partial recognition of a conflict among the parties
  c. **Manifest** – the conflict is ongoing and clear to all
- **There are three parties (or possible parties) to any conflict:**
  - **Protagonist**
  - **Antagonist**
  - **Bystander or mediator**
  
  *Everybody is capable of being in any of these three roles*
- **All parties bear some responsibility and have some power**
- **Conflicts can be escalated (made worse) or de-escalated (made better)**

*They cannot always be resolved but they can usually be transformed*

- **De-escalating conflict involves:**
  - d. **Cooling the heat**
  - e. **Establishing what can be traded**
techniques, to classes of younger students, from a different subject area. At this time, there was considerable contemporary research into peer teaching as one way of better engaging students in their learning (e.g. Bilson & Tiberius 1991, Svinicki 1991), which interested us as drama teachers involved in dialogical teaching and dedicated to democratizing teaching. So in Cycle 2, we taught the conflict concepts, explored through the same drama methods, to the next year's class, this time slightly more naturally integrated, subject-wise, within a unit on political theatre. We chose for them to peer-teach four Year 9 classes (14-Year-olds) in English (which were all – most helpfully – studying a theme of ‘conflict in literature’, where the conflicts within the books they were studying provided the raw material for our fictional conflicts).

We then split them (for confidence and morale) into four team-teaching groups of 4–6 students, with two groups teaching through process drama, and two groups through forum theatre). After preliminary training and planning by ourselves and the class drama teacher, they then taught three one-hour sessions, firstly demonstrating their drama technique, then helping their participants to create a piece of their mode of drama to use with their own class peers (the other three groups in that class). We did not intervene, and asked the Year 9 class teachers, with whom we had held one brief explanatory workshop, also to refrain, except in extremis.

Analysis of the peer teachers, the peer learners, and the survey and interview data all showed that this experiment had worked well. The peer teachers had successfully taught their charges the necessary conflict concepts, and they emphatically acknowledged how the peer-teaching had reinforced their own learning – a key factor in peer teaching (see Rubin and Herbert 1998). Both groups said almost unanimously they had enjoyed both the drama and the peer teaching experience, and the questionnaire showed that the younger students had absorbed over 90% of the conflict concepts. We judged from this, and their comments and observed behavior, that a two-year mean gap between teachers and learners was ideal, with none of the misbehavior the older students had feared, and a mutual respect developing. One student summed it up succinctly: “We respect them – they were in Year nine two years ago and they survived, so they must know something!” (Year 9 student, School 1)

This was to prove much more than a useful behavior control mechanism. The Cycle 2 experiment worked so well that structurally it became the model for Cycles 4–9, with a mean two-year gap proving as we had hoped an ideal age and experience difference.

For Cycle 3, however, with a visiting UK theatre-in-education expert, we digressed into performance-based theatre-in-education, with the Years 11/12 Key Class creating an interactive performance for their parents and Year 10 students, again based on the conflict concepts. We had no research funding...
so we could not collect sufficient data to assess its effectiveness, although the
anecdotal feedback from the actor-teachers, their class teacher, and both stu-
dents and parents in the audience was uniformly positive.

Cycles 4–6 – New South Wales

The next three years were sponsored by the NSW Department of Education
Multicultural Office, and the Australian Research Council, so we redesigned
the program to run remotely, based on a teacher in-service program and a
Teachers’ and Students’ Handbook, with ourselves no longer being participant
researchers. In Cycle 4 we extended the peer teaching downwards, so that the
Year 11 Key drama class taught two Year 9 classes, one in the subject Aboriginal
Studies, the other in SoSE (Studies of Society and the Environment). Those stu-
dents then taught two large cohorts of Year 6 students from the feeder Primary
school, visiting the High school for their induction program. For this cycle
we had deliberately chosen a much more problematic school than School 1;
School 2 was a rural high school with a history of inter-racial strife, a low SES1
profile and much poverty in the region, and no strong drama tradition within
the school. There were some logistical issues at this school (such as teacher
and student absences) that disrupted the smooth running of the program and
demanded frequent interventions from the research team after all, but the pro-
ject again achieved its objectives for all three student groups, with some spec-
tacular successes, such as ‘Tracey’ (see below).

For the next two Cycles (4 and 5) the program expanded into four Sydney
urban schools, two of high SES and two low. With the greater distance, the
program had to run remotely, after a local teachers’ in-service and a prelimi-
nary visit by us to all the schools. We also gave the schools the opportunity to
continue the peer teaching downwards. Some primary schools took the project
down to Years 3 and 4 (8/9 year-olds), with the drama activities simplified, but
no real change in the conflict concepts. From sideline observation, which we
were not able to research or explain, we noticed that Year 7 and 8 students
appear to be particularly effective peer teachers.

It was not until the end of Cycle 5, following a whole-day feedback session
with students and teachers, that we finalized the ‘ideal’ drama strategy. Until
then students and teachers had either been using forum theatre or process
drama.

- Process drama works with the participants taking a conflict situation as
  their dramatic context, then stepping into that situation and improvising

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1 SES: Socio-Economic Status.
mainly through role-play what might happen in that situation, along with some reflective theatrical techniques.

– Our version of forum theatre was modified from Augusto Boal’s template of interactive theatre for ‘theatre of the oppressed’ (1979), where a group of actors devises a scene illustrating an incident of oppression, and then invites members of the audience as ‘spect-actors’ to intervene as the oppressed protagonist and attempt to end the oppression. The two main changes we made for conflict learning were:

1. for the actors to create three scenes, not one, illustrating the escalating stages of a conflict situation, from latent to emerging to manifest
2. for the spect-actors to be invited to intervene as any of the parties, not just the protagonist. Boal’s rule was based on his principle of empowering the victims of oppression to believe that the tools for overcoming oppression are in their own hands. Our intent was quite different – to teach that all parties in a conflict may have agency to de-escalate or resolve the conflict.

The feedback identified that the majority of both students and teachers found process drama difficult to create and manage, but it achieved deep exploration of conflicts and rich learning; forum theatre they found much simpler, but it provided more superficial conflict exploration and learning. It could also encourage poor conflict management, by modelling that direct intervention in scenes of conflict is always appropriate. The feedback also identified that the fictional conflicts for both forms were not always consistently authentic.

We redesigned the drama into a composite of the two strategies, Enhanced Forum Theatre (EFT), that we used for Cycles 6–9. In the revised EFT form we built in a strategy to develop conflict scenarios that were authentic, because they were based on real situations reported by the students, but safely fictionalized and made more complex by dramatic techniques, so there could be no real-life consequences.

Enhanced Forum Theatre

This revised program now started with an extended first phase, where students in pairs recounted to each other a real and unresolved situation of conflict with which they were personally familiar, but which would not cause them emotional stress in the telling. As a first quasi-dramatic step towards distancing,

1 Socio-economic status.
both had to listen to their partner telling the story back to them in the first person, as if it had happened to the partner. The pairs then chose one of their stories, on the criterion of its potential difficulty to solve, and moved into groups of six or eight, where each pair told their chosen story, half each, leaving the audience to figure out whose story it had originally been. After hearing all the stories, the enlarged group had to choose one of the stories, on the same criterion. Each member of the group then added one likely but fictional detail to the story, to distance and complexify it further.

In the second – devising and rehearsal – phase, the group then became the performers, with one member as a non-performing commentator to introduce each scene and control the audience interactions and intervention. Boal called this figure the ‘Joker’ and we renamed it for simplicity the ‘Host’. A further protective fictionalization we introduced was to bar the student whose original story the play was based on from playing either the character they had played in the original story, or the Host. They took their fictionalized scenario and turned it into a three-scene play, as in the earlier version of forum theatre, with the first scene of latent conflict, the second of emerging and the third of manifest, finishing that third scene with a moment of open confrontation. They then cast the scenes among themselves and rehearsed them to get them approximately repeatable (with the Host given brief introductions to each scene to explain the setting, characters’ ages and relationships, and sometimes gender, etc.).

In the third, and central, phase the groups took it in turns to perform, or be the spect-actors for the other groups’ forum plays. The actors usually performed the play three times, the first time followed by a deepening technique borrowed from process drama, where the audience is invited to ‘hot-seat’ interview any character they choose, with the aim just of getting to know more of the background of the conflict and the attitudes of the characters. The spect-actors were invited to interrupt and freeze the second performance at any point, to find out what the characters were thinking at that moment – another process drama deepening technique – before the third performance, where they were invited to intervene by stepping in as one of the characters to try and de-escalate the conflict, while the actors improvised according to their own characters.

This is where the deep integrated learning of the drama really started. Almost invariably attempts to intervene would either:

a. fail, faced with the unexpected responses of the characters in conflict, which would lead to a rich discussion among the whole class about motives and interests, or
b. get the dreaded cry of ‘Magic!’ from the audience – our authenticity control mechanism (another feature from Boal) – indicating that the audience judged the intervention to be inauthentic to the character or the conflict situation, or just too convenient to be believable. This would lead to an even richer class discussion, and sometimes to a vote, if some of the audience members defended the intervener’s action as valid.

c. Occasionally but rarely an intervener would come up with a solution that reached to the nub of the conflict and satisfied both the actors in their conflictual roles and the audience. This invariable received a burst of spontaneous applause, and also led to a rich reflective discussion. Quite often this was as far as that group drama might progress, whether ending in a win or with the characters still in conflict, and the performance would be forgotten in the discussion. This was fine by us, as it demonstrated the integrated learning in action; we were not looking for any kind of a correct solution, nor to convey the idea that all conflicts could be resolved.

We had one further deepening step: Scene 4. The leader (the class teacher or peer teachers) used this step when the drama and the conflict discussion had reached an impasse, but the students were still highly engaged (and there was sufficient time available). Earlier we noted that good conflict mediation practice means that transforming the conflict often happens best away from the confrontation – separating the parties, or at another carefully chosen time. For Scene 4, the Host would suspend the performance and interventions, and break the audience into two or three discussion groups. They would then be asked a.) Where or at what other time could this conflict best be de-escalated? b.) which other people, possibly ones mentioned but not encountered on stage, could have a positive impact as mediator? After group discussion, each group in turn would make their proposal. The Host and performing group would then (again with lots more rich class discussion) select in their view the most likely of these, and either set up the scene and try out the suggestion, or if the class was a confident one, invite the proposing group to demonstrate it (with ‘Magic’ still a powerful watchword) … or simply just throw the discussion to the audience.

In this scenario, even more than the previous intervention scenes, the drama lost its importance and sometimes disappeared completely. It had done its job.

The accumulated mass of data, qualitative and quantitative, from Cycles 4–6 continued to show that DRACON – now renamed Cooling Conflict – is an effective and popular pedagogy for teaching school students to understand conflict and giving them tools to manage it. After Cycle 6, the NSW Multicultural Office decided to run Cooling Conflict themselves, using Key teachers from our program as tutors and managers, and increase the number of participant schools.
Cycles 7–9 – Queensland

For the following three years, we were commissioned by Queensland Education Department, with funding once more from the Australian Research Council, to use basically these same strategies to address bullying in schools. Once more renamed as Acting Against Bullying, we made necessary alterations to the cognitive concepts, to teach the students what they needed to understand about bullying, its participants and how to combat or mediate it (See Table 2).

We used the now-tested eft drama strategy, and the peer-teaching structures, with very few changes, in these three Cycles, which extended into a fourth year. We used five Key schools and a varying number of primary feeder schools, mostly in Brisbane. The data collected throughout these cycles continued to affirm the effectiveness equally of this drama pedagogy and the peer teaching. We encountered some new problems however that reduced the overall effectiveness of this part of the Project, most notably a complete lack of systemic support from the participating Education Department, and the lack of drama expertise or confidence in primary schools.

However, we were encouraged to make two further innovations. The first was at the suggestion of a group of primary principals, who were so enthused by the project that they demanded that the program should commence in primary schools (Year 7) and work down from there; this was because in the original program, by the time the peer teaching had worked its way down through the secondary school to the primary students, most of the year was over.

The other innovation was the training of Master Teachers, who could continue and expand the program after we had left. Our nsw experience had thrown up several Key Teachers who had developed such expertise that the Department had entrusted them with the program, including the preliminary in-service, after we had left. The program throughout all Cycles had shown how important it was to have a highly competent Key senior teacher – usually drama – both for leading and guiding the teachers, and for sustaining the school administration’s support. Accordingly, we carefully picked our 5 Brisbane key schools with a major criterion of an experienced senior drama or English teacher with a track record of influence in the local area, and mentoring experience.

The overall data on bullying and drama from Cycles 7–9 mirrored very closely the findings on all the earlier cycles:

- Students were, if anything, more enthusiastic about the project, because the earlier research and the data showed that bullying is even more of an immediate concern to them than ordinary conflict;
- By now the eft convention had become well-established, with clear guidelines and instructions for all to follow.
TABLE 2 Concepts of Bullying (the Acting Against Bullying Project’s cognitive content)

– Bullying is the ongoing misuse of an imbalance of power causing fear, suffering or humiliation to others less powerful

– Bullying can be
  – Physical
  – Verbal
  – Psychological
  – Social
  – Sexual

– Bullying arises in three stages:
  – Latent – conditions for bullying exist but are not yet explicit or acknowledged
  – Emerging – there is partial recognition of bullying among some of the parties
  – Manifest – the bullying is ongoing and clear to all

– There are three parties (or possible parties) to any bullying situation
  – The Bully
  – The Bullied
  – The Bystander or mediator

Everybody is capable of being in any of these three roles #
All parties bear some responsibility and have some power; the Bystander often has most potential power as mediator

– Bullying can be escalated (made worse) or de-escalated (made better), it can be stopped, or it can be allowed to continue

– Managing bullying can involve
  – Fighting back
  – Fronting the bully
  – Withdrawing or avoiding the bully
  – Mediating
  – Appealing to more powerful others

Which of these is appropriate depends on each individual case.

# This is why, in accord with current bullying Management practice, we avoid the term ‘victim’, which implies the bullied person’s powerlessness.
Most excitingly for us, the peer teaching in some schools was beginning to evidence what had been part of our original integrative vision: some impact across the whole school (and beyond, from secondary to primary). This was noted by many students, teachers and particularly Key teachers and Principals. It was well-summed up as

When you get to know students by working with them so personally, you get to like and understand them. There’s no urge to bully them or fear bullying. That goes through the school. (Year 9 Student, Cycle 7)

This was the main reason why the one school mentioned earlier as continuing with the project to this day has adopted it into their Behavior Management plan.

**Constraints and Limitations**

During the decade of course there were numerous hitches, blocks and individual breakdowns, relating mainly to one of the following factors (or lack of them): communication, support, organizational flexibility, organizational stability and understanding of drama. Together, these have led to a lack of long-term sustainability of the projects in the schools and the jurisdictions. However, the reason there were not even more hitches was that from the outset our first priorities in choosing our schools were to ensure that there was

a. an enthusiastic Key Drama or English teacher in each Key school
b. a warmly supportive administration
c. a designated Coordinator at Deputy Head level.

However, staff mobility and personnel changes are a bugbear of schools for any external providers; in some schools it felt like the Key teachers, Principals and Coordinators were on a carousel of promotions, secondments and transfers, particularly at the end of a year, which often terminated their own plans for the following year’s project continuation.

With in-service workshops, our Handbooks and regular communication with the Key teacher and Coordinator, we were able to ensure a flow of outgoing communication. However, within the jurisdictions, the schools, and among teachers and year groups we had no control. Our greatest failure of external support came in Cycles 7–9, where after one year the enthusiastic Curriculum division Curriculum Officer who had commissioned us was transferred, along with a departmental reorganization, leaving us adrift with no division willing
to take any responsibility for us (or the considerable funding we brought), and no spokesperson to talk to. This caused the collapse of our Master Teacher program, though the enthusiasm of the Key Schools and Key teachers enabled the main program to continue and flourish.

One problem we did not solve: the logistical difficulties of inter-class peer-teaching. For the schools, with their rigid, subject-based timetables, this was the most difficult aspect of the project, invariably involving special arrangements with other year-groups, and the interruption of tightly organized schedules. Those difficulties were augmented when arranging the peer teaching with the primary schools, that often involved travel and buses; we also discovered that there was rarely any close ongoing relationship between the secondary schools and their feeder primary schools. Goodwill nearly always prevailed, but this administrative nightmare was a powerful discouragement to maintaining the program on an ongoing basis.

Although the program proved in itself a powerful piece of integrated teaching, we were not able to embed it sustainably within the exam-driven subject-based curricula of secondary schools. We preferred to start within a Drama class, and that is where it sometimes stayed. We found English and Health and Physical Education teachers amenable, and more rarely, Studies of Society and the Environment. Other subject areas were rarely involved.

Drama pedagogy itself (and the image of drama in the school) was sometimes another stumbling block. The Key teachers we chose almost always acted as effective mentors to the teachers of the younger classes. However, especially where the project had been imposed on them, those teachers were occasionally resistant to the idea of drama or found it ‘too difficult’ (even though the actual drama would be carried out by the students), which was a disincentive both to the elder and younger students. Fortunately, these cases were rare, and usually the students’ successful peer teaching carried the day and often changed teachers’ attitudes.

A bigger disappointment was the collapse of our second innovation in Cycles 7–9, starting the project in the primary schools, as urged by the enthusiastic principals. They were part of the problem – though the principal was entirely supportive, the teachers often felt the whole thing was imposed on them and few had training in drama. This confirmed that there was a serious lack of experience, understanding of drama or confidence in teaching it in the primary schools. In particular there was not always a senior (Year 7) teacher able to act as a Key teacher and start the program off.
Conclusions

In spite of these negative aspects, overall, the project demonstrated hands down that using drama and peer teaching to teach school students to manage conflict is a safe and highly effective integral and integrative pedagogy, outstandingly affirmed by the students. The data from Cycles 4–9, after we expanded into primary peer-teaching, consistently indicates that 90–99% of students, some as young as eight years old, were able to identify the parties to conflict and bullying, define the three stages of conflict – latent, emerging and manifest – and identify them in their drama work. In the Cycles 7–9 project on bullying, almost all students (300 interviewed) recognized the need to intervene in bullying before it becomes manifest, and they were able to articulate their understanding of the nature and implications of bullying. Most students also identified the bystander as being the party best able to intervene to change a bullying situation. Consistently through the ten years, students reported that they had used some aspect of the knowledge they had gained in the project in their own lives. Drama and peer teaching had provided a thoroughly internalized and integrated pedagogy for teaching and learning this vital subject, of concern to all young people.

The project’s sustainability at the school or institutional level was at best patchy – with one jurisdiction (NSW) continuing to run and adapt the program for almost a decade, but most schools finishing after one or two years, when we left. However, the DRACON pedagogy has a remarkable longevity. Current programs using it, fifteen years on, include

- an international Peace Education Youth Theatre based in countries as diverse as Palestine, Northern Ireland, Brazil and the Ivory Coast;
- conflict transformation workshops in Indonesia;
- nursing education training programs in Jordan;
- current Cooling Conflict programs operating in Taiwan, prompted by the author’s 2007 and 2014 visits, and aided by a Chinese version of Cooling Conflict, By Bruce Burton and John O’Toole, translated by Prof Lin Mei-Jun, University of Tainan;
- a Singapore theatre company just now instituting a pilot Cooling Conflict program in secondary schools.

Last Word

The last word rests with a student. ‘Tracey’ was a Cycle 4 Year 8 participant, from the conflicted rural high school. Prior to the project we were warned that
she was likely to be disruptive: almost beyond the school's control, on her last warning before expulsion, and with a police (and school) record of violent behavior. The Year 11 students were terrified of encountering her in their peer teaching, so we sat in on the first class, and from then on followed her progress with increasing interest. She took to the program like a duck to water, complied with all her peer mentors’ instructions and became a leader both in the classroom and the subsequent peer teaching – leading two quite difficult and oversized Year 6 classes with assurance and authority. During the project, we received consistent reports of her improving behavior in other school contexts. To see whether this was a flash-in-the-pan, or she was actually internalizing the learning post-project, we interviewed her at length, then followed up with further interviews in Years 9 and 10, this time including her mother. Here is a little of what she said in Year 10, more than two years after the Project.

I’ve learned to be myself, to deal with my anger in different ways. Dracon taught me to stay calm, you know, take a deep breath and think about things. I’ve improved out-of-sight. My attitude, just my attitude towards schoolwork, toward my family, towards the teachers. Everything’s just changed. It’s great. It’s made me feel like I have to go and listen to others and there are other ways to deal with conflict.

I used to get angry and use violence all the time, but now I just go for walks, or take deep breaths, talk it through with my mum or who I’m angry with, and just stop and think of the consequences ... and then you [I] think, ‘Yeah, latent, emerging – it’s only got to emerging’ you know, because you [I] then step in – the actual words don’t go through my head but the stages do, like. It’s great. (‘Tracey’ Year 8 Student 1999)

In Year 11, the school reported that Tracey was now a settled, popular and academically achieving student, with a new boyfriend and the firm intent to become a police officer. For that student at least, the combination of drama and peer-teaching was a life-changing and totally integral experience.

Endnote

The full Dracon Project research report can be found in Löfgren and Malm (2006). More detailed accounts of the Brisbane cycles and their outcomes as referred to in this chapter may be found in Chapter 7 of that book.
Another more detailed account of *Cooling Conflict* and *Acting Against Bullying* and all the *dracon* projects, together with the theories of conflict and drama pedagogy that underpin them, as well as descriptions of the projects they have spawned from 2005–2019, can be found in O’Toole et al. 2019.

**Author’s biography**

John O’Toole was Foundation Chair of Arts Education at the University of Melbourne, and previously Professor of Drama and Applied Theatre at Griffith University, Queensland. He has taught, researched, and written about drama and arts education with all age groups for over fifty years, on all continents. He has written over twenty school text-books and research books, many of which are standard texts, and numerous articles. From 2009–2012, he was Lead Writer for The Arts and for Drama in the Australian Curriculum: Arts. From 2000, he has been involved with drama education in China, designing and convening a Masters course in Drama Education in Hong Kong from 2002–2006; and since 2016, he has been a frequent visitor for workshops, keynotes, and a research project with Beijing Normal University. In 2014 he was awarded the Order of Australia (AM) for services to drama education.

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