

Acting Against Conflict

Recent developments in South Africa have shown that the country is confronted with a new generation of youths who are “learning to be angry” (Jansen, 2010 :1). From a survey of media reports and research papers, the problem seems to emerge not so much from the youth themselves but from the country’s history. Reuben Mogano, a former researcher in the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation points out that the culture of violence affecting youths in South African schools, for instance, can be traced to the legacy of apartheid which saw the politicization of schools and transformed them into sites of political struggle (Mogano, 1993). Since then, ‘pupil power’ has taken a range of forms including pupil-pupil violence, pupil-teacher violence and pupil-state violence. If these findings are compared to recent outbursts of violence among the youth in South African schools, colleges and universities, it is needless to mention that drastic interventions are needed to refocus the youth towards a culture of learning rather than a culture of violence.

1. OBJECTIVES

The Acting Against Conflict (AAC) Project aims at addressing different forms of conflict in high schools, universities and other youth centres in South Africa. The ‘acting’ part of the project refers to the use of applied drama and theatre to help manage conflicts such as bullying, sexual harassment, xenophobia and other forms of violence from developing into a culture. The project aims at equipping young people with a range of creative strategies for conflict mediation and management. It is informed by the idea that peer education between the youth themselves not only maximizes learning but also instills a sense of ownership and responsibility over their actions. When the youth take responsibility for their own learning through peer education, they are motivated to embrace positive behaviour models that increase their self-esteem and reduce the propensity for conflict. As they reach out

to other youths in the outside community, the possibility of influencing their peers as role models cannot be ruled out.

The project regards conflict as “an opposition of ideas, interests or actions that results in a struggle over status, power and/or resources” (Opotow, 1991:416). Conflict can be either positive or negative. For instance, Augsburg (1992) argues that it is during periods in our lives when we are exposed to conflict that really challenge us, that we feel most alive and want to better ourselves. The absence of conflict may therefore be a signal for apathy, lack of interest and disillusionment while its presence can prompt us to explore alternatives and change our perspectives.

However, conflict can become a problem when it causes distress to others or when its consequences are undesirable. Such negative conflict can emerge from misunderstandings and clashes over personal or group interests, rights and power (O’Toole, Burton and Plunkett, 2005). Identifying the nature, causes and effects of negative conflict, and being able to manage or handle it, can help in reducing incidences of negative conflicts affecting the youth. The Acting Against Conflict Project therefore charts the way forward in training the youth on how to manage negative conflicts using the medium of applied drama and theatre.

2. METHODOLOGY

The application of applied drama and theatre to contexts that lie beyond the boundaries of theatre buildings such as classroom settings, urban settlements, rural villages, prison complexes, industrial sites, hospitals and museums has increasingly become contemporary practice. Such drama and theatre, conveniently prefaced as ‘applied’ casts a wide and collective net that has tended to bring unity to a diversity of participatory drama and theatre methodologies. These modes of applied drama and theatre include Drama in Education (DIE), Theatre in Education (TIE), Theatre for Development (TfD), Community Theatre, Forum Theatre and Drama Therapy, to mention a few. Critics who have ventured to interrogate these applied drama and

theatre modes (Taylor, 2003; Nicholson, 2005; Thompson, 2006; Prentki and Preston, 2007*) agree on their capacity to create transformational learning encounters between practitioners (or facilitators) and participants.

The Acting Against Conflict Project has adopted an integrated intervention approach that bridges the abovementioned modes of applied drama and theatre with Fredrich Glasl's Conflict Escalation Model (1999) as follows:

- (i) *Latent Phase*: when the conditions for conflict present themselves as potential tensions or clashes over interests, rights and power. Such tensions have not yet reached a point of crisis but are still 'hidden' from the conflicting parties.
- (ii) *Emerging Phase*: when the conditions for conflict begin to move towards a point of crisis. The conflicting parties become partially aware of the 'brewing' tensions.
- (iii) *Manifest Phase*: when potential and/or emerging conflicts come out in the open. The tensions of interests, rights and power 'escalate' (or explode) to a point of crisis and become visible to the conflicting parties, including bystanders.
- (iv) *De-escalation Phase*: involves responses to the escalating conflicts in order to 'defuse' or resolve them. Quite often, it is the task of those outside the conflict, the bystanders, to intervene or mediate in the management of the conflict.

The basic principle informing these escalating phases of conflict lies in the symbiotic relationship between drama and conflict. Conflict goes beyond its usual function as an element of drama to become an experiential phenomenon that lies at the heart of human behaviour, thought and feeling. More often than not, such conflicts are fuelled by notions of difference. As O'Toole, Burton and Plunkett point out:

To be different is to risk and suffer misunderstanding, one of the principal roots of conflict. To be different ... is often enough to incur bullying as (individuals) jostle for identity and acceptance in the dominant group culture (2005:14).

Thus each phase of the Conflict Escalation Model allows tensions emerging from difference to be played out within a dramatic space that is not so distanced from real life experience. As Cecily O'Neill (1995) puts it, we create 'dramatic elsewhere' in order to escape from the limitations of the real world, paradoxically, such escape allows us to be able to participate more fully in it.

3. IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

(a) Preparation by project facilitators

The project will be run by a team of highly trained facilitators operating under the Drama for Life (DFL) Company. The main task of these skilled facilitators will be to train and equip targeted groups of young people with knowledge and skills in conflict mediation and management. The project facilitators will be expected to initiate a peer education process involving trained youths reaching out to other peers in schools, universities and other centres.

(b) Training of peer mediators (or master trainers)

The project involves facilitators holding workshops with targeted youths as peer mediators. These training workshops will focus on the following areas:

- (i) Understanding the fields of applied drama and conflict management and locating them within the South African context.
- (ii) Practical training exercises in interactive drama and theatre techniques such as Drama in Education (or Process Drama), Image Theatre and Forum Theatre. These exercises will include (a) Knowing the body; (b) Making the body expressive; (c) Using drama and theatre as language; (d) Applying interactive process drama and forum theatre techniques
- (iii) Preparing conflict mediation workshops and/or performances based on interactive drama and theatre approaches. These workshop and/or performance interventions will be structured according to the Conflict Escalation Model.

The peer education process involves the team of project facilitators training selected groups of peer mediators to act as 'master trainers' who will be responsible for

extending and sustaining the peer mediation process. The peer mediators (or master trainers) will need to be adequately equipped with interactive theatre skills and knowledge in conflict management. With the guidance of project facilitators, these master trainers will be responsible for reaching out to other youths in schools, universities and community centres.

(d) Monitoring the peer mediation process

O'Toole, Burton and Plunkett (2005) observed that the success of a drama driven conflict management program depends on the key classes (or master trainers) becoming positive role models during the peer mentoring process. Using the ripple effect strategy, the master trainers as peer mentors will continue to reach out to their fellow peers to form a drama and conflict management spiral that can spread out into the larger community. The project facilitators will be responsible for monitoring the peer mediation process in order to ensure its sustainability.

6. EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The outcomes that are expected to emerge from this project include:

- (i) **Transformation through Drama:** The project will extend the youth's awareness and understanding of conflict using the medium of applied drama and theatre. By playing out roles in imaginary conflict situations, the youth will come to understand what motivates human behaviour in situations of conflict and develop empathy for the feelings of others.
- (ii) **Tolerance of Difference:** The project will also enable the youth to embrace the idea of unity in diversity by bridging the cultural gaps that tend to create antagonistic notions of difference leading to xenophobia, prejudice and violence. Quite often, the causes of conflict are embedded in negative attitudes and assumptions about others who are different from themselves.
- (iii) **Moral Regeneration:** The project will create a sense of moral responsibility among the youth themselves, thus challenging them to change the culture of conflict, violence and intolerance. Through peer mediation and education, the youth will be able to empower each other

with the necessary knowledge and skills for managing and resolving conflict. Ultimately, this will enable them to be role models not only in their own lives but also in the lives of others in the community and beyond.