

**Using drama to promote  
respect for all  
by  
Angie Kotler**

Angie Kotler describes a drama-based project in which young people from a wide range of backgrounds came together to explore their experiences and their identities through a drama and dance performance. The lessons learned, however, are applicable to all teaching and learning situations for they are about enabling young people to develop self-respect and thereby realise the common humanity they share with others, however apparently different from themselves.

**Introduction**

This article describes an experimental piece of work carried out at a secondary school in Bradford where the issues of 'identity' and 'community' were being worked out daily in the playground and the classrooms. A courageous drama teacher decided to take an innovative approach by working with groups of students to produce a piece of drama that was challenging, thought-provoking and extremely moving.

**The setting**

The project called *Reflections* is about the work of a teacher and a group of students at a school where approximately sixty per cent of the population are of Pakistani Muslim heritage, thirty per cent are white British and a small percentage are of mixed heritage or are from African or African-Caribbean backgrounds. Some young people arrive in the district from war-torn countries and are severely traumatised. They enter a school where the balance between the white British students and Pakistani-heritage students has shifted dramatically during the past five years. The school itself has undergone changes due to re-organisation, as well as several changes of leadership. It is a school in 'special measures'. There have been incidents where the victims are often those who do not fit clearly into the main 'camps' and are consequently easy targets. They often become withdrawn and anti-social in return.

**The project begins**

Lee Scholtz is the drama teacher at the school. One of her responsibilities last year was to lead a group of students in their Year 12 community action service option. She thought that community work should begin within the community of the school and that these older students could become good role models for some of the younger ones who were in the learning support unit because they were struggling to achieve and fit in with school life.

What became apparent when Lee talked to the Year 12 students was that they were no clearer about their own identity or the community that they belonged to than the younger children, who were apparently less able, students. She started to think that there was a need to open up the process and try to find a way for all of these young people to find their voice.

It was at this point that I entered the picture. I work at Education Bradford and I manage the Schools Linking Project ([www.bradfordschools.net/slp](http://www.bradfordschools.net/slp)). This work aims to bring together pupils from different ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds to learn with and about each other. The project normally involves pairing schools from different areas in the district, because many schools are populated by one predominant ethnic group. The project was in its third year and involved sixty primary schools, but increasingly I was trying to see how I could support secondary schools. I had met Lee at a drama coordinators' meeting, where I had offered to support any ideas that the teachers might have to use drama to facilitate 'community cohesion'. Lee telephoned me after the meeting to say she needed my help. She asked me to call in at the school to meet some students she was working with, because she said she had an idea. She didn't mention involvement with another school but knowing something about the school I was intrigued.

I arrived and was immediately confused. I walked in a room with a very mixed group of students, in terms of age, ability, ethnicity and language. The atmosphere was what you would hope to see in any classroom calm, collegial concentration. The students were writing poetry, sitting quietly at round tables, talking each other and writing. Some of them eagerly and politely showed me what they had done. I was confused because if I was honest that was not what I had expected and also because I could not see Lee needed any help at all! I left at the end of session wondering what I could possibly do. But the work continued and I followed its progress, I realised that this was building slowly but surely into something very important and Lee needed to know that there was support for it from Education Bradford to ensure that these students were not let down. They were courageous and beginning to take a lot of risks — we had to support this process.

### Developing the students' work

The two groups met every Thursday afternoon at the scheduled time and Lee encouraged them, through a range of activities, to explore their own stories and to share them. As well as writing poems, they had discussions and developed short drama tableaux, individually and in small groups. They listened to each other and they shared sometimes painful experiences, sometimes a lot of laughter and always honesty. Meanwhile they were learning techniques and skills that were boosting their confidence, as they noticed how they captured others' attention. They gave each other considered and constructive feedback. They decided that they wanted to produce a performance that would portray their evolving story as a group to the rest of the school, to their parents, to anyone who would listen — and they decided that they wanted to dance!

The next stage was to open it up to the rest of the school, so the sessions were extended into after school time. Anyone who wanted to could come to make music, to dance, to develop the piece that was becoming *Reflections*. None of this sounds particularly exceptional, except that these students were not used to turning up or making a commitment. This time, however, they were keen — to keep the commitment to themselves.

### Moving outside the school

Lee realised that to sustain this momentum and to help these students to excel she needed a venue — outside the school. She wanted a venue with status and the first stop was the Theatre in the Mill at the University of Bradford. Lee walked through the door one afternoon, just as the director and a member of the theatre team were discussing how they could get more involved in supporting schools, especially as the issues of racism and separate communities were such current controversial issues, and drama such a powerful medium to facilitate open debate on this. Drama can go where discussion fails because everyone gets too heated; drama opens the box and everyone has an opportunity to see the whole story.

So the Theatre in the Mill took on *Reflections* — the students went there to rehearse and were told what was expected of them. They were good and it was up to them to show that to the audience and not to let themselves or anyone else down. I saw those young people growing before my eyes.

There were many difficulties before the production reached the night of the performance, one of which is especially important to mention in the context of RE and citizenship. Some of the Year 12 students were Muslim girls and while they participated fully in the process in school and benefited enormously from it, they were very unsure about whether they should be seen on a stage performing. They knew they wanted to be heard, but maybe not seen. This was discussed and parents were also involved in the discussions. In the end all but one performed.

### The performance

The show itself was stunning. The quality of the individual and collective performances by the students was breathtaking. It was impossible to distinguish between normally proficient students, those in the learning support unit, those who had been in the compulsory lessons or those who had volunteered and come after school. They were a truly cohesive unit; the dancing

and the acting were faultless, but their individual voices also came through and the full house heard stories that would make any adult cry with both shame and pride — shame because children should not have the experiences many of these young people have had, and pride because they had learned how to stand up and be counted. When they received a standing ovation, they knew finally that their stories were really worth something and they left the theatre that night ten feet tall.

Lee presented this story to a workshop at the Respect for All conference during the following term. Sixteen participants found themselves led through a similar process in an hour that these students had experienced over weeks and months. They saw film clips of the students talking about their experience and then they worked in groups of four to produce a tableau of their shared story. It was amazing to witness such openness, trust and willingness to engage with a simple but incredibly challenging task to find out what binds us together as human beings. The themes here were the same as those of the students: love, pain, fear and loss, but always faith and hope for something better. It seems that if we only stop and listen and give each other space, humanity will come shining through.

### The future

*Reflections 2* is now underway at the school. A new, larger group of students has embarked on a similar journey. This time there are more Muslim students, both boys and girls, and this time they have been offered musical instrumental lessons as part of the process. One session during Ramadan became all about whether or not they should participate in music, particularly during the holy month. These dilemmas are central to the lives of young British Muslims and they need to air them. There were no clear answers, but the very act of articulation defuses the tension and anxiety and allows them to grow in confidence to start to work out for themselves what it means to be Pakistani, Muslim and British in Bradford in 2006. The following week, they turned up and joined in. Lee has plans to involve parents this time also and the group has an immediate target of a city centre venue performance for the Bradford Peace Festival.

### Conclusion and lessons

The development of a healthy, diverse yet cohesive community at the school will not be created by this work alone, nor will the difficulties disappear overnight. However, Lee has evidence now for what I suspect she knew all along: that this is important work and that whatever else happens at the school, she must continue to allow *Reflections* to grow. She continues to receive support from the Schools Linking Project and I hope that we will be able to share the lessons from this work across the district. Meanwhile *Reflections* has other ambassadors. One of the Congolese students involved in the production moved to a different school this year. He has gathered a group of new friends and approached the drama teacher, requesting to start a *Reflections* group there too.

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