
You didn’t Do Anything!
A Research Play on Bullying

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The anti-bullying drama—*You didn't Do anything!*—is a collective creation developed by a group of pre-service teachers from the University of Prince Edward Island in the winter of 2004 under my guidance.[1] In 2004, the play toured over 40 elementary schools in the Maritime Provinces reaching over 3000 students and teachers. Since then, the script has lived on, reaching a number of classrooms as a readers’ theatre piece; as a reading to entice classroom discussions around the theme of conflict and bullying; as well as a re-staging by senior elementary students in Nova Scotia. The DVD version of the play has also been widely distributed and used in a number of schools across Canada to provoke discussions on social justice issues.

The socio-emotional and theatre learning that emerged for participants (pre-service teachers, elementary students, and myself) has been well documented in other articles I have published (See references below). However, the script itself—*You didn't Do anything!*—has only had excerpts published in print. I feel it is important to offer the entire script as a representation of the research collected by the pre-service teachers during the play development.

The creative process for the anti-bullying play involved playbuilding techniques (Tarlington & Michaels, 1995), community building (Rohd, 1998), a/r/tography (Irwin, 2004) and performative inquiry (Fels & Belliveau, 2008; Fels, 2004, 1998), and it occurred over the course of two months (January-February 2004). The journey was both a pedagogical and research endeavor. It was pedagogical for the creators because they developed an understanding of theatre creation as well as ways to develop concrete lessons to teach drama and social justice issues. In terms of research, the play development process was built around a participatory action research model (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991) which “involves the use of information gathered and systemized by the group as a source of objective knowledge of facts or issues through communal meetings and artistic techniques” (Espinoza Soto, 2007, 113).

The pre-service teachers began their exploration of conflict and bullying through readings about bullying which included plays such as *The Shape of a Girl* by MacLeod (2002) and *I met a Bully on the Hill* by Hunter and Brooks (1995); literature such as *The bully, the bullied and the bystander* by Coloroso (2002), and articles from researchers Craig and Pepler (1997), Olweus (1993), Rigby (2001). They also did a number of school visits where they observed students, as well as talked casually to teachers and students about issues of conflict within their schools.

To share our learning from the readings and school visits, we held group meetings where we talked about our respective discoveries. The verbal sharing eventually led us to create improvisations around our research findings, where we would explore moments that resonated with us during our discussions. For example, a number of the pre-service teachers discovered through their school visits that bullying often happened on the school bus, so we improvised scenarios of tensions that could happen between adolescents on their way to and from school on the bus. The various improvisations, stimulated from our research, built the foundation for us to begin playbuilding, which included tableau work, hot-seating, and dialogue (Fels & Belliveau, 2008). For instance, in one hot-seat, a student in role as a bully shared how she felt bullied at home by her father and older sister; consequently, she unleashed some of this built up frustration from home on other girls at school. This hot-seat activity provided more complexity to one of the so-called bullies in our play.
Over time, characters began to take shape and a plot line emerged. The pedagogical focus was on learning by doing, and even though a deadline existed (we had set dates for the tour), we still tried to explore as long as we could, trying not to target on a finished and finalized product. We were all committed to allowing the script to emerge from the group ideas and had agreed that a collective approach would be used as long as possible. As noted in detail elsewhere (Belliveau, 2007b), for some members the collective process worked well but yet for others the emergent process created frustrations and tensions. As the facilitator of the project, I tried to refrain from being the director, and instead drew from the strengths of the group. Nonetheless, I did step in to provide direction at certain times of the rehearsal period, particularly as our tour dates approached.

The pre-service teachers involved in the playwriting and performing were not theatre majors, in fact few had any theatre experience at all. However, what they all shared was a genuine interest in social justice and a desire to learn about drama in education. Over the course of the eight-week creative process, the group met initially for six hours per week, then as the production came closer we doubled the amount of time to twelve hours per week. As facilitator, my objective was to help the pre-service teachers build some theatre skills along with our research journey into our topic of bullying. Although the readings were helpful in building a knowledge base, it became clear that their visits to elementary schools, where the pre-service teachers observed and interacted with students and teachers, became the cornerstone to understanding the complexity of bullying. The school visits informed their writing and brought authenticity to what they were reading, and at the same time they were reminded who their audience was going to be for their upcoming tour.

You didn’t Do anything! focuses on bystanders, as the group felt that exploring that position was where the most hope for change in bullying situations existed. They came to this realization through some of the literature, which suggests that peers are present as witnesses in over 85% of bullying episodes but only act to support the victim 11% of the time (Pepler and Craig, 1997). Moreover, their realization was authenticated during their school visits where a number of pre-service teachers noticed incidents where bystanders were present during bullying situations. The pre-service teachers talked about how bystanders in most cases failed to intervene. Therefore, their observations, supported by the literature, became the impetus to focus the play around finding ways of empowering and activating bystanders.

Their readings and observations were also supported by connections to bullying from their personal lives. A number of the pre-service teachers shared moments from their elementary and teenage years where they were involved in bullying situations, and these personal stories influenced and informed the playwriting of the script.

In the play, the bystanders, Courtney and Darren, find themselves in challenging ethical situations because they want to be accepted by the ‘cool’ crowd (KJ and Suzie), yet at the same time they would like to remain loyal to their friends (Lauren and Chris), who, for various reasons, are being bullied. Within the stereotypical roles of bully, bystander, and bullied, the pre-service teachers tried to make the characters real, confronted by complex issues youths face. As the pre-service teachers worked their way through the scenes from various perspectives, trying to acknowledge and come to understand how it may feel to be a bully, bystander, or victim, the play was able to move away from a purely didactic structure of representing one-dimensional, one-sided perspectives. Instead, the scenarios presented brought out the subtleties, complexities, and risks involved when individuals are immersed in conflict and must choose how to act or respond in these tense moments.

In using forum theatre techniques (Boal, 1995) and conflict resolution approaches (Rohd,
1998) during the playbuilding stage, the pre-service teachers were, arguably, able to develop the characters with a sophisticated level of complexity and believability. Like any theatre piece, characters only truly come to life during the performance when the text is supported by the actors’ movements, gestures, and voice. I mention this as a reminder that the script you will read is merely a blueprint for production.

To a certain extent the script also represents the pre-service teachers’ lived experience during the playbuilding, because as I mentioned earlier and discuss in detail elsewhere (Belliveau, 2007b, 2006, 2004a) tension within the group did build at different moments in the process, especially during the final weeks. When the collective playbuilding process reached a point where a unified script needed to be created and we had to narrow the play to 30-minutes (this was the time allotted in schools for the tour), a number of the pre-service teachers were frustrated that some of their suggested written contributions were omitted.

Nonetheless, I argue that the challenges of working in a collective came to represent sites of learning how to negotiate, listen, and accept other perspectives (Belliveau, 2006a). The points of tension the pre-service teachers experienced fed into their anti-bullying script and in their characterization of the roles, and in turn this passion impacted, and fueled energy into, the development of the collective play. I suggest that the moments of frustration and disagreement inadvertently became constructive, as we struggled and worked through the tensions to come to an artistically engaging and satisfying play, as experienced by both pre-service teachers and their young audiences. Nevertheless, from a pedagogical perspective, too much tension within a drama process can hinder the learning of individuals (Belliveau, 2004b), and as facilitator I had to tread a fine balance between tensions of individual relations, ownership of the work, and working together.

This introduction is not meant to be a detailed theoretical exploration of the collective playbuilding of You didn’t Do anything!; instead it hopefully offers an entry into the process and the ways of working that led to the script you are about to read. The characters you will encounter in the script I am sharing with you represent the research behind the pre-service teachers’ observations and perceptions of what is happening in schools, their reading of the literature on the subject of bullying, and their self-realizations of the complexities and challenges of dealing with power imbalances. The script is an artifact of their learning in their journey as teachers and researchers.

In this sense this script below represents an a/r/tographical example of pre-service teachers working through drama (Irwin, 2004). As an extension to the play you’re about to read, I have traced specific moments of my journey as facilitator in this project in a recent publication (Belliveau, 2006a). In that paper I share my learning of working with the UPEI pre-service teachers in a collective theatre project using theatre as a form of research representation. In effect, I similarly dramatize my learning about a drama-based project to try and capture the multiple layers of learning and meaning making.


The research project was ethically approved by the University of Prince Edward Island.