

# Jade Speaks Up

*Developing teachers' confidence with drama conventions to enhance health education learning*

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## KEY POINTS

- *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) has an expectation that schools will contribute to students' learning experiences that develop resilience, build personal coping strategies, and encourage access to help and support.
- Teachers can boost students' wellbeing when they facilitate learning strategies to respond to topics that potentially contribute to mental distress, such as domestic violence.
- Drama conventions are powerful tools that can be used within health education learning to facilitate the development of important social skills and to provide opportunities for meaningful student engagement.
- A New Zealand-developed and researched programme, Jade Speaks Up, provides teachers with a safe, supported process to explore sensitive issues with their Year 5–8 students.

Jade Speaks Up is an Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC)-funded programme. It supports teachers to use process drama and other activities to introduce the topic of domestic violence while at the same time developing emotional literacy, trust, and self-calming skills. This article draws on qualitative and quantitative evaluation data to show how process drama can deepen authentic exploration and generation of strategies. Insights from teachers are shared to illustrate the impact of their delivery of this programme. The purpose of this article is to encourage teachers to adopt the JSU programme to help address student needs of developing skills for keeping safe around domestic violence. The authors conclude that, with adequate resourcing and supervision, teachers can play an essential role in improving student resilience for challenging situations.

## Introduction

This article provides a snapshot of one aspect of a 3-year research project (February 2017– February 2020)<sup>1</sup> that is evaluating the impact of classroom teachers facilitating exploration of healthy relationships and violence prevention with their 8–12-year-old students. The authors examine the use of process drama by classroom teachers in the pilot to explore challenging aspects of the health curriculum. Experienced facilitators developed the programme Jade Speaks Up and related resources and worked with teachers in a selection of schools to implement and evaluate it. ACC has a clear position in primary prevention. Investing into Jade Speaks Up and other like-minded programmes provides ACC with a better understanding of the impacts to our teachers and schools delivering it.

## A note about process drama

*Process drama* is a form of drama in which the purpose is to participate in learning, inquiry, or discovery rather than to present drama to an external audience (Ministry of Education, 2019). In this project, drama was used to explore another curriculum area—Health and Physical Education.

Using drama in the classroom as a tool to scaffold learning can be a daunting prospect for many teachers who are not specialists in the arts. Arts Online (accessed through the Te Kete Ipurangi website, [www.tki.org.nz](http://www.tki.org.nz)) provides a number of drama resources for teachers. According to some well-known drama researchers and writers, process drama encourages

participants to respond to situations intuitively from their own life experiences (Miller & Saxton, 2004; O'Neill & Lambert, 1990). Through dramatic action, aspects of life and relationships can be safely explored within the classroom to gain an understanding of real-life relationships, attitudes, emotions, and choices (Burton, 2004).

The next section of this article describes how drama was used to introduce students to an exploration of a difficult family situation and to think about ways they might deal with such a situation. The class described below was participating in the second year (2018) of the 3-year pilot. Drama conventions are italicised to help the reader identify them. The glossary at the end of the article provides a description from the drama curriculum of the drama conventions that are mentioned in this article.

## A dramatic moment unfolds

Visualise this scenario:

Mum and Dad are mad at one another. Mum wanted the car home 30 minutes before Dad, with their 10 and 5-year-old daughters, arrived back from town. Mum had an important meeting to get to and needed the family car. It was too late now. Mum didn't know that Dad had been held up trying to locate Mr Cow, Sophie's favourite soft toy that always went EVERYWHERE with her but had somehow fallen out of the trolley at the supermarket. There was no way Sophie was going to go home without him. Celine, the 10-year-old, had eventually found him, picked up by some helpful shopper and perched on a shelf among packets of breakfast cereal. There was a lot of tension in the air as the family reacted to the converging challenges of their day.

## Exploring the scenario through drama

The teacher asks the Year 6 class to create a *freeze-frame image* in groups of three, depicting a moment from the argument described above. In one trio, Mum and Dad are pointing accusingly at one another while Celine crouches on the floor cradling her head in her hands. Another trio has Celine frozen in a position of fleeing the room as Mum's posture shows her letting loose her anger towards Dad. The teacher moves around the room using a convention called *thought tapping*. She places her hand on the shoulder of different students, inviting them to express their character's thoughts or feelings. Frustration, anger, and fear are given words or sound by individual students. Everyone else in the room is silent, listening, feeling, and processing.

A *de-roling* process is initiated, where students shake off their character's posture and feelings. They then share what they have learned from the experience. Students are considering what tension and stress look and feel like in a family setting.

## Key process drama strategies

The freeze-frame exercise described above is one of the strategies the teachers used to structure moments from real-life experiences to which students can relate. Initially, the class collectively created a family who might live in their area, with a child about their age. Using the convention of *role on the wall*, students worked on a large outline of each member of the family. They populated these outlines with the external appearance, activities, internal qualities, and concerns of the characters. The teacher extended this work by asking the groups open-ended questions.

Once the role-on-the-wall exercise was completed, the class identified what the family enjoyed doing for fun. These role-on-the-wall profile posters became resources for vocabulary in follow-up writing or discussions. The profile posters were left on the wall while the class explored ideas of emotional literacy, trust, and self-care, and thought of strategies that would develop these qualities. The role-on-the-wall outlines displayed in the classroom helped students reflect on and refine their thinking about the characters. They were able to refer to them and add new information to individual characters as they revisited what was happening for the fictional family.

The freeze-frame or frozen-moment strategy provided a safe structure for choosing a moment of impending confrontation rather than full-on conflict. Within the frozen moment, aspects of body language, facial expressions, and positioning of characters were the focus rather than movement or actions. Words and tone of voice were kept to a minimum when the strategy of *spoken thought* was added to freeze frames. All the small groups created their freeze frames at the same time. Some students chose to play the

role of the other gender, which also provided some safety by distancing students from real-life people.

The teacher later introduced other dramatic strategies (for example, *voices in the head* or *speaking thoughts aloud*) that allowed students to empathise and offer advice from the perspective of a "best friend".

## Moving out of the drama

De-roling is a critical part of shifting from the imagined world back into the real world. Even though the characters are fictional, the emotional reality of the conflict portrayed can be triggering. Allowing the students to "step aside" physically from the character they have just enacted gives some emotional distance. By verbally reflecting on the shared experience, students have the opportunity to make meaning for themselves from it (Edmiston, 2014).

Within the fourth module of the programme the class will watch the film *Jade Speaks Up*, an 8-minute animated film portraying a family with a child of their age in which family violence occurs. After the drama activities above which occur in Module One, and before the class were shown the film *Jade Speaks Up* in Module Four (see Figure 1), they revisited their fictional family. "So", the teacher reminded the students, "here is our family, having fun playing sports together" (or whatever fun activity was chosen by the class). "But life isn't always fun for this family, so let's imagine what might have happened to build stress for them." It was in this context that the scenario outlined earlier was created by one class. Other scenarios students came up with ranged from discipline issues, such as leaving their bikes on the grass in the rain, through to Dad using housekeeping money to go drinking with mates. Using these as starting points for further drama work, they shared scenarios such as the one described above.

## Impacts of the programme

The potential benefits of teachers and their students together using the JSU programme became evident as follow-up class discussions and activities occurred.

Student contributions to the follow-up class discussion about the fictional family revealed much about students' perspectives of everyday pressures on families. In their review sessions with the programme developers, teachers commented on how insightful the 8–12-year-olds were about issues that could be perceived as adult concerns, such as paying rent, providing enough food, or knowing that their housing was secure and unlikely to be taken away from them.

Teachers realised their students were opening up to them about life more than they had previously. Teachers remarked on the depth of empathy that students, particularly "staunch" male pre-adolescent students,

FIGURE 1. SCREEN SHOT FROM *JADE SPEAKS UP* FILM (JADE ARRIVING IN THE MORNING AT HER CLASSROOM)



The Jade Speaks Up programme had already been developed in West Auckland over a 10-year period. The current research project included refining the programme based on teacher and student feedback as well as advice from an advisory group comprising of professionals from the fields of education, health and social services. It was piloted within a range of schools and its impacts were evaluated by Dr Geoff Bridgman of Auckland Unitec.

The methodology of the Jade Speaks Up (JSU) evaluation is set out in a full research report along with the 2017 results (Bridgman, Dyer, & O'Hagan, 2018). Chapter 2 of the report outlines the methods, including a pre-, post-, and follow-up design, control and experimental groups, standardised tests of wellbeing, and triangulation between student and teacher data. Qualitative data was drawn from the teacher training day, and from online and face-to-face support conversations with teachers.

In 2017, the first year of the pilot, seven urban schools and one rural school with a wide range of cultural composition and deciles were selected to take part in the evaluation (seven in Auckland and one in the Bay of Plenty). All selected schools were involved in the Positive Behaviour for Learning (PB4L) framework. The PB4L criterion was based on the assumption that these schools would already have policies and practices in place to deal with issues such as disclosures, and that they would have a staff group that would be proactive around supporting students to deal with challenging behaviours. Forty-eight teachers and 1,300 students from 48 Years 5–8 classes participated. The evaluation process fed into new iterations of the programme, including changes to manuals, activities, training, and future evaluation work.

Two measures of childhood wellbeing and depression—the Child Outcomes Rating Scale (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2003) and the Center for Epidemiologic Studies of Depression Scale for Children (Weissman, Orvaschel, & Padian, 1980)—showed that 47% of the 1,300 children participating were in the category of “at risk” of psychological distress at the beginning of the programme. Over the evaluation period there was an 11% drop in the number of children at risk of mental distress. This is considered a significant result of the JSU programme.

demonstrated as they spoke to an *empty chair*, offering hope and solace to a child character who was worried about the safety and stability of their family.

With the empty-chair exercise, the kids got quite emotional saying reassuring things to Jade and Jasper. Around the circle there were many encouraging comments such as “Things will get better” or “You will be safe and happier going to live with your grandparents.” Students ... really “got” Jade and Jasper by sitting in the empty chairs. (Teacher)

In the subsequent evaluations, teachers said there were significant lasting changes in the class dynamic, particularly in aspects that were of most concern to them.<sup>1</sup> Students became more empathetic towards each other, realising that everyone had hard days, and there was “less bickering within the classroom” (Teacher). As their trust in teachers grew stronger, students were more likely to ask for help. Teachers with a counsellor or Social Worker in Schools (SWiS) available could refer children quickly for suitable support. One teacher of an all-boys class spoke about the students:

... opening up about their personal experiences at home and talking about how they can keep themselves safe—who they can talk to, who they can trust. The programme is creating a “safe space” for the boys, including ESOL students, to go into their life experiences and discuss domestic violence. (Teacher)

Teachers also recognised more clearly the students’ abilities to coach one another in effective ways of taking care of themselves, based on JSU learning:

One boy has issues with dealing with his anger. He got triggered and began to lose it. The other kids said to him, “Breathe, Think and Do.” He walked out of the classroom and around the perimeter fence of the school grounds, clenching his fists for a while, then came into the room and sat near the teacher quietly. She let him do so without comment. Soon after he was chatting to her and ... back to normal. This is very different than in the past when he would have got more aggressive, hit others, and got into trouble. (Teacher)

The student evaluations showed that the vast majority found the programme useful. Student evaluations also indicated that students made significant progress in wellbeing, emotional literacy, and the use of safety skills. Interestingly, 4 months after the taught programme, those students who had initially been negative or neutral improved significantly in their appreciation of safety skills.

Teachers consistently commented that the active drama activities engaged their students. However, the depth of student engagement differed to some extent within and between classrooms and schools. This is to be expected with any programme developed for delivery across a range of schools and classes. Some teachers also became aware that a lack of engagement could be a signal of something scary or uncomfortable happening in a child’s life. Group supervision sessions with the programme developers

enabled teachers to discuss student engagement and possible follow-up pastoral care. The opportunity to reflect on the drama processes and learnings during each teaching team's two supervision sessions provided invaluable support for them to respond effectively to students' (and teachers') personal content as it emerged.

## Conclusion

The reality for many students is that they live with stressors, such as those described in the freeze-frame scenario, that are not spoken about at school. Providing safely structured opportunities for learning in health education helps students develop skills for managing self and relating to others. Classroom teachers' use of drama strategies can facilitate both interpersonal and personal learning in a non-exposing and non-confrontational manner. We argue that having teachers rather than external facilitators implementing health programmes can be more effective for continuity of student learning. Teachers provide a daily role-model of how a trusted, trustworthy adult behaves.

With the support of the JSU team, their school colleagues, and the school leadership team, the evaluation found that teachers were able to have a positive impact on students' ability to apply their new knowledge to new situations. Both teachers and students reflected on and refined their work, ultimately transforming their understanding of violence and what they personally can do about it. They learned and embraced process drama strategies to help them deal with challenging topics within the health curriculum.

In the words of one experienced teacher who taught the programme in 2017:

This programme just worked in so well with my personal beliefs around anxiety ... It can be so terrifying to talk about the deep topics—in case we stuff it up—that we avoid it entirely to the detriment of our students, their whānau, and ultimately our society. (Teacher)

FIGURE 2. ANDREA, LEFT, AND ELAINE WORKING WITH LEAD TEACHERS OF THE JADE SPEAKS UP PROGRAMME



## Acknowledgements

The JSU programme and pilot research represent the work of Andrea O'Hagan, Elaine Dyer, and Geoff Bridgman, supported by an advisory group of experts in the fields of health, education, research, and violence prevention. Elaine trialled being an external facilitator by taking her first version of the programme into some west Auckland schools in 2004. As a past teacher, Elaine quickly recognised that her presence in classrooms once a week was not nearly as potent as the daily presence of the classroom teachers. Between 2005 and 2014, Elaine and Andrea continued to develop and redevelop this programme for teachers to deliver with external support.

As CEO of Violence Free Waitakere, Elaine was associated with Dr Geoff Bridgman of Auckland's Unitec. The current pilot began in 2017. Dr Bridgman, the researcher, selected two internationally recognised evaluation tools and designed additional evaluation questionnaires then analysed the data assisted by Fay Collins.

Elaine and Andrea participated in the research by designing and conducting the initial professional learning and development (PLD) day for the teachers, supervision sessions, and post-programme face-to-face interviews.

## Glossary

Glossary of drama terms from *The New Zealand Curriculum*. Some of these terms are reproduced from Te Kete Ipurangi (Ministry of Education, 2019).

**conventions:** established ways of working in drama (for example, hot seating, role on the wall, freeze-frame images) that explore meaning or deepen understanding.

**de-roling:** a set of physical activities to ensure a person steps away from the character they were portraying. De-roling is a very important aspect of disengaging from the elevated emotions of a character whose body movements, thoughts and speech have been taken on by the "player".

**empty chair:** an empty chair represents a character or role. Students are encouraged to address the chair with comments and reassurances as if it was a real person. They might stand in a circle around the chair and comment in turn. The empty chair gives a degree of distance so that students feel safe to make contributions that are personal without putting pressure on a class member. Another version of this convention is hot seating.

**freeze-frame image:** a convention used in performance and process drama in which a person or the members of a group use their bodies to make an image capturing an idea, theme, or moment in time; also called a **group sculpture** or **still image** or **frozen image**.



**hot seating:** a process convention in which class members question or interview someone who is in role (for example, as a character from a play, a person from history) to bring out additional information, ideas, and attitudes about the role. The class members may or may not be in role.

**role on the wall:** a process convention in which an important role is represented in picture form “on the wall” (usually on a large sheet of paper) so that information can be collectively read or added to as a drama progresses.

**speaking thoughts aloud:** a convention used in performance and process drama in which the action freezes and a character speaks his/her thoughts aloud in order to add tension, provide information, or for some other purpose; also can be called **spoken thoughts**.

**thought tapping:** a process convention in which the action freezes and a leader moves among the participants, tapping individual’s shoulders to activate the speaking aloud of the thoughts of that role.

**voices in the head:** a process convention in which a participant who is not in role speaks the thoughts of another person who is in role. It can be facilitated by a teacher freezing the action in a scene and nominating a student from the audience to stand beside or make physical contact with a student in the frozen scene and speak the “voice in the head” of that role.

## Note

- i. In 2017, teachers in more than 50% of the classrooms noted reductions in bullying and less student worry about non-school issues of concern. In 39% of classrooms there were reductions in anger issues, and 25% of classrooms had fewer children off sick. Four months after teachers had completed the programme with their classes, teachers were even more positive about the changes they noticed in their classes.

## References

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## Websites

- [www.violencefreecommunities.org/jade-speaks-up/](http://www.violencefreecommunities.org/jade-speaks-up/)  
<http://artsonline.tki.org.nz/Teaching-and-Learning/Pedagogy/Drama/Subject-statement>

► **Andrea O’Hagan** and **Elaine Dyer** are the creators of Jade Speaks Up (JSU). The JSU programme was born out of Elaine’s work with people in prison, then with people in community, to develop support systems to address some of the issues that can lead to violence, addictions, and a criminal conviction. Andrea was a teacher specialising in peaceful resolution of conflict through the Aotearoa Peace Foundation and drama education. From her background in neurolinguistics and the use of drama as a teaching tool Andrea contributed to the “toolkit” of approaches in the JSU programme to develop social and emotional aspects of learning such as emotional literacy, emotional self-management and awareness of others.

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