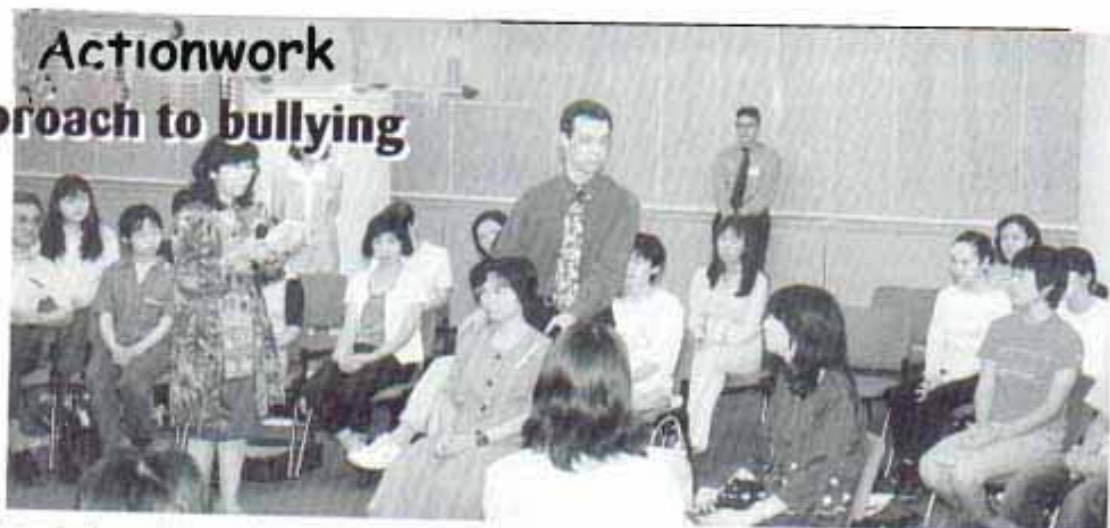


Actionwork a dramatic approach to bullying

by Kate Yamada



Those of us who have been in Japan for any length of time, and maybe those of us who have been involved with teaching children in particular, will no doubt have come face to face with the complex issue of bullying at least once or twice, if not regularly. I remember a boy in one class noisily refusing to be paired with the student next to him because she was 'too fat'. What to do in situations like this? Many people feel this issue needs to be actively addressed by Japanese society as a whole, especially since the terrible stories of bullying and resulting suicides which have recently filled our newspapers so horrifyingly.

It was with interest, therefore, that I heard about a seminar by Andy Hickson of the UK on "Preventing bullying through drama." The seminar was organised by the British Council in Nagoya and took place at the Nagoya Kokusai Kaigijo on 25th June.

Hickson is the leading force behind 'Die Tours,' a theatre group established in 1995, which tours schools, youth clubs, community centres etc. with shows and workshops. These workshops cover topics such as racism, drug abuse, teenage pregnancy and bullying.

Hickson's well-planned presentation started with an explanation that bullying is more often than not an unconscious reaction to one's own frustrations. Somewhat intriguingly, he referred to societies where bullying does not exist, something I honestly found rather hard to believe. In my interview with Hickson the following day, he told me about a society of indigenous Malays, called the 'Temiar,' where bullying does not exist. Hickson himself lived for 2 years in Malaysia, and for those of you interested, Robert Knox-Denton wrote about the Temiar in his book 'The Non-violent People of Malaya.'

In the Nagoya seminar, Hickson described how theatre is a agent for change, and has the power to challenge our patterns of thought. There is no right or wrong in the world of theatre, but various ideas can be put forward for the resolution of issues. As Hickson said, "things, ideas, concepts, beliefs are thrown up in the air during a show and when they land back down they have formed a new shape."

Theatre has replaced the role of ritual in modern-day life, where rituals expressed the beliefs of a community and provided a outlet for healing. This led to new 'action methods' for healing through drama, and Hickson outlined the three main techniques for us. Firstly, there is 'psychodrama,' which is more psychoanalytical than theatrical and focusses on the individual. Secondly, there is 'dramatherapy' which emerged as a discipline in 1958. Thirdly comes 'The Theatre of the Oppressed,' a technique used to explore issues of everyday life. It is therapeutic, but not actually clinical 'therapy'. The latter technique concentrates on a situation rather than an individual, and Hickson quoted Jennings, a leading light of 'dramatherapy' in saying that "the paradox of dramatherapy is that distancing brings us closer, so within the great story we all find our own story." People, seeing a situation acted out on stage, can find something which may help in their own lives. A key idea is that actions, and not just words are important for the therapeutic process.

This took us into the participation part of the evening. Throughout his talk, Hickson walked in and out of the audience, making eye contact with members of the audience. I wondered if this would make a Japanese audience uncomfortable, but there were few signs of nerves as we moved to a warm-up exercise. The exercise was simple, and intended to show something that "everyone can't do." Just try drawing a circle in the air with your right hand whilst simultaneously drawing a cross in the air with your left hand. Hickson later said that he had been very happy with Japanese audiences, and found them eager to make contributions to group sessions. I only wish I could say the same thing of teaching in a high school classroom.

The audience were asked to give their own definitions of bullying and responses varied from keywords such as 'powerless,' 'master/slave,' 'loss of self,' 'insecurity,' 'alone,' to the succinct reply 'boss'. This exercise showed us that bullying can mean different things to different people, although there were elements that each of us could relate to in each response.