

**Adolescents - risk & responsibility:  
working with drama, but not with drama alone**

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**Abstract:**

Throughout the world we hear and are shocked by stories of such violence. It seems that in many of our civilised societies babies and young children can be at much greater risk of violence within their own families than of hurt through acts of external terrorism. The causes of such violence are complex: they include inexperience in parenting, abuse of drugs and alcohol, transfer of the frustrations and shames experienced at work or in social interactions to acts of physical aggression to more vulnerable members of the family, inherited patterns of 'rough love'.

The adolescents in this project, probably like others around the world, were familiar with violence within their own communities and sometimes in their own lives. They were also critical of it, and during the process of the drama very willing to deconstruct why and how it occurs.

The risk to young people that this paper explores is not only that of the violence that may occur in their lives or that they may later themselves carry out, but also the risk of passivity that may prevent them from becoming agents of change. Adolescence is a period when young people are both idealistic and critical, when they learn to both conform to the social norms that surround them and rebel against them. In this project drama is a way of exploring what is, why it is, and what else might be. It is a way of learning how to be an agent rather than a pawn.

I want to be just like him, yeah  
I want to be just like him.

Cat Stevens

The conference theme addresses young people and adolescents at risk. There are many ways in which adolescents may be at risk in today's world. Risk may be physical, emotional or spiritual. Young people may be victims, be it of violence, intimidation, or abusive substances. Or they may be at risk of becoming those who use violence, intimidate or lead others to abusive substances.

This paper explores ways in drama, and perhaps other arts, may serve as a process to disrupt the behaviours and attitudinal predispositions of adolescents at risk, and offer the possibility to investigate, trial and practice different ways of behaving and thinking.

Clearly, however, drama is not a magic wand. While the experience of "doing drama" may in itself make a difference to some individual lives, in most cases it takes more cohesive planning and deliberate strategies to turn lives around. And not all interventions are successful.

This paper focuses particularly on particular school production project that as well as fulfilling the requirements of national examination<sup>1</sup>, empowered adolescents to take responsibility for shaping their identity, values, and potentially their future lives. The discussion seeks to identify and theorise the elements in the work and in the nature of drama processes that facilitate critical reflection, experimentation and empowerment. Finally the discussion draws on an account of a particular student in vocational tertiary programme to further examine the complexity of long term change through drama.

### **Young people at risk**

Many of our young people today are under considerable pressure. A great many experience the difficulties that come from family economic hardship, or from the low expectations of academic success and employability that arise from living at the margins of society. Some experience a strong dissonance between their home culture and that of their school and wider society.

In the wider world there are many young people who live precariously amidst the violence of war. And as a result there are thousands of young refugees in our apparently peaceful cities who live with the continuing violence of war deeply etched into their way of seeing the world. Those who have not personally experienced war, see it continuously on the media. Many feel its threat. Others become accustomed to the violence and inscribe it as an expected part of life. Violence comes from a number of different causes. Many of our young people have experienced or witnessed violence in their families.

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<sup>1</sup> New Zealand has a predominantly internally assessed and nationally moderated examination system, NCEA (National Certificate of Education Achievement) with progressive levels in each of the three final years of secondary education.

The media exerts other forms of pressure. Television, film, magazines and radio present an array of stories, fact and fiction, of interest-worthy people who live in a world in which many of our youth can never expect to belong. They are bombarded with marketing of goods which they cannot hope to afford. They quickly learn that their lives are at the margins of established society, and that the best society often wants from them is unobstructive anonymity.

Often our approaches to schooling also suggest that little else is required from them. Classrooms where students are construed as receivers, rather than constructors, of knowledge, and where learning is construed as the behaviours that can be measured by nationally moderated test scores, place them at further risk.

Among the consequences of pressure and risk are a range of observable negative behaviours. Some adolescents commit crimes. Some harass and sometimes hurt their peers. In some cases they hurt themselves, even to the point of suicide. Others do nothing that might be called ‘wrong’, but they react with defiance in our classrooms. Others may show a pervasive indifference. Frequently in our schools we notice ‘at-risk-ness’ because of continuing learning failure.

Of course ours is not the only time in which adolescents have been at risk. Adolescence is marked as a time of risk and change. From an anthropological perspective for example, Turner (1988) considers adolescence as one of a number of liminoid periods, in this case one in which the individual hovers until the tests and the ritual that allow him/her to cross the limen into adulthood. Such a liminal period is one that is characterised by clowning and ritualised transgressions of social rules.

In the context of developmental psychology Erikson (1980) characterises adolescence as a period of when children are exploring their independence and developing a strong sense of self. He also marks it as a developmental stage when some an individual can catch on early developmental challenges that have been missed.

In both cases, adolescence is constructed as a period young people when have a predisposition to seek change and to explore new ways of inscribing their role.

### **Drama as a potentially useful intervention**

As acknowledged in at the beginning, drama is not a magical or miraculous means of transforming young people lives. And it has little or no power to shield them from the world that they live in. However, it does have a repertoire of strategies that allow teachers and students to work together to explore and realise change. Here I would like to highlight a number that I consider most important.

The first of these is *agency*. Drama, particularly in forms of improvisation, process drama and devising, invites participants to *act*: to take responsibility for making something, to invest what they make with an imprint of their choice.

The second is the exploration and management of *role*. Role allows participants to be other than the way they have constructed themselves to be, or been constructed to be, in real life. It may allow them to explore someone else’s situation, or it may allow them to play with and chance some aspect of their own situation. It also allows a certain personal

safety during exploration, because it is not the individual who says or does something; it is the role.

The third is the *framing of conflict*. Drama allows a range of strategies for framing action. One is the use of fictional contexts. Another is the use of conventions of enactment, such as the freeze frame or voices in the head. Such strategies allow quite intense conflict to be explored with a frame that can hold that conflict separate from the real life of the participants.

The fourth is a palette of processes for *analysis and deconstruction*. Among these are, for instance, Boal's (1979) strategies for problem identification and exploration of options for action, and O'Toole, Burton, & Plunkett's (2005) strategies for conflict resolution.

The fifth is the experience of a collaborative undertaking, particularly of *group work, commitment, shared focus*. Participants learn the power of working together and experience the satisfaction of contributing and receiving contributions.

The sixth is *performance*, or, to play a little with the word, pre-form-ance. In the process of building up to performance, participants rehearse: they try out, refine, develop a satisfying fit. In performance itself, they have the opportunity to make a mark, physically and before witnesses. In some cases the performance can indeed become a process of pre-forming who they might want to become: trialling and claiming future roles.

### **The skills involved**

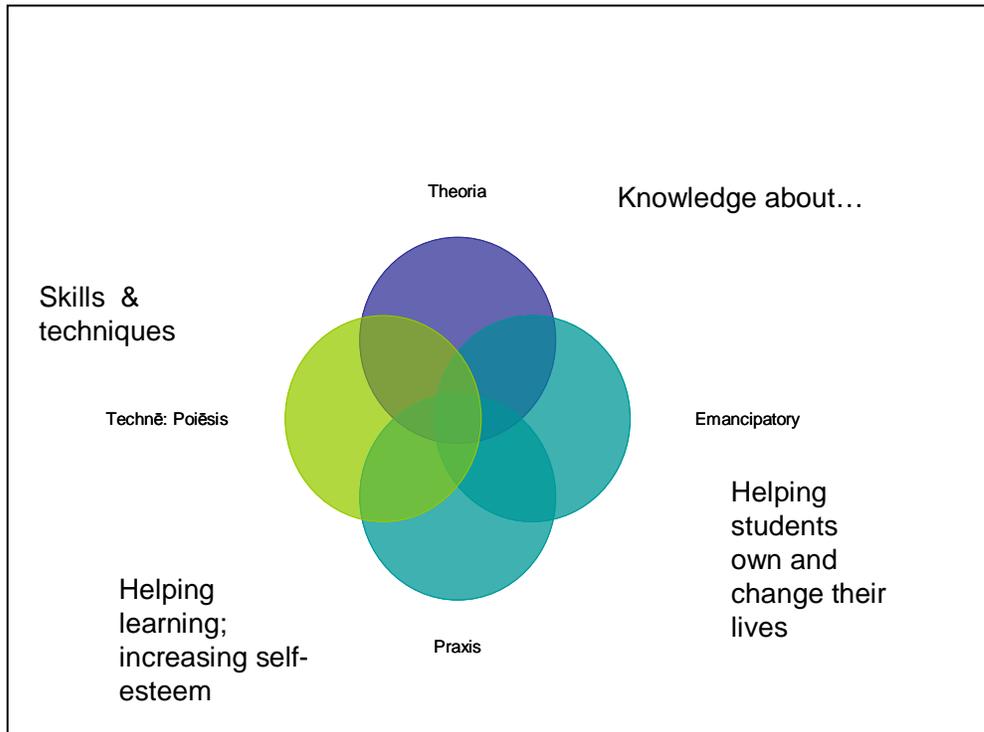
So, as many drama in education theorists (for example O'Brien & Donelan, 2007) have noted, drama can be effective tool for engaging with challenge and change. The degree of its effectiveness in a school situation, however, depends to a large extent on the breadth and richness of knowledge, and willingness to acquire knowledge, on part of the teacher. Among the understandings are ones such as these: awareness of the impact of socio-economic conditions, the value of cultural difference, an appreciation of social justice, awareness of the developmental stages and processes of young people, working knowledge of group process and negotiation, a sense of when and how to take to leadership, and of course a fine-tuned skill in managing drama processes.

It takes a strong knowledge base to be a drama teacher, and it takes a comprehensive and rigorous pre-service programme to educate one.

### **Classroom practice and different kinds of knowledge**

It could be useful to map these kinds of knowledge against the model proposed by Kemmis and Smith (2008) in their recent introduction to the series on pedagogy, education and praxis. Kemmis and Smith draw on Aristotle to three kinds of reasoning – theoretical, technical and practical, each guided by distinctive disposition and each with its own aim and issuing in a distinctive form of action. Thus we have *epistēmē*, giving rise to *theoria*; *technē*, giving rise to *poiēsis*, and *phronēsis*, giving rise to *praxis*. To these Kemmis and Smith add a further perspective: drawing on Habermas they add a critical disposition, giving rise to emancipatory knowledge.

In a classroom setting these four forms of knowledge might be schematised in the following way:



It is suggested above that drama teachers need a range of kinds of theoretical knowledge: about socio-economic class, cultural difference, social justice, human development. They also need a range of kinds of technical or skill based knowledge: including negotiation, leadership, group process and drama process. They need to bring these together in a practical and practice-based form that enables learning to occur and helps students more fully develop as people. In addition they need to bring all these together in a way that helps students examine and deconstruct the society they live in and their roles within it, and begin to make the kinds of changes that they want to own.

The following discussion examines how some of this spectrum of drama effects and teacher knowledge come together in a particular drama class production.

### **A Child is Born**

Maran is a young dance and drama teacher, working with high school students in a school that is located in a low socio-economic community. In some parts of the community there is a backdrop of gang prospecting, unemployment, violence, and academic indifference.

At a particular time Maran's students came to drama class shocked by a recent story of an infant's death from family violence, wanting to work with it. Maran agreed to make it the theme of production work that would be assessed for NCEA, the national certificate of

educational achievement that constitutes New Zealand's examination system at senior high school levels. The task became the devising and public performance of a play.

At the risk of oversimplification, Maran's task as teacher involved developing strategies that allowed students to explore the complexities of the problem, and introducing dramatic forms that would avoid 'a shock-horror' approach. She needed to create a safe space that would allow students to take on and again shed potentially disturbing roles. She sought to structure/co-structure processes that would allow students to see differently and be differently. She brought in community agencies who deal with the risk of family violence to work with the students in problem analysis, and the community as a whole to respond to the performed work. The project as a whole is described elsewhere (Sutherland & Greenwood, 2008); here I want to focus on the skills and knowledge Maran brought to the project and the potential the project had for the adolescents involved to see themselves as agents of change.

Maran is a young teacher, so her knowledge and skills are still in the process of development. She already has a strong framework of drama knowledge and skills and is steadily adding to it. That informs the strategies she used in facilitating the devising work, and in finding forms that avoided the dangers of sensationalism and oversimplification. She was a participant in a school-wide project (also reported in Sutherland & Greenwood, 2008) in which teachers were re-examining their own practice and the ways they related with their students, so she was able to draw on discussions with other colleagues about adolescent development, group process and cultural difference. She did not have any depth of knowledge about family violence and its cause, but she remedied this shortcoming by bring in community agencies who did,

Initially, in choosing the theme of family violence to children, the students made it clear that they positioned themselves well aside from such acts and the mindsets that lead to them. Some parts of the final performed play reflect the authorial stance that allowed them to place themselves outside the problem and critique and condemn the recurring instances of violence to children. As their work progressed, however, they began to explore how the socio-economic community they live in is constructed by society. This led to scenes that portrayed patterns of learned violence within a family and others that showed how a parent's frustration at work and final loss of his job led to increasing aggression at home as his sense of self worth was eroded. They began to understand that violence occurs not only in the overt acts in which it breaks out physically, but also in the latent injustices and disenfranchisements that occur at a daily level. They began to understand that identity is forged as well as perhaps being to some degree inherent.

One of the final decisions the students made was to create a split stage set: the larger section looked like a living room of an average family in their community, frugal but clean and tidy with family photos on the wall; the other part was covered with strongly blocked street graffiti. Both elements suggest a semiotic that places the actors/ writers right inside the problem: this is a community they are part of. At the same time it allowed them to show how they wanted to play out their own future roles within the community. The work shows the father figure trapped within a cycle of abuse that he has not initiated and that he only dimly understands. On the one hand the work as a whole denounces the abuse; on the other it looks for ways to help the father struggle out of his

trap. When the lights finally focus on the graffiti and allow the audience to read it, it was seen to read: *break the cycle*.

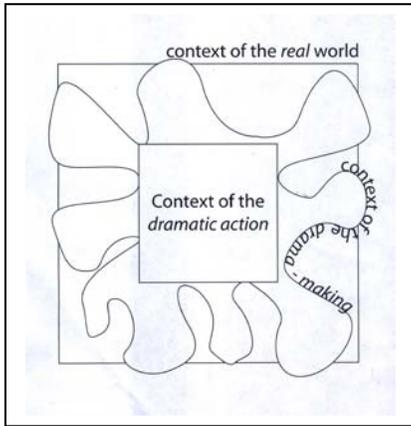
At another level, the process of making the play, allowed the students to experiment with the roles they take in the classroom, with sharing power and its consequences. Maran reported how the students' attitudes to attendance and their engagement in class changed as they developed their passion for creating their work: "they achieved because they cared about the work they were producing, they saw its relevance to themselves and to their community. They were passionate about their own performance and resolute in keeping each other up to the mark." They had begun to explore their personal identity as makers of ideas, rather than simply recipients.

On the second night by pre-arrangement the community workers opened a forum where the audience shared their opinions and spoke with the actors. "It was amazing," Maran wrote in a report later, "people stood up and spoke with their hearts. The parents of the students on stage talked about how they experienced the pressures of life and parenthood and used the work the students had offered as an important part of their discussion about the issues." The theatre was being used as forum where issues of importance to the community were being debated, and the students' voices were being treated as serious contributions to the debate. The students were re-inscribing their identity as engaged, and respected, participants in the community, with real opinions, concerns and hopes to contribute.

### **Contexts of learning in drama**

The learning in drama takes place at a number of levels. Firstly there is the learning provoked by material within the context of the play or process drama (see Fig 1). In the case of Maran's production this was learning through the stories researched and reported within the devised work. Secondly there is learning provoked by events and structures in the context of the 'real world' and particularly through changed understandings of what is happening in that world. In Maran's play this occurred as students engaged with the community agencies and then with their families and the wider community in examining the wider causes and effects of family violence. Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, there is learning that occurs in the context of the drama – making. In Maran's project this learning included all the self-discoveries, questioning, development of confidence and agency, planning for the future that occurred as students went through the process of devising the work and presenting it to their community for discussion. This kind of learning was not primarily about facts or skills, but rather about new ways of looking at themselves and their future. At the risk of simplification it might be translated as something like: "We are agents in this community. We take hold of our future."

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*Fig 1: Contexts of drama and of learning through drama (Greenwood 2003).*

However, it is also important to ask whether the sense of agency and ability to create the kind of change they want in their lives will survive within these teenagers when they no longer have the support of the group or of the process that they used.

The story of Raz suggests how difficult this might be.

### **Raz's story<sup>2</sup>**

Raz was a student in a “works skills” programme that I taught in a community tertiary institute. Works skills programmes were funded by the New Zealand government in the 1980s as means of not only equipping unemployed youth with basic practical skills that would help them find employment but also developing self-esteem, ability to work in teams and take direction, regularity of attendance and resilience. The funding authorities recognised the potential of performing arts courses to develop these personal skills as well as literacy, computer skills and other work with technology. They also hoped that the performing arts would have enough youth appeal to hold the commitment of young people who often had histories of dropping out of education. Students needed to be referred to such

Raz, a young man in his early twenties, came to the programme with a past record of minor offences, a short fuse to his temper and a history of walking away from jobs when there was a problem or he got bored. He spent a year in the programme, met a wide range of challenges, and learned to deal with anger. He was a fairly successful graduate of the programme, leaving to a job and planning to audition for amateur theatre productions.

About a year after completing the course he was arrested for setting fire to a school.

What happened? The answers I've framed are simply speculation, but it seems that the rules changed again for Raz after he left the programme. The resolutions he could make while he had the support of a group that had become a close knit team through their work

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<sup>2</sup> Raz is a pseudonym

in drama and while he was intensely engaged in work that demanded his full energy and focus and gave him a sense of agency and creativity were challenged when he was alone. Somehow he got into trouble, and he was sent to prison for a period.

It would be easy to see Raz as one of the failures of the process.

However, the part I know of his story is more complicated. I met up with Raz again while he was still serving his sentence. It turned out that Raz was a minor witness to a case where a relative of his had committed a fraud against the tertiary institute. The financial manager of the institute and I were major witnesses. The trial was in a small town court, and Raz was brought up from his city prison for the hearing. We were allowed to talk informally to Raz before the hearing began. When the session broke at midday, the financial manager (who also knew Raz well from the programme) and I asked the police if we could take Raz to lunch with us. Clearly Raz has not been a troublesome inmate, because the police agreed. When we asked Raz what kind of food he would prefer, he said that what he would really like would be to just walk around the street alone for half an hour. The financial manager and I looked each other: and we decided to take the risk. Raz promised to come back to the café in half an hour. We worried a little as we drank our coffees whether we had been naively trustful. Half an hour later Raz arrived.

### **The ‘real world’ and the importance of choice**

So Raz set fire to a school, but he retained his personal sense of honour and he respected our trust. So had the drama programme made a significant and useful difference for him or not?

The question is obviously one that does not yield an easy answer. The human journey is long and complicated in its twists, and who knows how Raz will continue to navigate it. He needs to make sense of it on his own terms.

However, his story serves as a reminder that even when we are successful in the context of the schooling (or second chance schooling) experience, the ‘real world’ continues to pose real problems. The problems are more wide spread and more deeply ingrained in the socio-economics of society than the individual difficult behaviours we met in our classrooms. And if the problems are bigger than individuals, how much can we hope to change at the individual level alone? And yet is it not at the individual level that they need to be challenged, and is it not individuals that we need to empower to make choices?

The suggestion in this discussion is that as teachers who use drama purposefully and effectively, we can make a difference to the young people we work with, but we will probably not be able to prescribe the extent of the difference. As teachers we can probe, guide, challenge, dig deeper, provide pathways, reinforce, support. But we also need to acknowledge freedom. The discovery of agency by a young person will not always lead to rehabilitation – at least not in conventional terms.

## Conclusion

The lines cited at the beginning are from a Cat Stevens song that speaks of the need a child has for role models. In the song the child looks admiringly at his father, determining to grown up “just like him”. Unfortunately it is not only the good qualities that are learned.

The argument in this paper is that some of the greatest dangers our young people face is what they will learn from the role models around them. It argues that different role models can be provided through the use of drama, and that by developing the skills and strategies inherent in drama processes, young people can develop the sense of trust and agency they need to make choices. One of the choices can be to be “just like” the person they have performed and pre-formed when they stood tall and proud, collaborative and reliable in the work they did through drama.

The paper also argues that drama is not a magic. It is a cluster of processes that hold some powerful tools, but for it to work it needs teachers who know the tools well and understand the society and the people they will work them with and the purposes they hope to achieve.

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