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Theatre-making and performance: The importance of authenticity in the process of 'being' and negotiating the 'becoming'

ABSTRACT

Theatre-making processes and performance opportunities offer young people who are vulnerable, marginalized or disenfranchised a means to rethink their current identities and consider different ways of being. This article discusses a three-month theatre-making programme with sixteen children from a low-income residential estate in Singapore. The programme, which culminated in two public performances, offered opportunities for the young people to re-engage with situations and experiences from their own lives. While exploration and story creation involved a fictional lens, the authors note the importance of including elements of authentic stories from the lives of participants. The theatre-making became a critical platform for the participants to examine the identities they performed; a state of

KEYWORDS

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being, and offered ways for them to see how they could shape future identities for themselves through the process of becoming. It was also a physical and dialogical space providing young people in need of supportive structures in their lives with alternative perspectives and voices.

INTRODUCTION

The process of making theatre and staging the original performance for an invited audience affords a physical and dramatic space for theatre-makers to tell and perform stories that need to be both told and heard. In a theatre-making project with a group of sixteen children between the ages of six and twelve years old living in a low-income government subsidized rental housing estate in Singapore, the young participants made the decision to explore and perform stories inspired by negative but authentic events in their home and school environments. Many of the negative narratives performed collectively by the children were common experiences in the low-income residential estate and their school environments, but the children needed the space and time during the theatre-making process to understand why such situations occurred. In addition, the collective experience of making theatre together demanded that the young people adopt roles and be entrusted with responsibilities that previously were unavailable to them.

This theatre-making programme was a case study research project examining how the collaborative and improvisational drama process enables a sense of positive self-efficacy and agency in children from marginalized backgrounds. The entire drama programme was divided into two phases of sixteen hours each and they both ended with a performance for the children's families and friends. Data were collected throughout the drama programme in the forms of interviews with the children and a community worker who oversaw the programme, the facilitator's reflection journal, video recording of the drama workshops, focus group discussions with the young people and audio recordings of debrief sessions between the facilitator and the community worker after each drama workshop. Data were analysed concurrently with the collection process, which influenced the planning and facilitation of each drama session. At the end of the data analysis, several stories emerged from the research to explain the importance of theatre-making and performance for children from marginalized settings to negotiate their current and future identities.

One of the key findings in this research project was the critical role played by engagement in a theatre-making process in terms of helping young people to make sense of their lives by telling and performing stories about themselves and people they know, and imagining what the future might become through the drama. It is important to highlight that the children's oscillation between *being* identities in the present and *becoming* identities of the future in this project was possible because the children were working with authentic stories that resonated with them. The impact of understanding the tensions and possibilities between their current identities and circumstances, and their plausible futures, was further enhanced by the immediate feedback they received as they tested out roles and ways of being in the theatre-making.

Cahill (2010: 161) warns against performances of authentic experiences to prevent locking the story-makers into 'replications of dominant storylines'.

However, findings from this study demonstrated that the performance of the 'dominant storylines' was an important process for young people to reflect and consider the ways in which they were being in the present. In addition, these children also lacked the space and opportunities to examine events in their lives with the safety that is offered in drama work. Most of the children in the theatre-making programme came from single-parent families, and half of them had elderly or sick grandparents as caregivers. The young people's infrequent attendance at school was not helpful in building positive friendships with their classmates or enabling supportive relationships with teachers. The space offered in drama therefore became a critical avenue for the children to question, dialogue and wonder about the circumstances that confronted them as young residents in challenging environments.

The pre-adolescents were aware and agreeable, although with some trepidation, from the first theatre-making session that they would be working towards creating a performance for an invited audience. The young people were worried because they had not done a performance before and they doubted their ability to do so. However, once they set their minds on making a performance for the residents in the neighbourhood, they insisted on including authentic material from their lived experiences in the devising process. The final performances in both Phases 1 and 2 were culminations of individual and collective narratives from all the participants. The children's choice of audience was highly influential in the devising process – the young people wanted to make sure that the stories they were performing resonated with the audience.

Although Oddey (1994) and Tarlington and Michaels (1995) recommend that theatre-making could start with a stimulus of any form, the children in this drama programme rejected the facilitator's suggestions of making imaginative stories. Heikkinen (2016) suggests that a playbuilding community needs to find a common theme that resonates with the participants involved and work on it to extract deeper meanings during the process of creating an original story. The final storylines that emerged after both phases of playbuilding were fiction mirroring reality. Ned (names of all participants have been changed to protect their identities), a nine-year-old participant, said the final performance was 'a bit like real' (Personal communication, 19 March 2015) but not exactly the actual story of the community.

The authentic stories offered by the children were shrouded in fiction to offer the participants a level of protection, as strongly advised by Kukla (1987), Peter (2009) and Prendergast and Saxton (2015). The fictional contexts encouraged the young people to be more invested emotionally in the theatre-making process for deeper identification with the stories created. The oscillation between fiction and reality when the children examined authentic stories within the creative process to build a collective performance alleviated the possibility of locking the participants into reliving any events that might be traumatizing or unpleasant. Conversely, it was important for the young people to be in those events in their lives through the fiction because there was no other opportunity for them to reflect and dialogue about what had happened. They selected moments for the theatre-making that had some negative impacts in their lives, and that they had previously been unable to discuss with a trusted adult or peer. Without the theatre-making platform, the experiences and events remained etched in the children's lived experiences without the possibility of respite or release.

The remainder of this article discusses the importance of theatre-making experiences for young people who have limited platforms to dialogue, to listen

and to be listened to. It highlights how the process of examining authentic lived experiences by being in those moments again, either performing as themselves or someone else in the stories, is crucial in supporting these young people to understand what they had gone through, and to negotiate what they can and want to become in the future. Using specific vignettes of the project to illustrate the theatre-making and performance experiences of the children, the authors argue that engaging in authentic stories during the process of theatre-making is pertinent for children living on the margins as a means of supporting positive child and youth development.

BEING, AND THE JOURNEY TO UNDERSTANDING

When they first entered the programme, the children saw themselves as products of the circumstances they were born into, and these circumstances shaped their identities and what they could or could not do. The children saw bullying as inevitable in the communal playground in the residential estate and, when asked if the situation could be changed, they agreed unanimously that it was impossible. The young people's sense of who they were at present and what their futures could look like were entrenched in their experiences of the neighbourhood, and a lack of positive role models meant that they did not know alternative ways of being and becoming.

Heathcote (2013) explains that participants undergo a process of change when they investigate and explore possibilities within the problem or situation in the drama. The theatre-making process afforded that platform for the children to look deeply into the problems and situations they were facing as young people living in a low-income estate with limited interaction with peers and adults outside of their living environments. Bundy (2013) explains that participants in a drama process may find enjoyment and relief when they engage in the retelling of stories that might previously have been difficult for them. The aesthetic distance and fictional contexts maintained in the drama process for exploring the stories 'opens the way for reflection that might not otherwise be available. This seems to be the case for others who perform in the scenes too' (2013: 239). The decision to be in the moments of injustice, neglect and abuse in the drama provided an opportunity for the children to reflect on the situations with the distance of time and a filtered layer of emotions. The open discussions and opinions offered by fellow theatre-makers to the performed scenarios provided the children with perspectives they did not have when similar situations happened in reality. At the same time, through the theatre-making experience, the young people were looking at themselves from a third-person lens and identifying possible ways to make or be the change. Bundy (2013) and Prendergast and Saxton (2015) explain that the examination of events from a third-person perspective enables participants to learn more about themselves and become more empathetic towards others in similar situations. In this project, the children grew to become better listeners to each other's stories, and the articulation of common experiences created the opportunities for them to support each other and find new ways to negate common challenges.

The children's responses to the theatre-making process resonated with Prendergast and Saxton's (2013) suggestion that participation in applied drama programmes encourages the exploration of lived experiences. Boal (2002) posits theatre as a rehearsal for what could happen in reality by engaging the participants in a process to examine the politics of the present.

Similarly, the theatre-making programme with the children showed that rehearsal for the future requires an examination of the present; without first making sense of what was or had happened, the future held bleak prospects for these young people, who did not know any alternative ways of becoming. Perry and colleagues (2013: 651) suggest that theatre-making acts as a 'critical pedagogy in which youths use critical literacy skills to question and discuss an issue, unpacking it in the form of a play'. The freedom and space to create the original performance offered the participants agency to plan and curate the final narrative they wished to perform for an external audience.

Punch and Oancea (2014: 240) remind us that, 'Narratives and stories are also valuable in studying lives and lived experience' as they uncover the voices of the community and reveal opportunities for the community to look introspectively if there is a desire to do so. The 'studying' of lives and lived experiences were thus not limited to the role of the researcher: the participants were equally empowered by the process of storying to examine their own lives. Additionally, the participants in this theatre-making project had the power to decide what stories they wanted to share and how they wanted to share. Vettraino and colleagues (2017) explain that when performers share personal stories, the audience is also offered opportunities to make interpretations for themselves. Caldwell and Vaughan (2012) argue that participation in the arts encourages young people to find a way to express themselves through an artistic medium, and this provides insulation from the daily stresses, especially in an urban environment.

When devising the first performance to the residents in the neighbourhood, the children chose to situate the stories in familiar environments: home, school and the communal playground in the residential estate. The communal playground was a topic that generated much excitement and enthusiasm from the young people as they fought for a chance to tell or perform the stories. The enthusiasm to offer images in the school and family settings, however, was significantly lower. After a short period of silence, twelve-year-old Kha responded to the theme of what happened in school. He jumped up from the floor, stepped into the performance space and stood with his legs apart, body bent at the waist with his upper body looking as though he was prostrated on something. After his frozen image, Kha narrated how the discipline master from his school caned him during recess a few months ago.

According to Kha, he had pushed another boy during recess and the boy fell down and split his lip. Kha explained that the other boy had first knocked into him when they walked past each other. As a result, Kha backed into another student who had then spilled her bowl of hot noodles on her leg. Kha claimed that he elbowed the boy back in defence and the boy fell and split his lip. Kha and the boy were both summoned to the discipline master's office. While the other boy was issued with a stern warning and his parents were notified because he had sustained an injury, Kha claimed that he was caned. Kha elaborated that he had been labelled as troublemaker in the school as a way to explain his relationship with school authorities. No one could verify whether Kha's account of corporal punishment was real or fiction.

The young boy's story did, however, highlight how he had been marginalized both in school and in the communal playground at home. In school he was known as a mischief-maker, while in the playground community in the low-income estate he was appraised as someone who did not make the cut as a leader. The double marginalization was evident in his performed identity: he demonstrated a low level of confidence and a poor sense of self-efficacy.

In the interview the day after he performed the tableau of corporal punishment, Kha was asked whether his mother knew of the caning that had taken place at school. He shook his head and dismissed the question by saying 'Aiya (colloquial equivalent to a sigh), teacher, my mother won't care this one la' (Interview, 17 March 2015).

Kha pointed out that such stories were not shared even between the children, and he had not mentioned this to anyone before. The performance of the tableau was a means for Kha to relive the scene of punishment and be in the moment when he felt he was unjustly punished. Kha reasoned that there was no need, before the theatre-making programme, to tell his friends or his mother what had happened as it was nothing special. The young boy did not see the altercation between him and the other child as conversation worthy and it would not build on his street credibility. To Kha, he was just caned. The other children in the drama programme reacted to Kha's tableau with a nonchalant attitude, giving the impression that such stories were indeed not special.

It is interesting that Kha chose to reveal this story, despite proclaiming that his peers would not be interested. Ewing (2013) suggests that when we tell stories, we curate them according to the audience and the message we would like to communicate. In that way, supporting Bruun's (2017) and Heikkinen's (2016) argument, this research shows that role-playing and the performance of the roles helped to build new perspectives for both the actor and the audience, and to foster a sense of empathy and reciprocity in relationships. It might be possible that Kha had wanted to seek empathy and support from his peers, despite the apathy exhibited, because many of them had common experiences. At the same time, Kha might have needed an audience for this story that he previously had lacked, and the facilitator of the drama programme might have been a suitable candidate because she was from outside the community and did not display the same apathy to punishments that his peers did.

Kha explained that his mother had never shown an interest in his school life: 'she never ask me about school before' (Interview, 17 March 2015) so there was a lack of need to inform her of the punishment he had received even though he felt that it was not justified. Prendergast and Saxton (2013) explain that drama creates a space for participants to relate to others through the fictional context to make sense of what was happening in real life. Kha's recounting of the background story to the caning allowed him to voice his opinion and raise several questions. He felt that he did not deserve such an extreme punishment, but he recognized that he had a bad reputation in school. He was indignant that the other boy was not punished. O'Connor (2009) suggests that participation in drama allows its participants to be at the centre of a personal story to seek meaning and understanding for themselves. Hughes and Wilson (2004) explain that during theatre-making, the participants have opportunities to explore their feelings, thoughts and experiences through performances of the narratives. Kha's performance of the story was an opportunity for him to be in the same event again, in order to find meaning and understanding for himself. Besides the articulation of these complex emotions and events, the theatre-making programme was an avenue for Kha to participate in a reflective exercise to analyse and understand the event with the benefit of distance of time and space.

Hughes and Wilson (2004) suggest that it is important for young people, especially those from troubled backgrounds, to have access to people and spaces that are unrelated to the problems they face. This offers opportunities

for them to build new identities and relationships. Kandil (2016a: 203) suggests that participants open up their struggles during drama participation because 'their initial investment was to build community with one another, and to find a place where they could feel accepted and their experiences valued'. The theatre-making processes also offered the participants a space and time to engage in multi-perspectives and multi-modal ways of looking and thinking, which Kukla (1987) argues is missing in a regular classroom setting. Bundy (2013) and Prendergast and Saxton (2013) agree that the gifting of stories in drama creates the platform for participants to see themselves through different angles in order to make sense of the situations they are in. Through the theatre-making process, Kha had another chance to be in a situation which bothered him and needed dialogue.

FROM *BEING* TO *BECOMING*: THE JOURNEY OF ACTIVE REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The second phase of the theatre-making programme started with the children creating the map of the neighbourhood in the new story. There was no other instruction given to the children except to draw on the big white sheet of plain paper how the neighbourhood in their story might look. The children moved quickly to discuss and collaboratively drew shapes on the paper, and labelled them as buildings. The discussion between the children centred on where block 20 in this fictional neighbourhood was situated and what other things the children wanted to include in this location map they were planning. Identifying block 20 was important to the young people and they insisted it was central in the map because many of the children in the programme lived in block 20 in the residential estate. The children remained focused and very serious in the collective drawing activity, and each child became very protective and proud of their contribution to the map.

The collective drawing did not look like a map in the end. The children had drawn a huge rectangle and marked it as block 20, and that was the only building in the map. The children included drawings of individual households on the blank spaces on the paper, making it look as though each family was magnified from the apartment block in a 'shout-out' bubble. In that drawing, there were also several apple trees, bats, many flowers and rainbows. It was a lovely and happy representation of their neighbourhood until Tin decided to include the graffiti that loan sharks liked to put on the walls to urge their debtors to pay up. Tin explained that his addition was 'make things real mah!' (Video transcription – Phase 2, 10 April 2015). He later embellished it further by adding a picture of a loan shark with a *parang* (a machete commonly used in the Malay archipelago) in hand, standing outside the door. The picture carried the weight of the harsh truths in the children's lives and at the same time it could be interpreted as a means to convey their desires for a safer and more welcoming environment.

The collective drawing reflected the porosity of fiction and reality where the boundaries may be blended into a blurry line revealing the discourses confronting the participants in drama. Mackey (2016: 107) explains that 'place can be reconceived conceptually and practically to reference alienation *and* attachment, roots *and* routes, stasis *and* mobility'. The deliberate and purposive embellishment of beautiful objects in the location map represented the children's desires to create a better environment than the one presented in reality. However, at the same time they were unable to depart from the harsh

reality where the common narrative of the community was one shrouded in violence and crimes. The map of the fictional neighbourhood accurately and acutely represented the conflicting emotions felt by the children towards their environment in a mixture of connection and rejection. The drawing was part of the narrative that the children were constructing about their neighbourhood, and Kandil (2016a) advised applied theatre practitioners to respect the decisions participants were making and the agency they possessed over how they wanted to tell their story. At the same time, the artwork resonated with Peter's (2009) argument that participants in a drama process can make links between the fiction they are creating and the reality in which they live. The powerful toggling between the two states increased the children's level of engagement and investment into the process.

The final performance highlighted stories of a family living in block 20 that was confronted with issues of domestic abuse, drug use and child neglect. These were not issues with which the young people were unfamiliar, and the storying process was an opportunity for the children to be in these situations again but looking at them through a fictional context. However, the children were not content to simply present these harsh and unpleasant truths to the invited audience of families and friends. They experimented and curated plausible methods of self-help for the characters in these stories. In the story, eleven-year-old Ned chose to play a police officer whose job was to investigate the drug use in the neighbourhood and she had made several arrests. In that collective narrative, the group decided that the female drug addict was sniffing glue when she was arrested in her home in the presence of her children.

During the debrief between the facilitator and community worker after that particular workshop, it was revealed that the narrative was not far from what had actually happened in Ned's family just months prior to her participation in the theatre making programme. The young girl's mother was arrested for drug use and had been in the rehabilitation centre since. Ned and her group further discussed and improvised various scenarios until they finally agreed on the best outcome possible. The story ended when the woman returned to her family hesitantly and afraid, but received a warm welcome from her children. The children told their mother that they had worked hard in school and were all doing very well. They encouraged the mother to find a job and said that then they would be happy together. The children were pleased with the simple and pragmatic ending. There were no mushy declarations of love between parent and children, and the hugs offered appeared at best cursory. Promises to turn over a new leaf or to build a better future together with big dreams were also missing in the final scene. Instead, what was performed was a practical and realistic presentation of love and care in a typical Singaporean family, muted and downplayed regardless of the intensity of emotions felt.

Heathcote (2013) advises that drama allows for the examination of a problem or situation by freezing it in time. The participants might undergo a process of change when they investigate and explore the various possibilities within the problem or situation. In this theatre-making programme, the pre-adolescents negotiated the process of *becoming* by reflecting on plausible pathways the characters in their stories could take. The options and decisions they chose resulted in different outcomes and required a different form of effort and emotional investment from the young people. The children's decision to perform the story about the woman who was arrested for drug use stemmed from the consensus that it was most reflective of what happened in their reality. The ending of the story resonated with Prendergast and Saxton's (2013: 14)

argument of 'allow(ing) participants to take on self- and/or collectively created social roles for the purposes of shared investigation'. It also facilitated a sense of agency in the young people, which Kukla (1987: 76) argues is a 'balance between the freedom of the imagination and the constraints of the real world, and adds a new dimension to their thinking'. O'Connor (2016) furthers this argument and explains that drama facilitates a participant stepping in and out of the fiction and watching their location in situations that could be analysed through the safety of distance in fiction. It was also an important way to rehearse for the future by understanding what becoming might look like after the opportunity to be in the drama process.

ENGAGEMENT IN THEATRE AS A MEANS TO SUPPORT POSITIVE CHILD AND YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Through the devising process, the children explored and adopted identities that they might not previously have been conscious of prior to their participation in the playbuilding programme. The individual and collective narratives offered by the children in the process demonstrated that school, residential neighbourhood and family were the dominant cultures with which they were familiar. Within the three environments in which the pre-adolescents spent much of their time, the roles and identities performed by the children had remained largely similar. The young people were constrained in their roles as under-achievers, and at times as troublemakers, in the academic environments and in the neighbourhood; they were children who loitered at the playground.

This section discusses the role drama played in offering a space for the children to experiment with becoming identities that previously were not available. It also suggests how membership in a theatre-making programme that was external to academic and familial environments was crucial in allowing young people from marginalized backgrounds to develop positive identities that were not tied to ingrained cultural discourses.

On the day of the performance for their families and friends, the children exhibited a heightened level of nervousness and excitement. They collaborated to set up the performance space, a huge storeroom in the social service organization's office. About 30 chairs had been organized for the audience who were expected to come to watch the children. The children decided that they were not interested in performing for anyone other than their families and friends because they felt that no one outside of these communities would understand the weight of their stories. The young performers were seated in a straight row right in front of the first line of chairs laid out for the guests about fifteen minutes before the doors opened for their audience. The children were eager to demonstrate to and educate their audience about new ways of being and living in the residential estate. On that afternoon, what was missing was the usual mischief and running around as all the children were consumed by anxiety and excitement.

The performance created the space for the children to adopt positive identities that were performed publicly. The roles of actors in a performance that had an invited audience, production managers for the show, wardrobe leaders, discipline managers, narrator and timekeepers filled the children with a great sense of importance and affirmation. The children were presented before the audience members as leaders in their own right and they owned the plot to the show that was going to be performed. These were identities the children had not previously owned in academic or familial environments. The

public performance of the new identities created a sense of pride in the young people, which translated into a heightened sense of efficacy as they performed their roles and later their show with pronounced ownership. It was also a way for the children to assume responsibilities that had a public outcome, and to negotiate ways of being in the process of the theatre-making and eventually when they were presented in front of people who mattered greatly to them.

The anxiety experienced by the children before the arrival of the audience was obvious. The young people worried about potential judgement and desired to impress. Hughes and Wilson (2004) propose that when youth participate in high-quality youth theatre programmes, they become invested in both the process and the product through the demands of the skills and capabilities developed. In turn, the young people feel a great sense of achievement and also pride in the work they have done. Bruun (2017) furthers this proposition and reports that regular participation in a drama programme results in escalated levels of confidence and spontaneity.

The drama programme provided a platform, which Brice Health (2001) calls a 'third space', for the children, which bridged the family environment and the school. Through their participation in the playbuilding process, the children explored issues and also became more aware of themselves and their responses to the events in their lives. This finding is congruent with Hughes and Wilson's (2004: 64) theory that young people established a more positive sense of identity after they had negotiated difficult emotions through the playbuilding, and 'Performances can be an important outlet that can help young people express and manage difficult feelings'. As articulated by Heathcote (2013) and Heikkinen (2016), participation in drama could facilitate a process of change for the young people as they experience transformation through the artistic journey, and this helps them to connect with the larger society. The third space – in this case, taking the form of the playbuilding programme, provides the creative and exploratory avenue that is absent in academic settings, and that Brice Heath (2001) argues is essential to the lives of every young person.

When the performance ended in Phase 1, the community worker gave a short speech to the guests present and explained the process of theatre-making. The children were visibly proud of their work and they had demonstrated a heightened sense of self-efficacy by the end of the performance. Upon hearing the encouragement from the community worker and members of the audience, they became even more pleased and proud of themselves.

Performance attainments are powerful sources of influence to an individual's sense of self-efficacy as they provide actual evidence of a person's capabilities, and the increase in self-efficacy fuels more desire to attempt tasks at a more difficult level (Bandura 1982; Buckworth 2017; Gangloff and Mazilescu 2017). The group of young theatre-makers had just completed an artistic journey where they experienced hardship and perseverance, thus the sense of achievement after the performance was intensified and their beliefs in their capabilities were augmented. Furthermore, their performance was a risk they had taken to reintroduce themselves to the community with which they were familiar through their stories, and the subsequent acceptance and acknowledgement by the audience members bolstered their sense of accomplishment. Applied theatre researchers (Donelan and O'Brien 2008; Hughes and Wilson 2004) concur that risk-taking for youth is essential in the process of art making and in this research project participants' sense of self-worth was enhanced when they were appreciated for the outcomes they showed and the artistic risks they had taken.

The theatre-making process afforded a physical and mental space for the children to think deeply and create a group identity and vision of how they wanted to present their narratives. On the performance day, the differences and the disagreements they had with each other became insignificant as they wanted to focus on presenting a high-quality performance for their audience. Oddey (1994) and Tarlington and Michaels (1995) agree that a play-built product encompasses the voices of every individual involved in the process, and in turn the collective voice becomes the unification of vision shared by the group. Prendergast and Saxton (2013) add that participants collaborate through the different roles they play in producing the performance in order to achieve the desired effects. The children displayed the collaborative behaviour when they were getting ready to perform for a second time as Kha's mother came after the show was over. She had got the time of the performance wrong and Kha requested an encore performance. He wanted very much for his mother to see his performance, and it was obvious that this young person wanted his mother to have a glimpse into his life and his work. The performance was a way for him to reintroduce himself to his mother who had been reported to be rather disengaged with his life.

The children readily agreed to perform a second time and there was no hint of the discords or friction that had marked our daily sessions. The eventual show that was performed to an audience of familiar faces was reflective of the children's understanding of their community, but more importantly, it depicted their desire for change and echoed their current sense of emotional and mental states – a positive sense of unsettlement that was seeking new ways of seeing their world. Kandil (2016b) argues that the process and product (if any) of applied theatre must consider the changing needs of the participants. In this playbuilding programme, the children's needs had shifted within the three months of the drama programme and they became aware of how they would like to challenge the status quo in their environments and lives. The constant changes made to the final narrative and the eventual product were testimony to the changing needs and how they were met.

CONCLUSION

After the second performance, which marked the conclusion of Phase 1 of the drama programme, the children gathered together for a debrief. There was a sense of euphoria and the children were tired but very happy. The community worker and facilitator congratulated the young people for the successful performances. The children cheered and clapped for themselves, and the girls hugged each other. When asked whether they would like to share their thoughts, twelve-year-old Sha spoke first. He said he was very proud of the performance because they had created the story. Several other boys agreed with 'Yah! Yah!' (Video transcription – Phase 1, 19 March 2015). Eight-year-old Rut put up his hand to speak and said that he liked the playbuilding part because he got to tell his story. Eight-year-old Ros chimed in and yelled from the back that he liked 'drama because I perform and my friend watch' (Video transcription – Phase 1, 19 March 2015).

The performance had heightened the children's sense of ownership of and pride in the whole process, but these feelings were not limited to the final day itself. The children first decided on the second day of the workshop that they wanted to show stories of loan sharks and gang fights in their neighbourhood. These were real fragments in their lives, which might appear to have added some thrill to the everyday events but imbued in the children some questions

about why their neighbourhood was a fertile ground for violent acts. While the children maintained that they wanted to include them in their narrative because they were authentic and not uncommon events, they changed their minds on the third day. They wanted to incorporate in the performance stories that were more related to them. Similar to Gallagher's (2016) study of Project: Humanity, where she and her team 'used drama techniques to explore issues and experiences of spatial inequality in young people's neighbourhoods' (2016: 230), this playbuilding programme gave space to the young people to decide and debate the aspects of their lives they wanted to make visible through the final product. After some discussions during the devising process, they decided to exchange the loan shark and gang fight stories for bullying stories.

Kandil (2016a) and Prendergast and Saxton (2013) explain that participation in drama builds a sense of agency in the participants because, as a collective unit, the young people have to decide how they should present their narratives and what is the best way to move their performance forward. The children demonstrated this sense of agency on the fourth day, three hours before we opened our doors to the audience for the first performance. The group that was presenting the images that showed bullying in the playground requested to make changes to their frozen pictures. The children felt that while the images were honest and authentic depictions of what had happened in the playground, they did not represent what the children hoped to see in that space. The young people were dissatisfied with being stuck in a repetitive show of negative events, either in reality or fiction. They desired changes and took the initiative to become the change.

The children saw the need to reshape their story for the audience that was coming, and also a responsibility to demonstrate possible alternatives to the common narratives in the community. At that time, the children did not necessarily have a plan of how they wanted to devise their alternative narratives or what the alternatives were. In that way, the children's behaviour corresponded with Bandura's (1982, 1993, 1997) and Buckworth's (2017) notion of self-efficacy, where they felt motivated to take on the challenge despite not possessing the knowledge, and their physiological states were primed to assist them to navigate any potential challenges. Membership of a drama process that was unrelated to academic and familial conditions provided distance for the young participants to examine the cultures in which they spent a large part of their time. The young people's membership in the creative process that had a public output challenged the rental residential communities' perceptions of the children with whom they were familiar. It was a means for the pre-adolescents to change perceptions and present a clean slate, which they could use to redevelop new identities for themselves that they gave back to the community in an artistic manner. They made known and available their talents and new understandings to the larger community as a way of re-being and becoming of selves.

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