Supporting Settlement: Participatory drama as intervention

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In this paper, I briefly introduce the participatory drama practice that the Griffith University Applied Theatre team has been engaged in within the context of new arrivals over the last ten years. I then turn to discuss resilience and the importance of hope, belonging and connectedness in the lives of new arrivals. This is followed by a description of a participatory drama program that occurred with a specific group of year 11 and 12 students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds during two school terms in 2016. The drama program that took place at one Brisbane high school, in Queensland, Australia, was designed as an intervention to support the young people based on the school's assessment of their particular needs. I then turn to reflect on the program's achievements against the stated goals. To do this I draw on my own observations as well as interviews with the students and one of the teachers. I conclude that the participatory drama program was a valuable and joyful intervention for these young people.

In 2007, members of Griffith University's drama team were approached by Multilink, an organisation that provides community services and resources to migrants and refugees from culturally diverse backgrounds. They wondered if drama might be used to assist successful settlement in Australia. We started with a small pilot study working with newly arrived humanitarian entrants from Burundi and Ethiopia on drama projects designed to help the resettlement process.

This paper considers the oft-stated aims of transformation, empowerment, and social change in much applied theatre work, as well as the discussions within the field that problematise these acts of good will. Because of the operations of power that are inherent in applied theatre contexts, there is a constant need for reflexivity – practitioners have to consciously ask the difficult but necessary questions about their work particularly with regards to the ethics of their practice.

Since then, our work in the context of refugee resettlement has continued to expand.[1] We have engaged in participatory drama projects in Logan and Brisbane with refugees and others seeking asylum from: Afghanistan, Burundi, Cambodia, China, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, El Salvador, Eritrea, Iran, Kenya, Laos, Liberia, Macedonia, Myanmar, Pakistan, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Thailand, Togo and Uganda. We have worked in primary schools, secondary schools and in the TAFE sector. Our work has been supported by ARC Linkage funding and more recently by a Queensland Government Department of Education and Training Collaboration and Innovation Fund Grant.

In this paper, I begin by briefly discussing resilience, hope, belonging and connectedness in the lives of new arrivals. This is followed by a discussion of the participatory drama work that occurred with one group of year 11 and 12 students with refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. The voices of the young participants are used to illustrate their perceptions of the impact of the program.

Resilience

Commonly, resilience is thought of as a person's ability to bounce back or cope after experiencing challenge or adversity. For example, the Collins Concise Dictionary (1988) defines it as 'recovering easily and quickly from illness, hardship etc'. It is often written about as an innate human capability, a particular inner strength. From this perspective, there is little focus on the broader social circumstances experienced by the individual.

More contemporary views about resilience recognise (to varying degrees) that the environment and social world that a person finds themselves in significantly influence their ability to cope. For example, an ecological approach, while still seeing resilience as a human trait, recognises that the child, their environment and the relationships that they experience all impact on their wellbeing and their development (Yohani 2010: 866).

Ungar (2011: 1) questions an ecological approach that still positions resilience as a human trait. Rather, he argues that resilience is a quality of the child's environment (their 'social and physical ecology'). While earlier ecological studies focused on how people might

reveal resilience, Ungar suggests we shift our focus from the individual and look at how a community supports resilience. What programs do we put in place? What resources do we make available? How do we create 'a social ecology where more positive development can be expected'?

Hope, Belonging and Connection

Like Ungar, Correa-Velez and colleagues (2010: 1406) assert that successful resettlement is significantly influenced by the social environment that people experience post-arrival. Furthermore, they argue that the settlement experience can be potentially more damaging than the pre-migration experience (Correa-Velez et al. 2010: 1400). People need to feel welcome and included. They need a sense of belonging and of achievement in their new land. They assert that wellbeing is significantly impacted by whether a person feels a sense of belonging early in resettlement (Correa-Velez et al. 2010: 1399).

Reading about this topic, I was drawn to the work of Beth Crisp, who separates belonging and connection, explaining that they are related but different concepts. They may co-exist but it is also possible for one to be present without the other. Crisp (2010: 124) uses belonging to refer to being an insider in a group. As an insider, you share the information that other members of that group share. Beyond having some shared values and beliefs, you feel you belong. There is positive emotion attached to this. Crisp (2010: 124) claims that all human beings require some level of belonging. When we know we belong, it is easier to take risks, to attempt tasks we have never attempted before, to 'meet new people or go to new places'. When belonging is desired but denied to a person, there is likely to be negative impact including feelings of 'isolation and loneliness' (Crisp 2010: 127).

Unlike belonging, emotion does not necessarily attach to connection. While a sense of connection or connectedness emerges as a result of participation in 'societal organisations or social networks' (Crisp 2010: 124), membership itself may not impact directly on one's sense of subjective identity. Programs that are designed to increase connection without also focusing on building belonging are unlikely to succeed. Crisp uses the example of programs that create access pathways to university for students who might not normally participate. If, once they get to university, there are no programs in place to support a sense of connection, they are likely to feel isolated and the pathway program will have failed. Similarly, schools must focus on programs that offer students connection to others through their participation in worthwhile/meaningful activity. Students need to experience the positive emotion that attaches to belonging as they participate in these.

Yohani (2008: 313) found in her work that 'connectedness to others' plays 'an important role in enhancing hope'. Hope is recognised as a 'key in coping, overcoming adversity, and living under uncertain and stressful life experiences' (Yohani 2010: 866). It is a crucial aspect of wellbeing and an important resource for new arrivals. Although numerous scholars recognise this (e.g. see Cheavens et al. 2005; Valle et al. 2006; Snyder 2000), Yohani and Larsen (2009: 246) found that there was a lack of focus on hope in programs designed to support refugee communities.

Yohani adopts an arts-based approach to work with newly arrived migrant and refugee children in Canada. Observing the children in her research, she noted certain qualities of life were present for the children when they experienced hope: they were more engaged in life; they could see good in themselves; they felt capable; they felt free (Yohani and Larsen 2009: 248).

Hope gives people the motivation to cope with adverse events (Yohani 2008: 312) and is forward thinking. When we hope we can picture ourselves in a positive future. There is a link between hope, self-perception and action (Yohani 2010: 868). There is also a link between sense of achievement and hope. Positive emotion is likely to be experienced when a person takes action that requires effort and their action results in success. Yohani and Larsen (2009: 254) note that experiencing success encourages a person to see other future desirable possibilities that they might engage in and achieve.

Hope and wishing are not the same. Hope implies goals and action. Te Riele (2010: 36) draws attention to the three elements that comprise Snyder's (2000) broadly recognised theory of hope: goals, pathways to achieve goals, and agency – the perception that one is capable of working towards the goal. What we hope for must be attainable, agreeable, future-oriented and require effort on our part. Like Te Riele (2010: 40), I suggest that there are ethical considerations in what we hope for. We should also ask if what we hope for is just.

Similar to Ungar's (2011) position regarding the importance of an appropriate social ecology, Te Riele (2010: 39) notes that hope needs to be considered in the context of the agency of individuals and groups plus the social conditions that constrain and support them. Young people need experiences in the classroom that allow them to feel success. They need to experience secure and positive relationships with family, peers and teachers. A person who feels supported by their personal and social networks is more likely to experience hope than one who is isolated. A person who feels secure in their settlement status is more likely to experience hope than one who is not.

Hope is encouraged when you feel that someone is there for you. This is more than trust. It is trust plus a belief in

its outcome. If I trust you, this can happen (Yohani and Larsen 2009: 255). There is a direct link between trust and hope (Yohani and Larsen 2009: 248). There is also a link between trust, hope and belonging (Yohani and Larsen 2009: 259). Activity that fosters positive relationships nurtures hope.

Drama for Hope and Belonging

The young people engaged in this project were all students in years 11 and 12 in one Brisbane high school in 2016. They ranged in age from 16 to 20 years. All were selected by the deputy principal, who believed that they might benefit from engagement in the drama program. While a few of the young people had been selected because it was thought they could be strong role models for others, most had specific needs. Many of the students were highly anxious. Some had limited family support or were themselves carers. Some had witnessed, or were themselves, victims of domestic violence. The deputy principal wanted a program that would offer these young people a safe environment, that would encourage their desire to come to school, and that would encourage them to feel a sense of belonging. She wanted them to gain in confidence and to develop oral language ability.

At the beginning of the year, there were 17 year 11s (13 female and four male) and eight year 12s (three males and five females) officially in the class. By the time the project concluded, 32 young people had participated at various times.

The countries of origin of the young people in the class at the beginning of the year included: Afghanistan, Côte d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Eritrea, Iran, Kenya, Liberia, Pakistan, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, and Uganda. The declared first languages of the students in the class included: African, Ewe, Dari, Dinka, French, Kurdish, Pashto, Somali, Swahili, and Tigrinya.

The visa subclass of the young people initially enrolled gives some indication of the difficulties of their lives:

- eight students entered Australia on a visa subclass 204 – woman at risk:
- 10 students had a visa sub-class 200 – refugee:
- two students had a visa sub-class 202 – global special humanitarian entrant:
- one student had a visa-sub-class 114 – aged dependent relative: and
- two students were persons seeking asylum – one had a bridging visa, the other had no visa.

Any person without a visa, or with a bridging visa of this kind faces a very uncertain future. The children in the school are aware of this. Knowledge of current government policy, and a personal sense of connection to stories of despair, impact on the outlook of other students and community members. The opposite of despair is hope. Included in the purposes of the drama program with these students was to support resilience and foster hope and belonging.

Our work together

Based on my understanding of the needs of the young people emerging from my interview with the deputy principal as mentioned above, as well as my understandings about resilience, belonging and hope, and of engagement in participatory drama, I determined a number of principles that would guide the work:

- to create a welcoming and inclusive classroom environment where students experience a sense of community and a sense of belonging
- to create a climate where secure and positive relationship building is encouraged amongst peers and between the participants and teachers
- to build an environment where people are able to trust each other
- to create an environment that encourages joyful encounters and experiences
- to create opportunities for new connections to be formed
- to create tasks that are meaningful, challenging but ultimately achievable.

We met once a week on a Wednesday afternoon for most of the school year. Often our planned sessions were abandoned when competing events occurred in the school. I worked alongside two experienced teachers, one a drama teacher and one who has an interest in drama and expertise in working with children for whom English is not a first language. I wanted to create an inclusive, open and inviting environment. Each week we began with a check in. We all sat in a circle and each person was greeted and invited to share something with the rest of the group. Throughout the sessions, I tried to vary how we worked, offering the students opportunities to work in pairs, small groups and in the larger group. Students were continually invited to share their opinions and ideas with others.

The focus of the first four weeks was on getting to know each other and build trust. I tried different drama approaches. I knew that I needed to develop a strong

pretext that could guide our continuing work. Four weeks into the project the students were engaged in a drama activity exploring emotion and status. They had listed words that described the emotions they were feeling and then together had brainstormed words that might be the opposite. All of these were written on yellow sticky labels and placed on the board. The students formed small groups. In each group one person lay down on a large piece of butcher's paper and the others drew an outline around the body. They then took turns to select sticky labels naming emotions that they had placed on the board and placed these onto the body shapes. They were then faced with a question: Who is this person that experiences all these emotions? Their task was to create the fictional character and their story.

In the process of working in their groups to try to create the characters, one group had indicated that their character was strong, not necessarily physically, but as a person. One young woman declared that it had to be a male character, because girls can't be strong. The information that I had received from the deputy principal was that this student was a victim of ongoing domestic violence. Her response and this knowledge informed my choice of pretext for the ongoing work.

I had recently read Kristin Hannah's (2015) *The Nightingale* telling the story of a young woman who was active in the French resistance during WWII. When I mentioned the book to someone else they asked me if it was based on the story of the White Mouse. I then started to research her story. Nancy Wake was similarly engaged in the resistance movement in France. Kristin Hannah maintains that her character is not based on the White Mouse but on the experiences of a woman from Belgium. She claimed that there were many women during WWII who were strong and took great risks to aid other men, women and children. I combined the stories and then further fictionalised this to create a character and a story that could be a starting point for the students to explore. The intention was not to re-enact a predetermined story but to offer the students the opportunity to create their own fiction with this as a starting point. As well as involving a strong female character, this had potential as a pretext for a number of reasons:

1. It contained a situation distanced in time and place from their own.

2. It was likely to evoke their interest.

3. It offered the possibility of engaging them intellectually and emotionally.

4. It implied roles for the participants and a range of situations that they could explore.

I told the students that we were going to draw on the two stories to weave fact and fiction and create a new character and a new story. For them to follow what could be really complex, I needed to break it into small chunks, introducing just a little that we could explore each week – but hint that there was more to come. In the first session I told them:

1. Our story is set in France just before and during WWII. When our story starts, Isabelle, a French girl and the hero of our story, is 16.

2. Isabelle has no mother. Her mother died when she was just a baby. Although her father tried to raise her, he was grief stricken by the loss of his wife and his experiences of war, and it seemed to Isabelle that he really didn't know how to be a good father to her. He decided to send her away to a boarding school in Switzerland.

The students were instantly engaged. They created a paired role play. One person was the father and one was Isabelle. It was the night before Isabelle was to be sent away. She is packing her bag. The students playing Isabelle were given the task of trying to convince their fathers not to send them away. The fathers were told a secret that was not shared with those playing Isabelle. They knew that war was imminent and wanted the daughter to go away where she would be safe but they mustn't let her know that.

The students were highly engaged in the task of creating the scenes. The secret added a layer of purpose and tension for the fathers and something to play against for the daughters. One participant, playing the father, painted a poetic image of the daughter's future through the stars. It was very moving and I wondered if there were resonances to leaving her homeland in the story she created. Other scenes portrayed the fathers as cold and distant. I asked those playing the father to keep the secret till the following week. Most did.

The following week we recapped the story we had created so far. This became a necessary and successful approach throughout the work. It helped those with limited English to gradually understand more and more of the story and assisted those who may have missed the previous session.

I wanted them to have fun and perhaps play with a little irony. I told them that the boarding school she was sent to was a finishing school. It was a place for her to learn how to become a lady, something she had no interest in learning. They worked together to create a list of the subjects that she would study and then took a blank timetable, the same as the ones used in their own school, and filled in her lessons for the week.

They split into two groups and each created a group improvisation of the most pointless lesson they could imagine her engaging in. They improvised an unwilling Isabelle engaged in a manners lesson, and a lesson about meeting suitable young men. They were very funny and even the shyest young people in the group were highly engaged.

We did revisit the fathers from the previous week. Each of the daughters was given the task of shaping their father into the statue that would capture what they thought their father was thinking and feeling when he sent the daughter away. They created images of fathers who didn't like them, didn't care. At a signal, each father spoke what they were really thinking or feeling. This added a layer of complexity to the characters and relationships that further engaged the students.

Over the following weeks we continued to explore the story, adding to it as we went. The students considered what Switzerland might look like. They drew a map of the school and the village complete with the obstacles Isabelle would face if she were to try to run away. They then created and enacted scenes showing her trying to escape. Each time she was caught and returned.

They created and took roles as the teachers in her boarding school at a staff meeting considering the problem of what to do with Isabelle. I wanted her to be expelled because I thought we'd spent long enough at the boarding school and needed to get back to Paris for a bit more action. They decided that she was really a very caring, brave and good person. They wanted her to have another chance. Having decided this, the students worked in groups to create a scene that would show her doing something that would make the teachers think they had made the right decision in letting her stay.

After several more sessions exploring and creating Isabelle's story, the students were given the task of choosing what they wanted to happen when she got back to Paris. Several different endings were created. One of the participants explained her ending to me:

> Actually, when she went home she met her stepmother at the house. We all gave our idea of how the story was going to end. Whether her dad will forgive her or not. As for me, I said her dad going to forgive her because no matter how angry he is he'll want to forgive her because it's his daughter.

Reflection

While this particular drama concluded at the end of term two, we continued to work together throughout the year. From September to November, I conducted ten, 30-minute individual interviews with those students who gave permission for this to occur. I also interviewed one of the teachers who had worked alongside me throughout the work. Drawing on these interviews and my observations, I turn now to reflect on our achievements against the program goals.

All of the students whom I interviewed noted that they felt that our Wednesday drama class was welcoming and inclusive. This was supported by the teacher's interview comments. For the majority of students who regularly attended the sessions, a sense of community and belonging was created. They identified as members of this particular class and noted that they would greet each other in the playground outside class time. Many commented on feeling comfortable working in this environment, sometimes even comparing this to how they felt in other classes. A student who was relatively new to the class and to Australia stated:

> So it was very hard for me but the day I came here, it was, it felt like I'm home. Everyone is my friend. My family. You know. So I didn't feel anything. Just very good and happy. Every time. Talk to anyone. Tell anyone that I trust my things you know.

Another student noted that she felt both comfortable and valued:

> … for example, in English class I feel so uncomfortable. I don't know. I just get a feeling like I'm nobody in the class. Everybody is on the top and I'm nobody. I feel discouraged by myself. But in the drama class, it's really, really important and it takes away some worries and makes you feel comfortable about yourself. Makes you value yourself. You know? Feel confident in yourself. Do what you can do and it's alright. Not stressed and worried.

The comfort felt by the students as they worked together with the same group of peers also influenced their willingness to contribute ideas:

> When we are here, we don't mind. It's like we are like brothers and sisters. We talk to each other and everyone gives their own opinion in what we are doing and we discuss about it.

An important comment made by one student was that she felt supported in the drama class and believed that the teachers genuinely cared about her:

> Oh my god. I think because we can talk about it. What we do. In my English class it's like, you go to class and you don't just talk and she'll look at you for language. She's not focusing on you, on

> how you feel because sometimes I might be feeling really depressed. If I don't speak it out she won't know. That don't help me focus what she is saying. And I will never get what she is saying. That's what happens to me most of the time.

Shyness impacted on student willingness and ability to talk and engage. Many claimed that the drama program helped reduce this:

> It makes me feel comfortable talking in front of people because after working together we have to present our point of view which is really good. I think it can take away shyness.

There was a general view that the way we worked encouraged participation. Each student was invited to share something with the group at the check-in at the beginning of each session. They were regularly invited to contribute their ideas as the sessions continued. Several mentioned that they did not think this was expected of them in other classes. One of the senior students stated:

> If the teacher asks for ideas, in those other classes, it's optional if you put your hand up when you want and when you don't want but in here you go around and people actually say what they have in mind but in other classes like no one is there to actually tell them, like to say what's in their mind even if they have great ideas.

Comments that the drama contributed to confidence and sense of self-worth were made by most students:

> The first time I took part in the drama I was feeling nervous and I was like scared. I feel like maybe they will tease me or anything and then I tried. I took part in the drama and the students were very good and I thought like it's nice. The things just come up in my head and tell me maybe if you do this it's going to be good and yeah.

> I did not trust myself in doing everything but now I trust myself, because when I bring up something, like how I was bringing up something that we can do in the drama, and it's come up a good thing, and I feel like the leader of the group, the little group and … I find it works.

> Before I didn't thought that I can do things but now I feel and know and believe that I can do stuff. Before I didn't know that I am good at stuff. Whenever people say do this, I say no. I can't do it. But now I realise that I can do it because I feel more better seeing what I can do.

Two of the students spoke about developing self-awareness. They gained insight into the way they were responding to others outside the drama and the way other people were reading and responding to them. Discussing participation in the drama, one of these students stated, 'Just helps me realise what kind of person I am'. The other told me that through the drama work he learned that, 'sharing, that me telling my ideas might be worth listening to'.

Another key idea that emerged in two of the interviews was freedom. One young man stated:

> Here you have more freedom but other classes it's a lot about listen and learn but here it is do, learn, have fun.

He spoke about having the freedom to express his feelings. The other student commented:

> I really like the fact that we have the freedom of expression in the classroom because most other time in our classroom you don't really have that. Freedom. You just have to do what you're meant to do. This class gives us freedom to express ourselves in ways that we don't normally do in other classes.

This same student linked the idea of freedom to exploration and portrayal of character. The stories and characters weren't predetermined by a script but could be developed by the individual students.

Many of the students I spoke to throughout the year and all of the students I interviewed mentioned the sense of joy they experienced coming to the class. All of the students who were interviewed and who had attended when we had explored the Isabelle story mentioned their enjoyment of exploring this in particular.

I asked the students if it was similar to their other classes. A few who studied other arts subjects noted similarities but also noted that the lack of assessment in this made it different. Other students who did not otherwise study arts subjects stated:

> It's different. The differences are like, firstly, we are not reading, we are not sitting in a chair. It's just like we are at a party.
>
> In our normal classes we go to learn a book and in here we just act, we do acting, talking, communicating, and entertainment stuff.

Another comparison made to their work in other subjects was the way that they worked in pairs or groups in the

drama. They talked about helping and supporting each other. One young man commented that in all his other classes he just did individual work. The students noted that the pair and small group work encouraged them to participate, to contribute their own ideas, to take risks, to communicate. They noted that this way of working improved their oral language skills and their confidence:

> In a small group of people you get to learn because you know something but you don't know all. You get to share ideas and learn from all the people. You improve your speaking with other people. As much as you speak you make mistakes and someone will be able to correct you. You can be able to learn from them.
>
> Most of the people in there, English is not our first language, and some people don't feel comfortable about talking among public, and some people feel shy to speak out their mind. These sessions are really good because they help people to share their ideas, helps people to communicate, improve their communication skills, it help them also to build up their confidence, yeah to learn from each other which is really good.
>
> Here you get to share things. And you just get to learn how to share. Normally I'm not that kind of person, who likes telling things, sharing ideas. I'm not really that kind of person that shares ideas. Just keep quiet. But this class just helps me you know. Here it's easy to share ideas because everyone is doing the same thing.

Throughout the responses, a sense of pleasure and achievement is evident. They have learned that they are worthwhile and that they have something to offer that will be valued by other people. The teacher whom I interviewed alerted me to an important idea about the link between achievement and belonging:

> … belonging really means that you're kind of wanted somewhere, not that you're just welcome because it's a good thing to welcome people … I think, especially for our students, when we make them feel like there's something in you that I need or something that you're adding to this, that's when they really, genuinely, without any outsider feeling, they feel, 'Oh, there's a spot for me'.

Conclusion

On reflection, I believe that the way we worked and my attempts to create a safe and creative space with the young people were successful. New friendships were forged. Together we created a drama workshop space filled with joy, optimism and fun in lives where this is not always available. There were opportunities to be playful, physical, and ironic. We created a fictional world and characters that were of sufficient interest to matter to them. Positive peer-to-peer and student-teacher relationships were built. I have a sense of the growing trust the young people feel about each other and me. Some of the students who were reluctant to speak when we began the work now voice their ideas and opinions. Throughout this work they have variously experienced success and developed a positive sense of their own capabilities. There is a sense of belonging. The school's decision to create the space for a program like this has been a valuable and joyful intervention for these young people.

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Penny Bundy is well known for her work investigating the value of drama for participants whose lives have been impacted by particularly challenging life experiences, and in which she takes an active role as drama facilitator and researcher. Penny has been a chief investigator on four Australian Research Council-funded Linkage Projects. She is co-author, with colleagues Balfour, Burton, Dunn and Woodrow of the Bloomsbury publication *Resettlement: Drama, refugees and resilience*. Penny is an Adjunct Professor at Griffith Institute for Educational Research.

End Notes

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