"Lock 'Em Up . . ." but Where's the Key? Transformative Drama with Incarcerated Youth

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Abstract
A research study doing applied theatre with youth at an Alberta, Canada young offender facility, asks: *How can participatory drama contribute to the education of incarcerated youth to avoid future negative outcomes of their "at-risk" behaviours?* This paper focuses on the social implications and the advocacy aspects of the research. It asks how spaces can be created within institutions such as prisons and schools for transformative processes to occur. Rather than the current "moral panic" that blames youth for social ills, rather than punishment and retribution – enacted against the majority of young Aboriginal inmates, strategies are needed that focus on personal and social development. Citing an example from the participatory drama work, the paper proposes the need for appropriate programming for youth and more compassionate attitudes regarding their needs. Participatory drama, along with emerging restorative justice practices based in Indigenous cultures, offer hope for community-based solutions to creating more caring and compassionate processes of schooling and justice and a more caring and compassionate society overall.

Introduction

In the US talk of the prison industrial complex (Davis, 2001) and the school to prison pipeline (see Schooltoprison, 2013) is ominous. These measures are critiqued as attempted quick-fixes to underlying social problems such as homelessness, unemployment, drug addiction, mental illness, and illiteracy. While we like to think of Canada as a more benign state, such measures are creeping into the Canadian justice system too. Zero tolerance policies, surveillance systems, and school resource officer programs have been in place in schools in Canada for more than a decade now. The passing of Bill C-10, Harper's Omnibus Crime Bill, in March 2012, means changes to the Youth Criminal Justice Act (Department of Justice Canada, 2013) including tougher sentences for repeat offenders and for drug related offences; and more youth charges tried in adult court. In Alberta, Edmonton's new $580 million Remand Centre will house 1,952 inmates – the largest facility of its kind in Canada (Alberta Justice and Solicitor General, 2013). Moreover, while US prisons are filled with African American and Latino inmates (Human Rights Watch, 2002), in Canada the inmate population is majority Aboriginal descent (Silver, 2007) – indication of a justice system fraught with systemic racism.

My SSHRC funded research study *The Transformative Potential of Drama in the Education of Incarcerated Youth*, was in response to this situation. It involved doing participatory drama with incarcerated youth, at a youth jail in Alberta, Canada to draw attention to the educational needs of incarcerated youth and youth deemed "at-risk." The question my inquiry addressed was: *How can participatory drama contribute to the*

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education of incarcerated youth to avoid future negative outcomes of their "at-risk" behaviours?

By engaging young participants in drama and other creative activities to express their experiences and understandings, the study investigated: the educational needs of incarcerated youth to help them make positive change; what drama practices could best contribute to meeting their needs; how spaces could be created within institutions such as prisons and schools for transformative processes to occur – which is a central consideration of this paper; and how to assess the benefits of drama intervention in the context of incarceration.

Theoretical perspectives

My approach for this study grew out of my participatory world-view (Heron & Reason, 1997); I understand the world through my experiential participation in it and through valuing my lived experiences, the lived experiences of others, and our relationships (Wilson, 2008). I believe that our participation in the world together bestows upon us an obligation to one another. My work is openly ideological (Lather, 1986); I am committed to creating a more just society. Specifically, my research seeks justice for youth who are often marginalized and scapegoated (Blake, 2004; Giroux, 1996, 2003; Males, 1996; Strickland, 2002). As Giroux notes, "youth are now demonized by the popular media and derided by politicians looking for quick-fix solutions to crime. In a society deeply troubled by their presence, youth prompt in the public imagination, a rhetoric of fear, control, and surveillance" (2003, p. 554).

I came to work in youth prison based on what youth in schools had previously told me (Conrad, 2005) about their negative experiences at school: the strict disciplinary structures, the hierarchical, authoritarian relationships, and their limited opportunities for input (see also Epp, 1996). For some "at-risk" youth, I noted, school may be perceived as a prison.

Indeed, Foucault (1979), in his historical study of prisons, saw prison as analogous to schooling in that both were founded as disciplinary bodies, apparatuses of power and punishment. In his assessment, it has long been known that prison environments serve more effectively to reinscribe criminal mentality than deter crime or reform offenders. Foucault's (1991) notion of *governmentality* focusing on the collective, taken-for-granted ways of thinking behind the institutionalized practices that attempt to normalize individuals' conduct, offers an understanding of the dynamics at play. The way that power is wielded in these institutions, according to Foucault, constitutes individuals as objects of that power, engendering attitudes of resistance. To similar effect, Bourdieu's (1998; also Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) "law of conservation of violence" helps to explain how symbolic and structural violence in society ultimately erupt in instances of local interpersonal violence. The symbolic and structural violence inherent in the context of incarceration, the unbalanced distribution of power engendering resistance, are antithetical to the project of education for individual development and social change.

Research methodology and methods

In response to the negative institutional dynamics in the context of incarceration, my participatory research (Kidd, & Byram, 1978; Park, Brydon-Miller, Hall & Jackson, 1993) aimed to benefit and advocate for the youth as we re-searched our world together. The arts-based methods (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Finley, 2003) provided opportunities for

the youth to express their embodied and emotional as well as intellectual knowledge. The study drew on the tradition of critical pedagogy, based on the work of Freire (1970), focusing on the development of critical consciousness, the capacity to critically examine the world in order to transform it.

The popular or applied theatre approach (Diamond, 2007; Prentki & Selman, 2000; Rohd, 1998; Taylor, 2000) the study employed, adaptations of Augusto Boal's (1979) *Theatre of the Oppressed* techniques, built on prison-based theatre programs (Balfour, 2004; Levine, 1997; Moller, 2003; Thompson, 1998) that have been found to benefit inmates and offer possibilities for transformation of self and society through drama. As Boal (2006) suggests, those who transform reality through the creation of art are themselves transformed by the act.

My research was carried out in a maximum-security youth corrections centre in Alberta, Canada. I was invited by the centre's Native program coordinator to work with her after-school program which offered cultural and arts programming. With appropriate ethics approval from the University of Alberta and the Alberta Office of the Solicitor General, I made weekly visits to the centre over a period of three years. Participants were youth incarcerated there, who volunteered to participant in the drama program I offered. They were mostly boys ages 14 to 19; also some girls when mixed gender programming was sporadically allowed. I interacted with upwards of 50 youth over the three years. Due to the nature of the context, the turn-over of the youth who participated was ongoing, with some youth participating for only a week or two, some for several months – with some returning months later. A few youth participated for two or more years. Participants were appropriately informed of the research intentions and they gave consent and/or consent was sought from their parents/guardians as required. The majority of the youth were of Aboriginal descent, the tragic reality in Canada being that Aboriginal youth are eight times more likely to be incarcerated than non-Aboriginal youth (Chalverley, 2007) – an issue that my research also sought to address.

Over the course of the three years, I sought emergent opportunities to engage the youth in applied theatre activities. Using a project-based approach various popular theatre and other popular arts forms, were employed. We engaged in drama games and activities for group building and for creating an environment of trust and community conducive to creative work. Sessions included brainstorming activities to elicit themes and issues, as well as story-telling, role-play, spontaneous and planned improvisation, scene creation, performance and other creative forms such as writing, drawing, and digital media creation. Through the creative activities youth were encouraged to express their experiences prior to being incarcerated and their experiences of incarceration, to critically examine their understandings of offending behaviours within a social context and to enact their visions for the future. Our drama work helped them examine their feelings and beliefs about issues they identified as relevant to their lives, and searched for alternative responses or options for change.

The sources I drew upon for my interpretations included my researcher/facilitator field-notes and journals recording and reflecting upon participant observations of the day-to-day lives of the youth within the context of incarceration – notes on what they told me and the interactions amongst the group members, as well as notes and reflections on the processes of our creative work together; along with all of the artefacts from our three years of applied theatre work together including: youth devised drama scripts, transcribed stories, poems, digital photographs, digitally manipulated photos, digital stories,

drawings, other visual art/craft works, and video recordings of dramas and other activities.

The youth greatly appreciated our time together, which they expressed during our farewell ritual (traditional smudge, prayer and handshake) at the end of each session. I trust that our work benefitted the youth to some extent – giving them opportunities to express themselves, be creative, share recreational time with peers and have fun together. While the youth would very much have liked to have been given individual credit for their creative works, this was not possible given that the identities of young offenders are strictly protected by law.

Social Implications: Poverty, Racism & Incarceration

As research aimed at advocacy, I draw attention to the social implications of the context of the research – in this case the context of incarceration, and the many challenges faced by youth who find themselves incarcerated. Unfortunately, our social institutions – the bastions of symbolic and structural violence, do not always have youths' best interests as their priority (Giroux, 2003).

As a drama educator, who found participatory drama an effective method for reaching hard to reach youth, I came to the world of criminal justice with a naïve perspective. I was encouraged to find the work of scholars in forensic psychology (Vandergoot, 2006) and criminology (Doob & Cesaroni, 2004) supportive of my findings.

Dr. Mary Vandergoot (2006), a clinical psychologist who has worked extensively with young offenders in Saskatchewan, Canada, contends that youth crime is often the result of psychosocial immaturity and situational factors that lead to negative consequences for the youth and for their victims. Often these factors are aggravated by mental disorders such as Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder or Oppositional Defiant Disorder (Vandergoot, 2006) – which may be correlated with socio-economic factors. Many of the youth who end up in prison, I have learned through my experiences working with incarcerated youth, have lived much of their lives in high risk and abusive situations, suffering physical, mental, sexual abuse or neglect, or otherwise negative domestic environments involving violence, crime and substance use. While there are, no doubt, youth "at-risk" from stable, affluent homes, research indicates that the greatest factors that put youth at-risk are low socio-economic status (poverty) and racial-cultural minority status (racism) (Machamer & Gruber, 1998; Tanner, Hartnagel & Krahn, 1995).

My ongoing interest in working with and for youth at-risk led me to various locations across Alberta over the years – to the inner city, to rural communities and to the provincial youth jail. In each of these locations, the majority of youth I encountered, youth deemed to be "at-risk," were youth of Aboriginal (First Nations and Métis) descent. In the youth prison setting of this research, approximately two-thirds of inmates were youth of Aboriginal descent – numbers confirmed by national statistics (Chalverley, 2007; Statistics Canada, 1998).

How is this disproportionate incarceration rate for Aboriginal people across Canada accounted for? Simplistic assumptions, such as those underlying Harper's Omnibus Crime Bill, see justice served when those racialized Others allegedly committing crimes, are safely locked behind bars, rather than considering the effects of systemic racism within the justice system (Neugebauer, 2000; Office of the Correctional

Investigator Canada, 2006). The Aboriginal gang "problem" too, which poses threats to communities across Canada's prairies, are products of the inequitable justice system; the majority of the Aboriginal gangs having been founded inside prisons (Friesen & O'Neill, 2008) – another example of how toxic prison environments spawn further violence.

To understand systemic racism related to incarceration, we need to move beyond simple assumptions by asking some critical questions: Are members of racial minority groups disproportionately targeted by law enforcement? (Is racial profiling by police a common practice?) Are they treated inequitably by the justice system? (Is white collar crime treated differently than street crime?) Is our justice system constructed so as to disadvantage racial minorities in terms of the legality of their activities? Do our laws unduly criminalize the activities of some? Why might crime be a viable option for some people in our society? (Can gang activity and drug trafficking be seen as symptoms of our social ills?) Is our justice system constructed so as to disadvantage racial minorities in their defense against criminal charges? (Does more money buy a better defense?) Does our justice system practice inequitable sentencing along racial lines?

It would come as no surprise to Albertans that according to provincial statistics Aboriginal people in Alberta are twice as likely to live in poverty as their non-Aboriginal neighbours (Lee & Engler, 2000). Thus, the correlation between poverty, race and incarceration becomes evident.

Youth Crime and incarceration

In light of current negative public attitudes towards youth, critical questions should also be asked of young people's involvement in crime. There is a moral panic (Giroux, 1996; jagodzinski, 1997; Males, 1996; Strickland, 2002) these days over youth behaviour including the drop out problem, drug use, violence and crime. The public impression is that young people today are "bad," violent and disobedient, much worse than in the past. In fact, youth charged with violent crimes in Canada is on the decrease (Brennan, 2012; Chalverley, 2007). If criminal charges are laid against youth, the majority of which are property offences or related breaches of probation, this may have as much to do with unjust policies or practices than with actual crimes being committed (Chalverley, 2007). And yet the common perception today is that youth are "out of control," a threat to public security. As Giroux contends, "rather than being *at risk* . . . youth have become *the risk*" (2002, p. 35).

When youth crime does occur, those with empathy are disparaged. We regret the negative consequences for the young perpetrators and their victims. But youth crime, rather than being "the problem," is symptomatic of greater social ills. As Blake (2004) concludes, an erosion of hope on the part of marginalized youth has lead to a "culture of refusal" characterized by resistance to or non-participation in mainstream society.

The questions that need to be asked then are: Why is criminal activity an option for some youth? How are our laws constructed so as to criminalize the activities of some youth? The criminalization of youth behaviour becomes even more problematic given the fact that it is, more often than not, Aboriginal youth and other poor and/or non-White youth of colour who are the targets of the panic perpetuated by the dominant White Canadian culture (Neugebauer, 2000). As a society, rather than blaming youth, we should take our collective responsibility for caring for young people to heart.

In my home city, there was a flurry of media attention around a horrific incident that occurred – the murder of a young woman perpetrated by other youth (see Staples,

2007). This murder was linked to other recent incidents of youth violence in the city. As shocking as these incidents were, some comments expressed in the media by adult citizens, condemning youth, were equally appalling. The call to "lock 'em up and throw away the key" resounded loudly. I questioned: What do we hope to achieve through punishment and retribution? Is it just to incarcerate youth? What sort of a society imprisons its young?

Youth, by virtue of being young, have had limited opportunity, power or influence in shaping our society. They were born into this society already created for them; and as we know children live what they learn. What do we expect from twelve, fifteen and seventeen year olds who are, by our own definition, just kids?

What kind of society have we (adults) created for them? What are the predominant and consistent messages that youth receive about what is important in life today? I see a society that emphasizes self-interested individualism, extrinsic reward and punishment, competition, material wealth and consumption. Should we be surprised when young people respond with self-interest and aggression? These are the structures that *we* have created for them, by which we are quick to judge *them* and hold *them* personally responsible. While youth who have committed offences should be held accountable, rather than focus on blaming and punishing them, or protecting society from them, we must ask ourselves how we can serve young people and society better. How we can do justice better?

The Youth Criminal Justice Act (Department of Justice Canada, 2006; Doob & Cesaroni, 2004) declares "rehabilitation," not punishment, as the primary goal of youth incarceration. The notion of "rehabilitation," is itself problematic, in that it constructs the individual as having some deficiency in need of fixing (Adler & Adler, 2003), rather than considering the social context of the offending behaviour. (Personal and social development may serve as a more productive concept, I would suggest). What I saw in the youth prison where I researched, was not rehabilitation, but that priority was given to containment for the purposes of security – for the protection of youth from themselves, from other youth, and for the protection of society from them. While it may be true that conditions of basic security must be met before any "rehabilitation" can occur, if the scant resources allotted are only enough for accomplishment of the bare minimum, security – along with some well-intentioned, but tokenistic attempts at rehabilitative programming, what more can be expected? I saw relatively little attention given to appropriate programming for the youth. Nor was the prison environment conducive to doing it. Some of the psyco-educational programs offered at the jail, going by names such as: High Risk; What are you thinking?; Anger Management; as well as the Substance Abuse program offered at Alberta Hospital, were derided by the youth. In contrast the Native program, was effective in spite of the constraints of the prison setting. Through ongoing sincere interaction, the Native program coordinator was able to develop close, caring relationships with many youth. She offered Native cultural activities and arts activities that the youth appreciated and enjoyed, often inviting elders and guest artists in to work with the youth. In her dedicated program space she posted the youths' artworks and photos making it a welcoming home in which the youth knew they were valued and respected. The positive environment she managed to create contributed greatly to the success of the programming I was able to offer. The only other program I heard the youth speak positively about was extra-curricular sports.

Our drama work at the jail, too, was subject to constraint. I encountered resistance from administration because, drawing on the youths' experiences, some of the themes that came up in our work were among topics banned from discussion (criminal activity, drugs, anything to do with gangs), as they were seen to compromise security. We were regularly censored or required to self-censor. I was from time-to-time censured and called upon to defend my presence there. What I experienced was an environment so heavily rule-bound and coercive, with a focus on containment, reward (by point system) and punishment, that there was little room for meaningful personal development to occur; it was an environment antithetical to the aims of education for personal and social development.

The Transformative Potential of Drama

Along with critique of existing conditions, it is productive to also propose affirmative possibilities. In envisioning a more just reality for youth, participatory drama by no means a panacea, does offer a glimmer of hope. I have seen steps in positive directions taken in some isolated and under-resourced settings within schools, communities and even in prisons. For example, there are a few alternative high school programs in Edmonton for youth who have been unsuccessful in mainstream schools. ihuman Youth Society offers crisis intervention, life skills development and arts-based mentorship for high risk and street-involved youth. The Native program at the jail, provided a safe, nurturing, culturally appropriate and creative environment for the youth.

As these successful interventions with youth illustrate, rather than punishment for those who do not conform to society's expectations, we should offer young people support and educational opportunities to help them transform their lives and our society. Given the realities experienced by many of these youth, providing support requires a way of being with and engaging youth that sees them as valuable, contributing members of society, that is respectful of their views, that gives them a voice in the process, and takes their interests and experiences into account.

The example from our drama work which follows, suggests a way for engaging youth in the kind of self-conscious, critically reflective exploration that is needed.

Examining issues of "citizenship" through newspaper theatre.

This project employed adaptations of Boal's (1974/1979, 1998) Newspaper theatre and Forum theatre. Beginning from the youths' response to a newspaper article, the aim was to collectively create a scene, which we hoped to perform for other inmates at the centre.

Attending to the centre's demand that we not discuss criminal activity, I sought material that would raise challenging issues and be relevant to the life experiences of the youth, without addressing crime or criminality directly. The Edmonton Journal newspaper article (Kent, 2007) we drew upon discussed the mayor's suggestion to adopt a bylaw that threatened fines up to $10,000 for coercive panhandling. (In 2008 such a bylaw was passed in Edmonton with fines up to $250). The issue of panhandling, as raised in the article, met the criteria I was looking for. It pushed the limits of what was and was not considered "criminal," and engaged with a meaningful local current event with broad social implications.

When I first read the article I was struck by its absurdity, which I suspected, would not be lost on the youth. I was particularly incensed by the article's claim that,

"While [the mayor] isn't concerned about someone quietly seeking a handout . . ." (Kent, 2007, par 4). If our mayor *had been* more concerned over the need for citizens of our city to seek handouts, perhaps there would have been no need for concern over coercive panhandling.

To justify the project to the centre's administration I drew on Alberta Education's rationale and philosophy for the K-12 social studies program regarding:

> opportunities for students to develop the attitudes, skills and knowledge that will enable them to become engaged, active, informed and responsible citizens . . . [and] develop their sense of self and community, encouraging them to affirm their place as citizens in an inclusive, democratic society . . . promot[ing] a sense of belonging and acceptance in students as they engage in active and responsible citizenship at the local, community, provincial, national and global level . . . (2005, p. 1).

The language of the Social Studies curriculum around responsible citizenship – full of vague platitudes and empty rhetoric was, re-interpretable by us in more radical terms.

Newspaper theatre, one of Boal's (1998) earliest *Theatre of the Oppressed* forms, allows topics raised in the news to be re-examined from multiple alternative perspectives through theatre. Newspaper theatre's aims as outlined by Boal were to popularize the means of making theatre, to demonstrate that theatre can be practiced by anyone to show and defend their ideas, and to demystify the pretended objectivity of journalism, allowing people to read newspapers differently.

Like me, the youth responded to the article with fervor. We began our process with discussions around the article and the issues it raised. As I anticipated, the youth too perceived the proposed bylaw as absurd. They wondered how someone who needed to panhandle could be expected to pay a $10,000 dollar fine. They saw the tactic for what it was – the criminalization of the poor, a way for the municipal government to control behaviours deemed undesirable by mainstream citizens. They saw panhandling as a measure of desperation, and all agreed they would never want to be in a position to have to panhandle to survive. They identified poverty and addictions as factors that led to panhandling, and described a vicious cycle, that once caught within, was difficult to escape. They felt that rather than create bylaws to curb panhandling, the government had a responsibility to address the needs of the poor, the homeless and citizens with addictions issues. They linked the criminalization of the poor with a similar criminalization of youth by police and the city's "good citizens." They claimed that in their experiences, any group of two or more youth, these days, were treated as a threat. They spoke at length about their experiences of harassment by the police, and wanted to create a scene about police harassment of youth. When I responded that the administration would never allow such a scene, they were incensed that they would not be allowed to say what they wanted. This led to a lengthy discussion about censorship and how to work around it. In devising our scene, we explored ways of saying what the youth wanted to say without overstepping the boundaries of what the centre would permit.

To bring our discussion to life we physicalized images and created scenarios about panhandling, addictions, loitering, conflict between "citizens," and police harassment that built towards our scene. We entitled our scene *Need Change?* The setting for the scene was a store owned by a local businessman – one of the city's "good citizens." The scene began with the storekeeper and an employee inside the store. The

storekeeper's character was established as he complained to the employee about his laziness. Next, a group of three youth arrived outside the store, their pre-arranged meeting place, to plan purchases for their cousin's 18th birthday party that evening. A panhandler approached the friends asking them for money for food. They gave him five dollars. Then another customer approached the store. The panhandler asked this customer for money and got pushy when refused. The customer became angry, shooing the panhandler away, and proceeded into the store where he immediately complained to the storekeeper about being "harassed" at the door. Meanwhile, the panhandler returned to the friends asking for a cigarette, which they gave him. Just then the storekeeper stepped outside the shop door and accused the group of friends of loitering and harassing his customers. The friends tried to explain that they were customers too, but the storekeeper refused to listen to them. A heated argument ensued, with the youth trying to defend themselves, while sheltering the real panhandler from the wrath of the storekeeper. The storekeeper threatened to call the police. Frustrated the friends left saying they would go elsewhere to shop. After the friends left the storekeeper noticed the panhandler, still standing there. Angry, the storekeeper knocked money from the panhandler's hands and returned into the store to call the police. The scene ended with the panhandler left picking up his coins from the ground.

While we never did get to present our scene to an audience of other inmates as we had hoped to, we did discuss the intentions behind Forum theatre – a form that presents a "problem" scene and looks for alternatives. As a group we practiced some interventions looking for solutions. We did perform the scene once to be vetted by an audience of staff and administrators. The youth were very excited to perform – nervous beforehand, but very willing, and afterwards elated by the performance rush, their achievement and the opportunity to have spoken out. The audience was impressed by the youths' performance skills and the emotional reality they were able to portray. The level of emotional reality achieved, was, of course, precisely because the content was based on the youths' actual lived experiences. The audience also commented on the compassion the youth characters showed towards the panhandler.

While we were granted permission to show the scene to other inmates, logistical constraints ultimately prevented us from doing so. Just at that time two of our actors were released. We recast and rehearsed the scene again, but could not achieve the same level of performance, and by then the youth had become tired of the scene, so we let it go. Unfortunately, an excellent opportunity for further discussion of the issues with peers was missed. Nevertheless, the performance did allow the administrators and staff in attendance to see the youth differently – as active, productive and emotional individuals. It gave the youth an opportunity to express their ideas, gaining agency and empowerment in the process.

The following two quotes by youth participants about our drama work hint at the transformative potential such drama-based work might have. For a CBC radio interview about the research, a producer visited us at the jail to record some of our interactions. In a discussion we were having at the time about the drama work generally, one boy said, "It's all about decisions. One little measly decision will change your life totally, completely turn it right around, turn it upside down" (MacQuarrie, 2007). Clearly, the youth had gained insights from the activity that he could apply to his life.

On another occasion, a journalist from a local newspaper visited us at the jail for an article he was writing about the research. In the article he quoted one of the youth

saying that the drama process "helps me to come out of my shoes, so I can look at myself" (Gerin, 2007, par 12). It is such relevant and imaginative educational opportunities that are needed to help youth make sense of their life experiences and look for alternatives.

Restorative alternatives to punishment and retribution

We should not wait until youth have committed crimes and are incarcerated to offer them support and appropriate programming. Schools are places where meaningful interactions with youth can and should occur, but, instead, schools can be like prisons for some youth (Herr & Anderson, 2003). Zero tolerance policies and the three strikes approaches (Tibbetts, 2006) are destructive in that they blame, stigmatize and exclude individuals, pushing the marginalized even further to the margins (Giroux, 2003; Williams, 2005). As Fine and Smith (2001) suggest, "ideologically, [zero tolerance] is part of a larger political project of 'accountability,' in which youth . . . are held accountable for a nation that has placed them 'at risk.' Systematically denied equal developmental opportunities, they are pathologized, placed under surveillance, and increasingly criminalized" (p. 257). Rather than zero tolerance we need to offer troubled youth multiple chances, infinite patience and unconditional caring in order to bring offenders back into the community. "Zero tolerance policies should be replaced by extreme-tolerance policies in which we seek to understand inappropriate behaviour and how the dynamics of the school play a significant role in modelling acceptable problem-solving" (Scherz, 2006, p. 106).

An approach that is emerging as an alternative to punitive or retributive responses to offending behaviour, in schools, in communities and within the criminal justice system, is *restorative justice* (Cormier, 2002; Karp & Breslin, 2001; Morrison, 2007; Sharpe, 1998). Amazing experiences of love, forgiveness and hope have ensued when victims and offenders have come together to undertake restorative processes in response to incidents of even the most violent crime – for example, the story told by Katy Hutchison (Squamish, BC) of reconciliation with Ryan Aldridge, who as a youth, killed her husband (Katy Hutchison, 2008); or the story of Reena Virk's parents (Victoria, BC) who embraced Warren Glowatski, one of the youth convicted of their daughter's murder (Canadian Press, 2007).

Restorative justice holds offenders directly responsible to their victims and to the community through face-to-face meetings, dialogue and community-based resolutions. Such alternatives benefit both the victims and offenders. Restorative processes nurture love, forgiveness and hope, which, rather than punishment and retribution, we should teach our young in order to help them learn to love, to forgive and be hopeful.

Restorative approaches draw on the capacity that human beings have for compassion, caring and community response. Imagine a society that emphasized these instead of individualism, competition and consumption. Restorative justice is already proving a more effective way of addressing youth crime than the punitive "get tough on crime" approach (Braithwaite, 2001, 2002; Doob & Cesaroni, 2004).

As the plight of our young people today shows, our society is in need of change – towards a more positive and nurturing social environment for our young. A communications officer from the Alberta Office of the Solicitor General who once visited our drama session commented that he was surprised to see the youth so willing to participate, so engaged (Tim Chander, personal communication April 17, 2007). I know it

is possible to engage youth, even those deemed to be at high risk, in meaningful learning and personal development if we make the effort to create an environment that truly respects and acknowledges them.

Conclusion

In this article I discussed my three year study using participatory drama with incarcerated youth focusing on the possibilities for creating transformative educational spaces in a setting that is highly institutionalized. I used an example from my study using to illustrate the potential for engaging youth in meaningful opportunities for personal development, with implications for social transformation.

This study highlights the systemic racism in our society and our justice system that accounts for the disproportionate incarceration rates for Aboriginal youth, which urgently demands attention. The study suggests the need for more appropriate intervention-focused programming for incarcerated youth founded on attitudes caring and compassion to better meet youths' needs; as well as the need to re-think the current punitive or retributive methods of justice towards more restorative approaches.

Let's not give up on our youth. Let's not lock 'em up and throw away the key. Our collective challenge is to reclaim our responsibility to our young citizens.

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