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Embodied Voices: Using Applied Theatre for Co-Creation with Marginalised Youth

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Abstract

In this article we take a strength-based approach to understand how Applied Theatre as a vehicle, provides opportunities for embodied voices to have a positive influence on the wellbeing, and attitudes to health, of young people who have been 'pushed' to the margins. We begin by explaining the concepts of wellbeing, embodiment and embodied voices, and Applied Theatre, followed by an example of practice from Canada with Indigenous youth to illustrate these concepts, and finally present some recommendations for professionals using Applied Theatre for co-creation with 'marginalised' youth for their wellbeing.

Key Words

Marginalised youth, Indigenous youth, voice, embodied, applied theatre, wellbeing

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Embodied Voices: Using Applied Theatre for Co-Creation with Marginalised Youth

In this article we take a strength-based approach to understand how Applied Theatre as a vehicle, provides opportunities for embodied voices to have a positive influence on the wellbeing, and attitudes to health, of young people who have been ‘pushed’ to the margins. We begin by explaining the concepts of wellbeing, embodiment and embodied voices, and Applied Theatre, followed by an example of practice, and preliminary data, from Canada with Indigenous youth to illustrate these concepts, and finally present some recommendations for professionals using Applied Theatre for co-creation with ‘marginalised’ youth for their wellbeing.

Wellbeing

Before looking at practice that can influence wellbeing it is important to understand what we mean by wellbeing. This is especially the case as a systematic literature review found that wellbeing has not been defined clearly. Several dimensions, such as emotional and psychological wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing, physical wellbeing and social wellbeing have been used in literature when referring to wellbeing (Toma, Morris, Kelly, and Jindal-Snape, 2014). Wellbeing is also used interchangeably with terms such as, happiness, quality of life and flourishing (Statham and Chase, 2010). On the other hand, McLellan, Galton, Steward and Page (2012) have summarised four approaches to conceptualising subjective wellbeing; Hedonic Approach (affect and life satisfaction), Eudaimonic Approach (personal growth, development, self-actualisation and motivation), Social Approach (social integration, contribution, coherence and acceptance) and Capability Approach (bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, affiliation, control over environment, etc.). Another approach was taken by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) (2010) when it designed The Social-Emotional Wellbeing (SEW) Survey. This survey takes a strength-based approach and adopts an ecological view of children and young people’s wellbeing and assesses seven components; three external components of school life, home life and community life; and four internal components of resilience, positive social skills, positive work management and engagement skills. Other constructs that have been seen to indicate wellbeing, or are seen to be leading to wellbeing, include enjoyment, absence of stress or anxiety, self-esteem, self-worth, confidence, empowerment and voice (Jindal-Snape, Scott, and Davies, 2014). Wellbeing is a term being used more frequently in conceptualizations of health to portray the idea that an ideal state of health refers to a holistic understanding rather than mere physical absence of disease. Therefore, in this paper we see wellbeing as a holistic state of being characterized by the aforementioned dimensions of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual life realms that include our relationships, environments, and arts.

The case study we are focusing is situated in an Indigenous community in Canada. Indigenous perspectives differ from definitions from modern Western medicine. Perspectives on health and wellbeing from within Indigenous communities often make reference to the inter-relatedness of all things (Robbins and Dewar, 2011). Arvol Looking Horse (2009) highlights that Indigenous health perspectives ‘view the earth as a ‘source’ of life rather than a ‘re-source’’. While recognizing the benefits of other approaches to health and healing, many Indigenous viewpoints recognize the benefits of healing practices that predate the spread of western scientific views of health (RCAP, 1996). Within Indigenous communities, links to

ancestral knowledge, traditional systems of health and healing and local contexts provide approaches to living in a good way and maintaining health.

Impact of Arts on Wellbeing

Four systematic literature reviews were undertaken to understand the impact of creativity and arts on wellbeing (Davies, Jindal-Snape, Collier, Digby, Hay, and Howe, 2012; Jindal-Snape, Scott, and Davies, 2014; Levy, Kroll, and Jindal-Snape, 2014; Toma, Morris, Kelly, and Jindal-Snape, 2014). Although the quality and rigour of evidence across the studies were variable, there was evidence that suggests that arts and creative approaches can lead to increased levels of motivation and engagement (Craft, Chappell, and Twining, 2008), improvement in academic achievement (Schacter, Thum, and Zifkin, 2006), increased levels of confidence and imagination associated with creative environments (Galton, 2010), enhanced ability to face challenges (Galton, 2010), increases in resilience (Bancroft, Fawcett, and Hay, 2008), enhancement of emotional development and social skills (Bancroft et al., 2008; Galton, 2010), and positive impact on health and wellbeing irrespective of age (Davies, Jindal-Snape, Collier, Digby, Hay, and Howe, 2012; Jindal-Snape et al., 2014; Toma et al., 2014). They can also enhance the young person's self-esteem, resilience, emotional intelligence and agency (Jindal-Snape, 2012).

This impact was also seen on children and young people who might be marginalised. For example, Marsh (2012) looked at the role of arts and creativity, specifically music, in refugee and newly arrived immigrant children and adolescents' lives within a range of extracurricular school, home and community contexts in Australia. He suggests that the music project contributed to fostering social and group cohesion and helped overcome perceived separation and marginalisation. Similarly, Barrett and Baker (2012) found that young offenders who participated in the Australian Children's Music Foundation's (ACMF) 'Youth at Risk' music initiative developed transferable skills. Wood, Ivery, Donovan and Lambin (2013) also reported positive impacts on young people 'at-risk' who participated in a drumming project. Professionals in the Wood et al. study highlighted positive changes in behaviour, outlook on future opportunities, a willingness to learn and follow instructions, confidence, interactions with others, a sense of pride and belonging, group cohesion, improved communication skills, all seen as important for their life transitions. The benefits of arts experiences with youth 'at risk' are also argued by O'Connor (2008) in New Zealand and Conrad (2004) in Canada. Nadeau and Young (2006) used traditional and contemporary art forms like drumming, singing, dance, and drawing to reconnect Indigenous women internally and externally with others and the world around them to enhance the spiritual health of participants.

More specifically in the context of this paper, Daykin, Orme, Evans, Salmon, McEachran and Brain (2008) undertook a systematic review of performing arts such as drama and found that they had a positive impact on the engagement with peers, social skills, understanding of, and attitudes towards, risky behaviours. Using a quasi-experimental longitudinal design, Joronen, Konu, Rankin and Astedt-Kurki (2012) reported results that tested the effect of a school-based drama programme on the social and emotional wellbeing of primary school children. Intervention comprised of drama stories, home activities, interactional tasks between parent and the child, and parents' evenings. The results suggest that drama had the potential of improving social wellbeing at school compared to usual schooling alone. Teachers reported that students' empathy with others had improved, with lower levels of antisocial behaviour, whereas children described an improvement in their social relationships and less experience of bullying and victimisation.

Jindal-Snape (2012) argues that arts and creative approaches have an impact on children and young people's wellbeing by providing them with an opportunity to express themselves in ways meaningful to them and have a real voice. The arts, including creative drama, enable a dialogic dance to occur between mind and body; a socially constructed process that creates moments of insight that are both cognitively and physically experienced. In this way, the arts enable embodied knowing and the space to verbally and physically give voice. Next, we will discuss embodiment and its role in providing young people a voice.

Embodiment

Embodiment as a concept centres on how we understand the world around us through our physical being (Finlay, 2005; Varela, Rosch, and Thompson, 1995). Finlay (2005) defines the ability to understand the physical world as being integrally linked to the fact that we are physical beings. Our bodies operate within a cultural and social context that influences the way we manipulate objects, share ideas, aesthetically appreciate the world through our senses and so on. This understanding is shaped by the way we think and how we put those thoughts into action. This would indicate embodiment as a process or activity. Varela et al (1995) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999) suggest that this is embodied action; knowing the world through our biological, physical and cognitive structures.

Lakoff and Johnson (1999) suggest three levels at which embodiment occurs:

- The neural level – involving the circuitry in our bodies, the sensory and motor processes that carry information throughout our systems
- The phenomenological level – every experience we have, everything that we are aware of is influenced by the actions we take
- The cognitive unconscious level – those processes and connections that we are unaware of consciously but which enable us to understand and make conscious our experiences

All three levels are in operation and all interconnect and overlap generating within an individual the ability to *know how* to take action in a given situation. Varela et al. (1995) give a useful example of this when discussing how ideas are received and understood by a 'perceiver'. When the perceiver experiences an event, at the neural and cognitive unconscious levels, information processing occurs as connections are attempted to bring to consciousness existing schema to enable our existing knowledge of the world to be used as a departure ground from which to make sense of the experience. At a phenomenological level, the perceiver is experiencing an action within their own context or sphere of reference, i.e., what directly concerns them at the time of the action. They embody their experiences and guide subsequent action as their understanding of the event unfolds. In other words, we work reflexively through our bodies; what Finlay (2005) terms 'corporeal reflexivity' (272) in order to move forward in our understanding of the world around us and also of ourselves.

Linds (2006) defines embodied knowing as a body-mind connection, where the individual is aware of cognitive processes made manifest through the physicality of their actions. For example, a commonly heard phrase is 'I could feel something was wrong'; the knowledge is embodied and manifests as a physical feeling. This mind-body connection can be made visible to the world through embodied action. In its simplest form, we know this as body language – the messages that we give the world through the way we hold ourselves in any given situation. Our bodies process the experiences (emotions, thoughts, feelings) that we

have and transmit the outcome through our physical interaction with those around us. In this way, we can give our thoughts and feelings a non-verbal voice; an embodied voice. When working with young people, embodied knowledge is created through the body-mind connection of each individual and how they are processing the experiences they are having through their bodies in interaction with others and the social and physical space. Learning is co-created through corporeal connection, how others react to and mirror others' actions enables new knowledge to be created and shared. Facilitating these experiences can enable young people to give an embodied voice to their individual and shared experiences. This voice can include verbal and non-verbal actions but it is the importance of the message being transmitted through embodied action that gives power to the young people's embodied voice. This form of message transmission can be created through the physicality offered by theatre processes and, in particular, applied theatre forms.

Applied Theatre

Applied Theatre is a somewhat contentious term, given the wide range of practices and contexts in which it is practiced. The Applied Theatre Researcher journal defines applied theatre as 'theatre and drama in non-traditional contexts.'

Thompson (2003) further suggests that 'Applied theatre can cast a wide net.... The metaphor of the net is deliberate, in that applied theatre brings together related fields as much as it constitutes its own' (14). The specific features Thompson identifies are that projects always take place in communities, in institutions or with specific groups, they often include the practice of theatre where it is least expected and is a participatory theatre created by people who would not usually make theatre. He adds that through theatrical means participants make and remake their lives, telling and retelling stories to enable people to rehearse changes in their lives in a safe space that they then make take outside that space into their day-to-day lives.

For the purposes of this paper, we contextualize Applied Theatre in our work with marginalized youth, and define it as a process that enables participants to story and re-story their experiences in the world through theatrical means, including theatre games and devised plays. In Applied Theatre work, theatrical processes enable spaces for embodied reflection to occur for both participants and facilitator. This is often an unconscious process for all, allowing individuals to be alive to changes needed in the moment through feeling and not just thinking. The process arises through their need to engage bodily with character and role; theirs and others (Beirne and Knight, 2007), thereby providing opportunities for embodied voice.

To understand how Applied Theatre can have an impact on young people, let us consider Boal's (1995) 'metaxis', which can be defined as the experience of belonging to two worlds simultaneously; the real, physical world and an alternative and fictive reality created by being able to see oneself as both character and actor (Boal, 1995; Vettraino and Linds, 2015). This space between and betwixt (Linds, 2006) is a transitional place where reflective and reflexive stories and narratives emerge, evolving from instant reactions to stimuli around us. In moments of transition, stories are often told in order to enable smooth passage between experiences (Gersie and King, 1990); metaphorical or analogical bootstrapping occurs as we seek to link one unknown or unfamiliar moment to another (Gentner, 2010). In a similar vein, metaxic action takes place in the space between experiences, potentially within multiple stories told in order to move the individual from where they were before that reflective moment, to where they need to be, thereby providing an opportunity to involve young people

in co-creation of their own narratives to bring about change. Collier (2010) refers to metaxis as self-spectating, drawing on the work of dramatist Bolton (Davis, 2010) and arguing that it is possible for someone to be both creator and audience of their own reflexive process. She considers reflection through a dramaturgical lens, describing a view of individuals as spectators in their own storyworlds, watching action unfold in their lives and influencing changes as a result. Thus, the stories are not created by others, but co-created by the young people ‘from their own desires, delights or inspiration’ (Thompson, 2009, 159).

Creating transformational possibilities in co-creation with marginalised youth

To illustrate the transformational potential of the co-creation of embodied storytelling, we draw in general from our experiences working with youth and specifically from one workshop¹ conducted with Indigenous youth in northern Canada. In our workshops, trust is developed, enabling the development of voice, and the sharing of power that enables a specific group of young people who have been pushed to the margins, i.e., Indigenous youth in Canada, to express themselves. In referencing our work with Indigenous youth, it is first important to explore their context because current Indigenous realities are impacted by the history and current processes of colonialism and ongoing racism, and their relationship to the work being described.

Contextualising the Work

The Applied Theatre work we will describe took place in a First Nations run high school in Canada. The term ‘First Nations’ refers to people registered under the Indian Act of Canada. ‘Indigenous’ is the inclusive term from the Constitution Act, 1982 that refers to registered Indians, Métis, and Inuit. First Nations people live both on and off reserve. Reserves are tracts of land governed under treaties with the Crown. We also use the term ‘Indigenous’ in our work to refer to a collective of distinct cultural groups worldwide that have experienced the damaging processes of colonization. Note that in the literature, both Indigenous and First Nations are used interchangeably so we have respected the original language in the literature where required.

Despite significant progress achieved in the last few decades, Indigenous people remain among the most vulnerable segments of the Canadian population (Garner et al., 2010; Waldram, Herring, and Young, 2007). The health and wellbeing of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples are still significantly lower than that of the remaining Canadians (Carrière et al., 2010; Health Canada, 2009; Smylie, 2009; Tjepkema and Wilkins, 2011; White, Beavon, and Spence, 2007). The health of Indigenous youth living on and off-reserve is particularly worrisome (e.g., First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2012).

The picture is particularly difficult for Indigenous youth who live in remote or rural areas. Not only is access to health services challenging in such areas, but Indigenous youth were found to be in poorer health, proportionally, than their non-Indigenous counterparts. In northern Saskatchewan, where the case study workshop occurred and where we worked for 3 years with a high school, large health inequities exist.

After an exhaustive review of extant literature of Indigenous health research, Young (2003) concluded that researchers in Canada have not adequately addressed important needs of the

Indigenous population in regard to health. Little attention has been paid to upstream health interventions (i.e., that target the root causes of health disparities at the population level - Gehlert et al., 2008), using approaches that involve wellness and wellbeing, which are distinct from the conventional medical model. These research gaps are particularly flagrant in regard to Indigenous youth health research.

Wellbeing in Indigenous Communities

A study of community healing programmes (where efforts are made to restore language, spiritual and communal practices) in Canadian Indigenous communities (Archibald and Dewar, 2010) concluded that there was ‘compelling evidence that creative arts, culture, and healing are linked — to each other, certainly, and also linked to the idea that, when given the freedom to choose, community based healing programs overwhelmingly include creative arts. They note that a ‘study of 103 projects with promising healing practices found that more than 80% included cultural activities and traditional healing interventions (Castellano, 2006)’ (4).

Such a strength-based approach to Indigenous youth wellbeing shifts the perceived deficits away from the individual and allows the practitioners to focus on the strength and resilience that many of these youth have demonstrated in the face of colonization. (Snowshoe, Crooks, Tremblay, and Craig, 2015).

Indigenous Knowledge’s key aspects are that it is based in on holism and relationality (Hart, 2007; Kovach, 2010; Wilson, 2008) rather than separating parts and dividing knowledge into disciplines (Hart, 2007; Swanson, 2003). It emerges from our relationships and how we relate to things and ideas and how we situate them relative to one another. Through this approach artistic endeavours are recognized as parts of life that promote and sustain health and wellness. The arts are how we learn about, come to terms with, and express our identities, emotions, thoughts, and spiritualities (Nadeau and Young, 2006) and both transmit traditional knowledge and promote embodied healing. In Archibald and Dewar’s (2010) study on the use of the creative arts in Indigenous healing programs in Canada that ‘holistic healing includes creative arts’ (6). This theme conveys ‘the interrelatedness of creative arts, culture, and traditional healing and is consistent with holistic worldviews that stress balance, harmony, and connectedness’ (6).

However, when working with any young person, cultural safety, or the notion of ‘actions which recognize, respect and nurture (...) the unique cultural identity of (...) [a given people], and safely meet their needs, expectations and rights’ (Wood and Schwass, 1993, cited in Polaschek, 1998, 453), has long been acknowledged as a critical factor in health practice concerning Indigenous peoples (Smye and Browne, 2002). Kirmayer (2012) notes that ‘culture influences the (...) response to health promotion, prevention or treatment interventions’ (149). Rigby, Duffy, Manners, Latham, Lyons, and colleagues (2010) found that the provision of culturally safe spaces significantly improved the delivery of health education programmes, and suggested that such improvement would likely bring positive health outcomes in regard to the overall health status of Indigenous populations. Ramsden (2001, 2002) and Eckermann, Dowd, Chong, Nixon, Gray, and colleagues (2006), point out that the awareness of, and respect for, cultural differences are fundamental to cultural safety. Therefore, when working with Indigenous youth using arts-based approaches, it is important to recognise cultural safety as a key variable in health research and practice with Indigenous populations (Goulet et al., 2010, 2011; Linds et al., 2010; Ribeiro et al., 2012, 2012a). Nonetheless, wide gaps exist in the Indigenous youth literature concerning the provision of

culturally safe spaces in the context of developing wellbeing, and few, if any, studies have looked into the benefits that can be accrued through arts-based methodologies as a means of breaking down cultural barriers; for example, between different cultures within Indigenous communities.

Transformational workshops

Acting out! But in a good way refers to a research project where a group of Canadian Indigenous and settler scholars² have engaged in a decade long collaborative research partnership with a Tribal Council of First Nations¹ in southern Saskatchewan, and a First Nation in the north of the province. In the partnership the arts is used to develop participants' relationships in the physical, intellectual, social/emotional, and spiritual domains, in accordance with an Indigenous holistic view of health and wellbeing. The 'Theatre of the Oppressed' (Boal, 1979; Diamond, 2007) workshops were adapted for Indigenous youth. Through applied theatre techniques involving theatre games, the youth engaged in embodied reflexivity; connecting mind and body to create and explore how the choices they make affect their wellbeing to create imaginative 'blueprints' for possible future choices.

The methodological framework adopted for this study has been a combination of community based participatory research (CBPR – Minkler and Wallerstein, 2011; St. Denis, 1992) and theatre action research (Thompson, 2003). CBPR draws on existing knowledge in a given community, in order to solve a particular problem afflicting the community. It calls for direct involvement and input by the community under research, as well as a close and equitable relationship between researchers, participants, and community. Given that CBPR's ultimate goal is to 'influence change in community health, systems, programs, or policies' (Wallerstein, 2002), it has been particularly well-suited for research with marginalized youth, such as Indigenous people (Minkler and Wallerstein, 2011). Theatre action research has involved theatre-based workshops to Indigenous youth, which foster youth leadership, resilience, and healthy decision-making (Ball, 1994; Goulet et al., 2011; Linds et al., 2010).

The scholars, who are all researchers/practitioners in that they facilitate the workshops as well as use the workshops as the medium and methodology of research, use a participatory approach which uses artistic tools and processes and artistic expression as a way to understand, enhance, and explore individual and collective experiences (Jones et al, 2008; McNiff, 2008, Knowles and Cole, 2008). This involves exploring relationships through the arts where the arts are both a research method and a program that develops wellbeing. For instance, the Maori educator Russell Bishop (2008) identifies *Whakawhanaungatanga* as a Maori research approach that identifies, 'through culturally appropriate means, your bodily linkage, your engagement, and, therefore, an unspoken but implicit commitment to other people' (157-158). Similar to the earlier discussion related to embodiment, the Hawai'ain Manulani Meyer (2008) writes that the 'body is the central space in which knowing is embedded' (223) and 'knowing is embodied and in union with cognition' (224). Thus, arts-based methods, such as applied theatre, have been increasingly used to study a variety of health issues and behaviours, with great success (Rossiter, Kontos, Colantonio, Gilbert, Gray, et al., 2008, Skingley, Bungay and Clift, 2011).

The indigenous young people in this case study were involved in developing wellbeing-related leadership skills through drama workshops (e.g., Goulet, Linds, Episkenew, and Schmidt, 2011; Goulet, Episkenew, Linds and Arnason, 2010; Linds, Yuen, Goulet, Episkenew, and Arnason, 2010). As can be seen from the example of workshop given below, these workshops provided a culturally safe space for Indigenous youth where indigenous beliefs and practices were valued (Anderson, Perry, Blue, Browne, Henderson, et al., 2003; Chandler and Lalonde, 1998; Coffin, 2007; McCormick, 2000; Smye and Brown, 2002). Moreover, these workshops allowed participating Indigenous youth to reflect on health behaviours, social-determinants of health, and healthy decision-making (Goulet et al., 2011; Goulet et al., 2010; Linds et al., 2010). themselves.

Overview of our Workshops

The arts-based workshops being focused on in this article has involved intensive experiences that introduced the rudiments of Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (1979) process using a graduated sequence of basic acting games, image-making exercises and scene improvisations. An elder from the community begins each day of the workshop with a prayer and talks about the traditional values of the community that are then incorporated into the norms of the workshop. Along with these norms of respect, the facilitators encourage equity among participants and the research team by starting and ending each day with talking circles and a circle formation is often used to debrief games and activities.

As leadership and the collective production of knowledge are main aspects in the process of the research, agency becomes a critical component of the workshop. Agency is an individual's and group's expression of self-determination and might be one way to approach wellbeing through 'alternative ways of seeing and living in the world' (Brydon and Tiffin, 1993, 11). The process creates trust, develops awareness of what it means to make moment to moment decisions, and promotes reliance on peers to make informed decisions. Such decision-making can only be made if we become aware of what is around us. So Boal's (1992) formulation of seeing what we look at, listening to what we hear, and feeling what we touch is used to activate the senses and develop teamwork and communication. For example, 'Blind' games help develop trust as participants close their eyes and move around the room. Participating in games helps young people express their ideas and feelings, develop group cohesion, and encourage trust, bringing together those who do not normally associate with one another, either in school or in the community.

Trust and group building games also establish a relationship with the young people and sets the tone for the remainder of the time (including subsequent workshops) working with them. These games build a sense of common purpose while unlocking issues affecting wellbeing that the group is investigating. The young people are then asked to share and develop stories about their wellbeing and the health and wellbeing of their communities through Image Theatre and through short plays, constituting rich data which, along with observations and interviews has been subsequently analyzed by the researchers.

Acting Out! But in a Good Way

In 2015, a three day theatre workshop was conducted in a northern First Nation community in Saskatchewan. Theatre games were played and Image Theatre, where stories were told through frozen 'photographs' using bodies in relationship, was created by the young people, who were aged between 12-16 years old. The purpose of the workshop was to explore how and why we make decisions that affect our health and wellbeing.

The research project had a research agreement with the First Nation. The research project hired a community research associate (CRA), who was from the First Nation and a qualified teacher, who worked as part of the school team. The workshop information was sent to the school administrator who was enthusiastic about the workshop. The CRA presented information to the grades 7 & 8 class, explained the ethics of participation, and obtained consent forms from parents of those students who volunteered to participate. The administration also identified a male and a female Elder to participate in the workshop. In addition to saying prayers in the language of the community, the Elders shared their knowledge of healthy living (life on the land) and the values to live by.

The following represents preliminary data from this workshop.

The workshop took place in a school included twenty-nine students³ from grades 7 and 8. Facilitators/researchers included the CRA, a mix of First Nations and Settler researchers and research assistants from the university. Interviews with 13 of the youth during the last day and a video recording of parts of the workshop were sources of information from the youth. Observational field notes taken by six facilitator/researchers during the workshop as well as minutes of debriefing meetings after every day provided data from the adults. The following represents a preliminary analysis of the data.

The CRA who was working with the project by teaching arts and drama classes reflected after the first day,

‘This [workshop] is allowing students to finally let down their guards and just be kids despite all the difficulties, struggle, and odds that are stacked up against them.’ (Debriefing notes, January 27, 2015).

After the second day, the research team reflected that the young people had seemed to find an outlet for their energy and that this ‘outlet seems vital since they are expressing the energy instead of projecting it into resistance’ (Debriefing notes, January 27, 2015).

An example of this was the game Wizards, Giants and Elves (Johnston, 1998), which is an embodied version of Rock, Paper, Scissors where two groups do the motions of one of the three characters and then one group chases the other group if their character has more power than the other group’s character (Wizards overcome Giants; Giants overcome Elves; Elves overcome Wizards). The game involves collaboration within each group along with competition with the other group as well as improvised actions. This is an example of what we term ‘collaborative competition’, where collaboration replaces in the game youth-youth power dynamics with community dynamics within each group playing the game. This game illustrates how playing it enables the young people to channel their energy outward.

Another aspect of the workshop that was evident was that the structuring of activity from less risky to more risky, and the dynamics of each activity where the youth decided on the safety of the game by how they participated in it meant that the barrier of the institutional culture of the classroom was being broken down. In addition, the presence of an elder in the workshop

meant that the workshop was grounded in Indigenous spirituality and culture. One reflection the research team had after the three day workshop was that this grounding was hard to define, but it was thought that it brought ‘a new level to the work; they bring spirituality to the space that changes the energy.... The spiritual presence makes the education so much more meaningful’ (Debriefing notes, January 28, 2015).

What Emerges

The meaning created therefore emerges *through* the theatre games as they create a culturally safe space; a necessary condition for the sharing of stories and embodied action. Diamond (2007), who has applied Boal’s methods as *Theatre for Living*, points out that the games used in a workshop are not just warm-ups or icebreakers, they enable the development, in small ways, of trust and group cohesion. They contain through their embodiment the stories of the participants and also enable these stories to emerge: ‘each person will experience them privately, filtering the game through their own life experiences’ (91) and in often surprising ways, ‘unlock access to the issues the group wants to investigate’ (91).

The workshop was filmed and for this article, one small segment of the video was viewed and transcribed. One of the beginning exercises in the workshop, a game called *See-Saw* (Boal, 1992) which involves pairs facing each other, holding arms and, while bracing each other feet to feet, one rises as the other stays seated, and then lowers as the other rises. This was part of a series called *Pushing against each other* was used to introduce participants to improvisation and the essence of theatre -- the push and pull of emotions and strategies. This is the exercise we refer to in the following analysis. Colonization has ‘fractured’ relationships among First Nations (Brendtro, Brokenleg, & Van Bockern, 1998). So one aspect of creating a culturally safe space is the restoration of positive relationships through these type of games.

An elder from the First Nations community attended the workshop. She does not speak English as her first language but expressed her view of the effect of the interactive embodiment of drama games, including the *See Saw* on the creation of positive interactive relationships that create safe space:

Drama is a very good idea because then they think it's a game, like it's a game for them and same time, they're learning a lot of things, like for instance, body contacts, like the hands --like this morning where they pushed back to back, when they pushed, you know, the contact of that is so safe, I'll say because, you know, there is nothing in their minds other than doing what they're supposed to do. Where so many times, I see young people thinking different, you know, because of the knowledge they have so early in life from learning it from elsewhere, TV, I don't know. But you know what I'm getting at is the kids learning the -- had learned these things and, you know, practising even, you know, the stuff. And, but today, well this drama group where they -- it's really nice and it's also showing -- teaching the kids to respect (Cree Elder reflecting on an Applied Theatre Workshop, January 29, 2015).

One of the student participants in the workshop also commented on how games break down barriers to embodied interaction between boys and girls.

You know how like a boy doesn't want to hold a girl's hand or a girl doesn't want to hold a boy's hand or anything, yeah, but we just did it

anyways for the game. We don't really notice after a while and we just go ahead and do that (Male student, participant in the same workshop, January 29, 2015).

Similarly, as researchers, when we viewed and transcribed what happened in the *See Saw* game, we noticed that one male student saw this game as a challenge. It required him to cooperate with his partner (a girl about the same age and size) and balance with each other so that they could accomplish the task. Together they had to coordinate their bodies to co-create actions that would lead to success. Over and over they did it again and again (his partner was out of the frame so we could not see her expression). Each time they were able to rise up to standing from the crouched position he looked over at the facilitator with a big smile on his face. His expression conveying a sense that together they were performing a magical act of great import. After watching the roughly one minute we concluded that this was about 'engagement with another person and the environment: simple pride' (Research notes, June, 2015) in accomplishing a challenging task.

Preliminary data from several research workshops indicate that the workshops have been successful in affecting Indigenous youth's health decision-making (e.g., Ribeiro, Episkenew, Linds, Goulet, Ritenburg, et al., 2012, 2012a). Similar to the results of Archibald and Dewar's (2010) study of healing and creative expression, an analysis of the interviews showed that the worked developed the importance of healthy relationships, enabled expression of positive feelings, improved self-image, developed leadership skills and developed participants' awareness of the connections between communication through drama and healthy relationships. As one youth shared,

You get to meet those people and say like just have fun. Just not shy or anything, just having fun with a big group of people, you know. No people there judging you. (Male Youth Participant, January 29, 2015)

In response to a question about how the workshop affected their relationships with others, one youth stated,

[It] mademefeelconfidence (sic) inmyself.Mademefeelstronger. (Female Youth Participant, January 30, 2015)

Another added that it had an unanticipated wider effect on family as they had gone home and

took some of the games and activities you showed us to my nieces and nephews and they found it enjoyable (Male Youth Participant, January 30, 2015)

This confirms the data from other workshops during our project where we have found that the arts affect self-esteem, reduced stress, fostered openness and creativity and enhanced youth's ability for self-expression, among other results. Through interviews with youth participants and adult facilitators in our workshops we have heard that the activities involved in applied theatre workshops were not just fun – they had a greater significance, in that they build trust, enabling the development of voice, and the sharing of power. In addition, the workshops also connected youth to elders and cultural practices; they told us that these connections were also ways to learn about themselves. As one youth shared in response to a question about how the workshop showed the initial steps to forming relationships and was connected to cultural practices

thesharingcircle... howtoconnectwithpeople,makecontact. (Male Youth participant, January 30, 2015).

Conclusion

Previous research and what was presented here suggests that creative arts approaches can be beneficial in increasing a range of emotional and social wellbeing factors in young people. Evidence would indicate that among the benefits of using the arts as an underpinning philosophy in working with young people is that there are increased levels of motivation, sense of self-efficacy and achievement, an enhanced ability to cope with diversity, uncertainty and change, as well as the enhancement of social skills and emotional development.

Also highlighted in this paper are the benefits of working with the arts in contexts where young people have been marginalised. When defining marginalised youth, the authors have adopted a broad definition of those young people who could be classed as ‘marginalised’ because of cultural, gender, race, religious, social and other factors. In particular, the arts have been shown to improve the ability for some marginalised young people to form stronger social and group bonds, to identify with positive outlooks for future opportunities, and find communication and interaction with others easier.

Whilst covering a broad range of visual, aural, oral and performative activities, the authors have focused on the benefits of working with applied theatre methodology to engage marginalised young people in embodied processing of their experiences and stories. Applied Theatre and drama offer a way of exploring self through an aesthetic process that is both cognitive and embodied. Through a comprehensive exploration of a long term study with some Indigenous communities in Saskatchewan, Canada, the authors have examined the benefits of applied theatre techniques as a way of giving an embodied and aesthetic space to young people to co-create stories about their choice making processes which they can then explore physically. In the co-creation and sharing, the young people were exploring felt or embodied ways of knowing, as they were physically enacting and living their own and each other’s experiences.

Applied theatre also offers a safe space in which young people can embody and reflect on their experiences within the construct of aesthetic distancing. Returning to the concept of metaxis (Boal, 1995) raised earlier in this paper, applied theatre offers the chance to both inhabit a different role whilst still being yourself and viewing the role from the outside – to be both actor and character. This form of aesthetic and embodied reflection creates chances to voice, both verbally and non-verbally, one’s feelings and thoughts without the need to publicly ‘own’ them.

Preliminary findings from this study appear to support the broader literature base around the arts as beneficial approaches to affecting positive change and behaviours around wellbeing. Findings from both the case study included in this paper and the broader scope of literature (Davies, Jindal-Snape, Digby, Howe, Collier and Hay, 2014) would indicate that facilitators working with young people would benefit from understanding and utilising the arts as a way of enabling openness and dialogue within marginalised communities and being ready to ‘let go of control’. However, both the study with Indigenous youth and the previous literature, also indicate important implications for undertaking embodied processes with marginalised youth in any context. The need for trust to be built and for the young people to be operating

in safe contexts is vital to ensuring that they feel able to contribute openly. As mentioned above, a safe space can be created to enable this openness but this has to be created and held by the facilitator.

This offers a second implication for practice which is the need to have trained facilitators with experience in theatre methods working with the professionals who are with the young people on a regular basis eg: teachers. Results from the Saskatchewan project indicated that the experience and engagement of the teachers in the work with the marginalised youth had an impact on the relationships built and sustained between them. Linds et al (2015) term this relationship, co-determination⁴; a working with and between rather than at or on another. The continuity of connection between facilitators and the young people was also pivotal to the learning process and this raises implications for teachers engaging in embodied work within classroom contexts where perhaps a number of different teachers work with a given group. Continuity avoids the concern of an initiative being ‘parachuted’ in to an already marginalised group which needs time and space to build relationships and trust. Further, the case study highlights the importance of partnership between not only professionals and young people, but also with the community.

However, there are challenges to the use of applied theatre when working with youth in communities where expectations for long term change are part of the purpose for engaging in the process. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that using theatre processes to affect a change in understanding about self and situation can have an immediate and apparently positive response (for example, Coetzee, 2009, Fels, 2009, 2012, Forgasz 2014), and programmes that have a defined time and space within which the participants’ experiences are given a voice can provide contained periods of engagement. Cognisance needs to be taken of the fact that young people come from and return to their own lives and communities, sometimes in chaotic fashion. The challenge of this form of ‘parachuting’ into and out of young people’s lives was something that the Acting Out team faced, supported in part by the trust placed by the youth involved in the link person (who was a health educator with the partnering organization) for the theatre team.

This highlights another challenge to this form of working which is about the place of the facilitator in the process. The act of facilitating an applied theatre process designed to create spaces for dialogue and change, is in itself creating a context within which power relationships will influence the learning (Dwyer, 2004; Fook and Gardner, 2007). The relationship among participants, between the facilitator and the group and between the facilitator and individuals within the group all create potential tension that can influence and define both the process and outcome of the work. Part of the construct of power in this form of process comes from our use of language and embodied expression, and the contextual power that gives individuals; and herein lies the benefit of using non-verbal forms of connection such as Image Theatre to explore meaning of their own stories through corporeal means. This enables youth to use their power to decide on the stories they would share and how they will share them and also gives those watching the power to make their own interpretations.

Taking this work forward, therefore, would require the following to be considered:

- Ensuring experienced facilitators of applied theatre were part of any project team in order to ensure safe spaces were constructed to enable the work to take place.
- Training of professionals working with the marginalised young people as part of the project would be beneficial to ensure the continuity of any project based work. This would also require engagement and a commitment to the longevity of any project process.

Our research has led us to conclude that a commitment to the arts as a fundamental and core process for developing wellness and wellbeing is necessary. This would mean professionals associated with any programmes or projects generated to explore embodied work with young people need see the arts as a philosophical underpinning, rather than as just an additional activity that can be inserted into any programme.

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END NOTES

^[1]<http://actingout.iphrc.ca> The workshop (which we refer to as Acting out!, But in a good way), is part of a larger initiative of arts based programming by that title that examines the connection between arts based programming and wellbeing in Indigenous youth.

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³ The workshop was part of a longer funded research project embedded in the school with a funded teacher/researcher who taught drama and other arts courses over a 2 year period. All participants and their parents/caregivers signed letters of consent. The youth who attended were part of this longer research /arts pedagogy class.

⁴Co-determination is a concept in English reflective of the Nehinuw (Cree) relational concepts of *weechiseechigemitowin*(alliances for common action) as well as *weechiyauguneetowin* (partnerships) first used by Cree scholar Keith Goulet to apply in educational contexts in a presentation in 2003. Also see Goulet & Goulet, 2014.

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