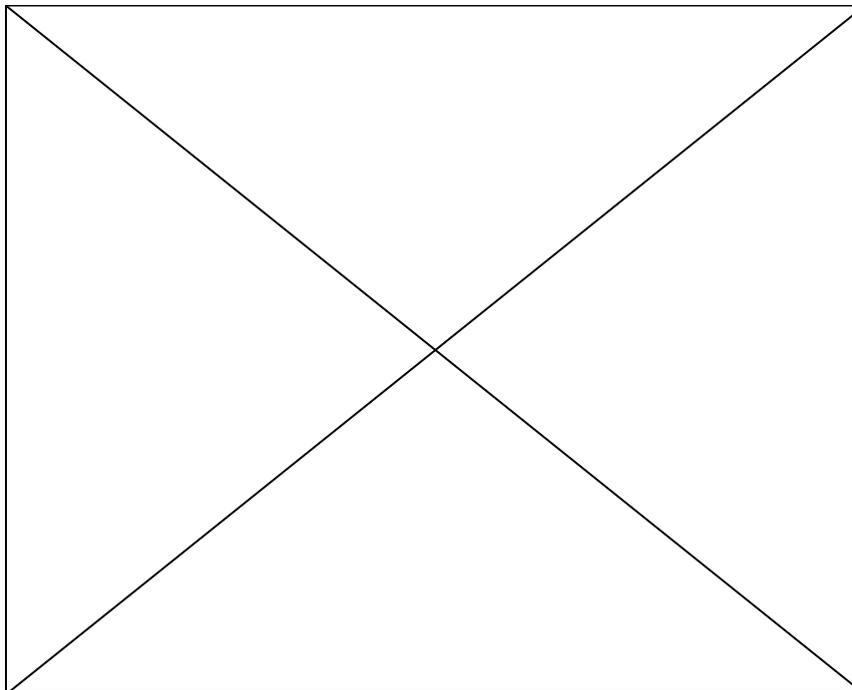


Break the Cycle: Report of a Project

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Introduction

The stage depicts a minimally furnished living room. On the walls are photographs of happy family life. To the right is a large strong swirl of street graffiti, and to its side a screen where images from newspapers will be projected. The lights come up with a family gathered around a small coffin. “I’m so sorry,” one after another of the extended family says.



A few moments later one of the cast looks back to the days, in relatively recent western history, before the abolition of slavery. At that time, he says, “All of them were unfree human beings.” Some were born into slavery, he continues, and won their freedom later. Some were never set free. He doesn’t spell it out any further, but we in the audience are left to consider whether our children are born free or unfree human beings, and to wonder whether their captivity continues into their adulthood and how they win their freedom if they do.

Because the play is one performed by students in a high school we are tempted to take the question a little further: to what extent are our students free or unfree human beings? Which way would we want them to be, and how do we work towards it?

Focus of this paper, who’s writing it, and how we position ourselves

This paper reports on the process and outcomes of a theatre devising project – *A Child is Born* – with Year 12 and 13 classes in a low decile¹ school in the north of New Zealand. At a

surface level it was designed to allow students to meet the requirements of the New Zealand examination standards, NCEA Drama 2.3 and Dance 2.1, and to allow them to be assessed according to the prescribed achievement criteria within the unit.

However, the devising unit took place at a time when Maran, the teacher, was involved in a pilot group of the school's participatory action research (PAR) project, *Reaching for Success*, that is aimed at developing the school as a sustainable learning community and that has improvement of outcomes for all students as a key goal. The play is thus initially embedded in the PAR project although it grows to have its own life.

This paper discusses the purposes and progress of the PAR project as a whole as well as the design, process and results of the drama/dance unit. It also explores the implications of both for our understandings of teaching and learning and of the development of strong and sustainable communities of learning.

Two of us are writing. Maran Sutherlin is the newly registered teacher who led the devising unit, and a member of the pilot group in the Tikipunga High School *Reaching for Success* project. Janinka Greenwood is a researcher and lecturer in drama at the University of Canterbury and is the external facilitator for the *Reaching for Success* project. Overall this paper comes from dialogue between us about all aspects of the dual project. However, in terms of the research, analysis and reflection we have initially contributed different parts. Maran worked with her classes to develop *A Child is Born*; she also worked with them to evolve her understandings of teaching and learning within the PAR project. Janinka worked with all the teachers in the pilot group to develop a research process that was appropriate to their needs and the school's needs, and to facilitate reflection on and development of each teacher participant's individual project. Maran brought the strategies of devising work and of drama and dance teaching. Janinka provided a consideration of the wider conceptual and methodological framework in which both the inner play and the wider PAR project take place.

Methodology

In its overall shape the *Reaching for Success* project is based on principles of participatory action research. As Kemmis and Wilkinson (1998), Cardno (2003), Kemmis & McTaggart (2005) define action research, it is based on an evolving and practical approach to problem-solving. The process of research is directly prompted by a desire to create change in a work or community based setting. Initial investigation is translated into action that prompts evaluation and further investigation and so on through progressive cycles. The participants are themselves researchers, examining the literature, trying and refining strategies for change, allowing themselves to change, and sharing in the publication of their process.

Many models of action research involve mini-cycles in which some or all of the participants will explore an area to the side of, but arising out of, the main focus and bring their discoveries back to the overall project. 'To the side' is of course a relative term: an action research project evolves its direction rather than advancing upon a pre-decided path. Within *Reaching for Success* all of the teachers set up their own mini-cycle in which they explored an aspect –of their choice – of their practice. Maran chose to work with her senior drama and dance classes and explore how she could navigate the tension between her role as leader of learning and the need to listen to what her students were saying. What the other teachers

explored, and how their themes fitted together is discussed elsewhere (Greenwood, Garelja, Harris, Eccleton, Davidson, Sutherlin, Wallace & Wellington, 2007).

Early in the overall process the PAR group discovered the concept of bricolage. Kincheloe and McLaren (2005) construe the researcher as a bricoleur: one who recognises that design is evolving, who repeatedly identifies gaps in existing data and analysis and who adds new investigative strategies as they are needed, and who overtly focuses on multiple dimensions of the problem being considered. They also considered the role played in the overall research process and in their individual investigations by the elements that Durie (1992) stipulates as the cornerstones of well-being from a Maori perspective: hinengaro, wairua, tinana and whanau; or mind, spirit, body and community. Both conceptualisations had particular relevance for Maran's particular project.

Maran also drew on a range of further methodologies in her playmaking: both ones that informed development of the work itself and those that assisted her and her students' critical reflection about the product and the processes. There was a popular toolbox of improvisational strategies that included using pretext, accepting offers, working within the confines of form and convention, interweaving expansion and progression. Informing approaches to character portrayal were the Stanislavski's (1981) strategies for exploring motivation, and Brecht's (Willett 1978) strategies for preventing a sentimental engagement with the characters. "We'd studied both of these earlier in the year," she says, "and as we developed our play I encouraged students to examine in their written reflection how they were drawing on either or both of these methods." She also drew on Boal's (1979) strategies for problem analysis and solution seeking, as a tool for reflecting on the work as well as for reflecting on her own role in directing the project, Maran drew on recent critical approaches to research in drama education, such as Neeland's (2006) suggestions for reconceptualising the practice of the reflective practitioner, and for engaging with questions of power and bias as well as with process.

In her well-known book by that name Ely (1991) describes qualitative research as "circles within circles". She is asserting that the process of knowing the 'how' of things needs more than the somewhat two-dimensional progression of collecting and analysing data that is often associated with ethnography. The process of writing itself sparks new directions in analysis: it starts new circles within the existing ones, and changes the points of focus and direction. Our collaboration in writing about this project involves us not only in an exploration of the two projects, *Reaching for Success* and *A Child is Born*, separately but also of what they say to us as teachers when they are taken together.

Unlearning within the action research project

The group of teachers came to the PAR project with a range of expectations of what shape research about the school might take. Two of these, Janinka says, needed disrupting: one of these was that the research approach was something that was predetermined and that Janinka was the one who would tell everyone what to do; the second was that we would need to start by researching the students. The first part of the project thus consisted in shifting the locus of the study.

"The shift was a gradual process," Janinka recalls. "It took place through face to face sessions, brainstorming, group planning and critiquing, examining ideas we found in

literature, policy or practice, finishing with nibbles and wine, through on-line planning and dialogues, and through skype web-conferencing.” The goal was to forge an awareness of being a professional learning community who could discover what it really wanted to learn and how, and that could empower its members to look at their own practice first, and explore how they wanted to position themselves with each other and with their students.

The first cycles of the action research were thus about unlearning, about unpacking previously taken for granted assumptions, and reconsidering power relationships in the classroom. The direction found resonances in Kincheloe (1995) who stresses the importance of testing research in difference in practice, in Carr & Kemmis (1986) who asserts that research needs to be assessed primarily by its capacity to resolve educational problems and inform practice, in Andreotti and de Souza (2007) whose work in ‘education using a difference focus’ is geared to enabling people to think otherwise and try things differently, and in the poet e.e.cummings (1994) who says “all ignorance toboggans into know and trudges up the hill to ignorance again.”

One of the conceptual challenges for many of the participants was the difference between being the *teacher in charge*, and the *teacher in control*. The teacher in control feels s/he needs to design everything that will happen in the classroom. The teacher in charge provides the safety for students to explore their own motivation and share in the construction of their own learning.

Maran started her personal action cycle, looking for leadership skills. “I found all the books I could about leadership,” she recalls, “and they were mostly all about running a business, but I applied it to teaching. I found this book that claimed to be about the most powerful leadership principle in the world. I flipped eagerly through the pages and I found out that the most important thing in leadership is to serve. In academic terms I figured that was to be a facilitator. My task as I saw it was to find out how to serve, and at the same time how to have the structures to know what I’m doing and why I’m doing it; to serve and not just be a servant.”

Maran began to explore a range of ways to share decision-making with her students. Some days it seemed to work; on other days it all seemed to go backwards. “None of you teachers really listen to us,” one of her students said. “But I do,” Maran insisted in our PAR group. That provoked an extended discussion about levels of listening, and left all of us with the challenge of what listening, really listening meant. Was it just about words? And what was the relationship between listening, doing and empowerment?

Evolving the drama

One day after watching the evening news and readings headlines in all the papers about yet another example of abuse against a small child, her students came to class outraged and hurting. “Some students,” Maran recalls, “who would never stay still in class were standing as if transfixed, probing their own lifestyle and their outraged rejection of what had happened, some felt the pain too close to their own, others were passionately educating the rest about the statistics and the details of cases in New Zealand that they knew about.”

They were just about to begin an NCEA unit devising an original piece of theatre based on a theme. Gradually the circle discussion turned to a decision to commit to the subject of

violence towards children. “They convinced me they were passionate to do whatever it takes and there would be no absences unless they were moved out of town.”

Committing to an extended study was a risk – a huge risk, says Maran. The enthusiasm might run out; the hurt might get too deep within the class itself; they had to avoid the trap of sensationalising the violence they way they often saw in television entertainment, and Maran had to ensure she wasn’t the patronising outsider. “I was raised,’ she says, “with the parenting philosophy of compassion for others, especially women and children. I knew I needed to move beyond just disgust and horror. So I turned to some of the Stanislavski concepts I had taught to the class earlier. Even though my mother was extremely compassionate, she was not free from the temptations of power abuse – perhaps no one is. And I knew about feeling caught between love and anger. I drew on my childhood feelings and my current understandings and I brought them with me to our work.”

Maran decided to start the improvisational work with an adaptation of a performance art work done by Yoko Ono. In that work Yoko sat on stage with materials all over her body and asked members of the audience to remove one piece at a time until she was naked and vulnerable. Maran wanted to pick up on the complex relationship between the stripping away of protection and the feeling of trust. “I sat on the ground in the middle of our circle,” she wrote in her journal that night. “No one had stepped into role yet and this was my only catapult into the work. We may never have been able to do this production if this circle had not worked, but it did. I asked the students to one by one push me or nudge me or swipe me in any style until I was no longer able to stand up. I did not even mention emotion. This was an emotionless task.”

She sat long enough to begin to feel that her idea was going to go nowhere. Finally a student walked through the circle and pushed her shoulder gently and immediately after another tipped her torso over a little more. “I was facing the floor with my eyes hidden from them and I waited for the unknown to happen. Someone said – we all can’t do this. They couldn’t push me around more than that. My body was symbol enough. They didn’t have it in them as a collective to explore more. I slowly came out of the position the last and had put me in and I rose to look at them, not knowing how to act properly as the only teacher in the room. Each and every one of them was just as powerful as the role model I had just become, and they knew it. They knew they could not be forced to do this work.”

An exchange student in the class asked for a ritual to cleanse themselves from the roles they had taken, and Maran suggested a movement of lifting off the work like stripping a mask. The work would stay in the auditorium ready to be picked up next session, and they could walk away free from its psychological pressures.

With the momentum of the students’ commitment the work built explosively every day. Groups were separately working developing content and shape and when their work was flowing they would tune in to the developments of others. There were still occasionally absences and for the first time students become very upset by them, but Maran was developing rafts of strategies to go with her services and she had activities planned for such days in which she explored the bridges to connect the work of the groups into one show.

Maran called class ‘board meetings’ to plan the set, lighting and sound. These were not popular. The students owned the devised work, but expected the technical side to just happen.

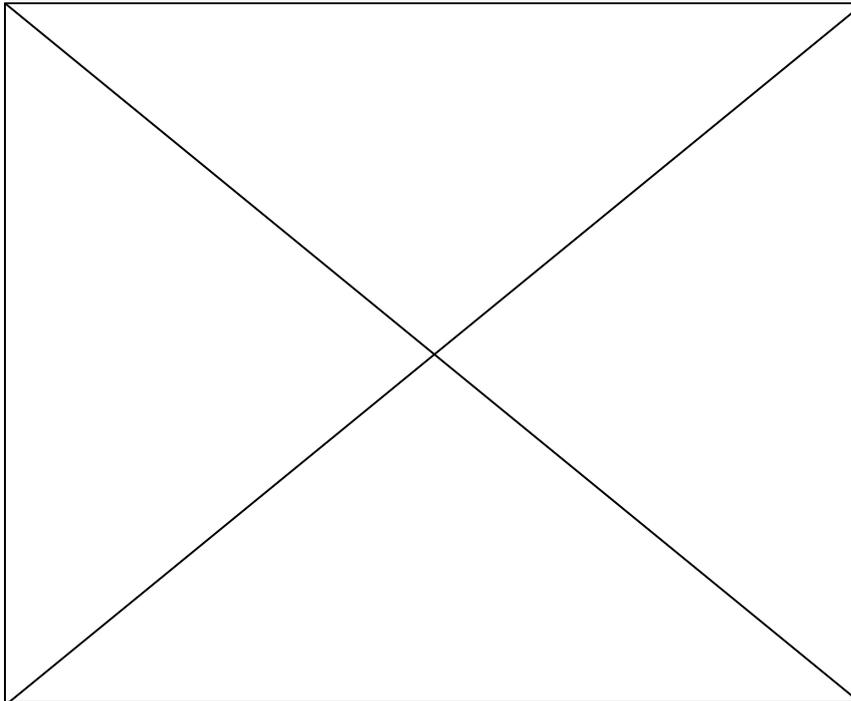
It was one of the few times when she became ‘the boss’ again and recalls that the students gave her a run for her money in this role.

In considering the overall process, Maran says: “I got in there alongside them, and it was their work, their ideas, their scenarios, their voices. What I did was guide them. I gave them structures to follow. When they got stuck, I gave them a strategy to work with.”

Impact of the work on stage

Maran sums up her role in the devising as providing support structures, providing opportunities for reflection, and providing a stage. The decision to share the work in an open community performance was a further risk, but Maran set up a supportive structure by inviting the school social worker, CYPS (Children and Young persons Services) and Amokura (Family Violence Prevention Consortium- Tai Tokearau) to come at various times of the development to come in and speak with the students about both the understanding the students were shaping and the strategies for dealing with stress each organisation was exploring with parents in the community. The trust and collaboration the students were building with one another spread to include the community groups.

A Child is Born was performed on two nights to open community audiences. The show had a collage structure, derived in part from the earlier exercises examining the ideas of Brecht and Boal and in part from the spontaneous compilation of thematic and scenic ideas. The participants had agreed it was important to show situations in their human honesty but not to get caught up in an emotional engagement with the characters or to wallow in depictions of abuse. So the scenes were short, juxtaposed with projected headlines from newspapers, rap sequences, dance, and several commentators, one who drew the analogy to slavery quoted earlier, another who threw out rapid harsh statistics about the incidents of child abuse and low percentage of cases brought to prosecution: “Our children are being killed,” she tersely told the audience, “not by war or by poverty but by our own abuse.”



Parents and families came. So did representatives from CYPs, Amokura and members of the public who had no ties with the school but who were concerned about child abuse and who were interested in how the young people would deal with the issues. On the second night by pre-arrangement the community workers opened a forum where the audience shared their opinions and spoke with the actors. “It was amazing,” Maran wrote in a report later, “people stood up and spoke with their hearts. The parents of the students on stage talked about how they experienced the pressures of life and parenthood and used the work the students had offered as an important part of their discussion about the issues.” The theatre was being used like a marae² where issues of importance to the community were being debated, and the students’ voices were being treated as serious contributions to the debate. Drama was not being contained in a box for assessment and schooling was regarded as an intrinsic part of the capacity development of the community.

Impact on Maran’s awareness of teaching

One of the significant aims of the devised work was to allow the students to meet the achievement standards in NCEA assessment. Across the board improvement in achievement was also the aim of the school action research project. The students involved in the devised work did achieve, of course- in terms of NCEA as well as beyond it. They achieved because they cared about the work they were producing, they saw its relevance to themselves and to their community and they valued how the work gave them a voice in their community. They were passionate about their own performance and resolute in keeping each other up to the mark. In the process Maran learned a lot about what her students were capable of and how she could support them.

She learned that the road of their progress did not need to be smooth and unpitted. “I found that it is not a matter of always having perfection in class, of always having a good class, and of staying in control,” she reported (Greenwood et al 2007). “It is a rocky road. It can be

chaotic. Like a family. Sometimes it's sort of a twilight zone family- dysfunctional. But it is a kind of a family, everyone's prepared to care if you listen to what they care about. You have to love them."

She also learned that it was safe to have failure. "I learned that I haven't failed just because the class is occasionally in chaos or because some one loses their cool. It depends on what we all do next. It can actually be part of the process."

"So now I think my classroom is the road," she explained. "It doesn't look like a destination I might plan. They'll get to the place that they themselves arrange. That was a deep learning for me – I wonder why I didn't learn that earlier. I want to keep to working with those learning opportunities."

Implications for our understandings of education

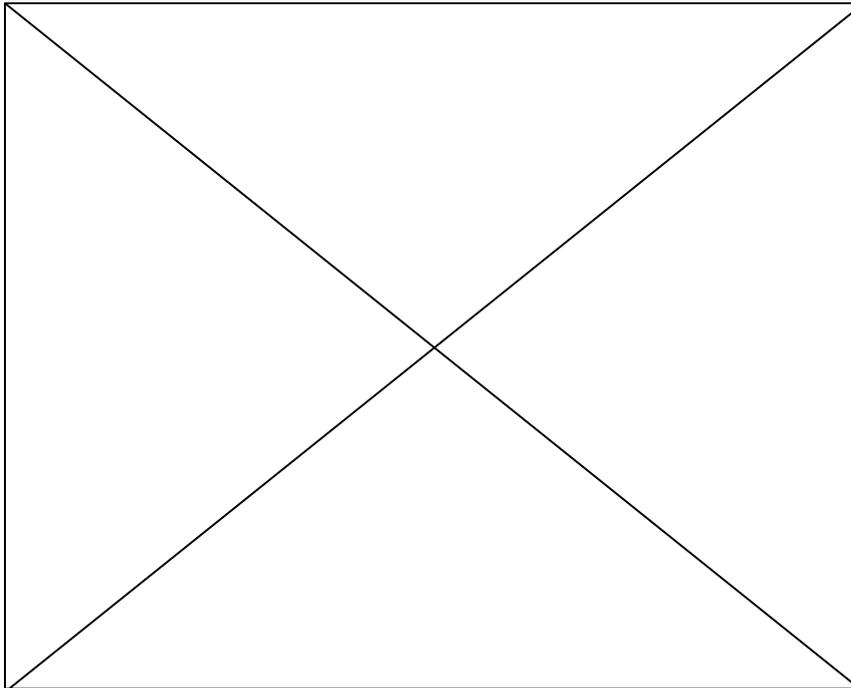
So we turn to tease out further the connections between the devised play and the school's action research project.

As the students unpacked the cycles of behaviour that lead to abuse, they explored the question of who was really free. It is a question that may apply just as well to the cycles of disruption and discipline that occur within schools and to the frustrations, for teachers as well as students, between the hoped for achievements and the not uncommon pedestrianism of the managed curriculum. Maran's discoveries paralleled those of others in the pilot group. In different ways everyone found that their students were engaged – in one way or another – in their own sense making. Freire in his ground-breaking book (1972) drew for us the relationship between illiteracy and the distribution of power; he asserted not only that learning needs to be located in the concerns of the learner, but that those (like teachers) caught unconsciously in the in their deference to the status quo need liberating as much as the oppressed. Giroux (1988), picking up his challenge, exhorts teachers to actively deconstruct the 'given' circumstances they operate in and work with their students within a critical and liberatory pedagogy.

Our suggestion here within this paper is that process has considerable resemblance to the processes of devising: you have to start with interest and drive, but you have to work out where you're going by the process of going there. There are strategies and conventions that can act as support, but the destination is unscripted; it needs to be artfully and collaboratively improvised.

In the wider sense of the school too, it might be said that the classroom is the road, not the destination. The students need to be active agents in devising their journey, the teacher serving as a facilitator and guide in a process of change.

In the play the father figure is shown to be trapped within a cycle of abuse that he has not initiated and that he only dimly understands. On the one hand the work as a whole denounces the abuse. On the other it looks for ways to help the father struggle out of his trap.



It can validly be asked: did the students understand the fullness of what they were doing? It probably can not be easily answered. Perhaps they did: because this is an issue that concerns them greatly and they worked for some time at exploring it. Perhaps they only caught the shadow of their future understandings.

And perhaps that is what our teaching, and our learning, is about?

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Footnotes

1. In the New Zealand system deciles represent average community income. Thus a low decile school comes from a low income community
2. A marae is a Maori communal space, the site of community discussion .

Biographies



Maran Sutherlin is a teacher of Drama and Dance at Tikipunga High School. She is committed to empowering her students through devised dance and drama theatre pieces. Maran sees Tikipunga High School as a very unique and challenging hub of possibility that produces small and large scale miracles in education that she feels lucky to be a part of. She is interested in seeing young people empowered by finding their inner strength and nurturing their talents as they emerge. This is her 3rd year teaching and so far her students have produced 4 original productions including the most recent for Stage Challenge: *Kotahi te kohao o te ngira*: contemporary dance that drew on hiphop and Maori whakatauki. She is the mother of a two year old daughter and is expecting a second baby in the new year.

Janinka Greenwood is a teacher, writer, researcher and drama worker. She is Associate Dean of Postgraduate Studies in Education. Her research is based in a group of interconnected areas: education, theatre and the intercultural space where these take place. While some of her projects are in one or other of these separate areas, she is keenly interested in where they overlap and extend our conceptualisations of aesthetics, semiotics, scholarship and knowledge. Associate Professor Greenwood has published widely and is an editor for a number of journals. Work includes: *Te Mauri Pakeaka: A Journey in to the Third Space* (with Arnold Wilson, 2006, Auckland University Press) and *The bridge, the trolls, and a number of crossings: a foray into the third space* (with Laura MCCammon, 2008) in *NJ (Drama Australia Journal)*.