

# A Youth Offender Said: I Liked Acting and Devising a Scene because It Was about Cars

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## Abstract

A New Zealand residential youth justice school project researched the potential of drama to model a co-operative learning approach and quality teaching to produce successful learning outcomes for students. It involved the implementation of a one week drama programme facilitated by a university drama lecturer. Incarcerated youth responses to activities and teacher and social worker feedback suggest the contexts for learning were relevant to students' lived experience, and specific approaches and teacher qualities contributed to student participation in group activities. This research has implications for future research in youth justice facilities and mainstream education.

**Keywords:** youth offenders, drama for social change, co-operative leaning, teaching style.

## Introduction

There is a long history of treatment attempts for youth offenders (Homqvist, Hilland Lang, 2007) and over time the attitudes toward these treatments have changed. In past decades research into the effects of treatment and anti-social youth was met with the pessimism that nothing worked (Martinson, 1974). However, by the 1980's researchers recognised that some things worked (Gendreau, 1981). During the 1990's researchers began to ask the question what was working with these troubled youth (McGuire, 1995). It appears important that treatments are systematic and well focused (Homqvist et al., 2007) and, according to Quim and Slera (2008), it is imperative that "incarcerated youth learn skills that enable them to be successful in their long-term efforts to reintegrate into their communities" (pp. 288). These researchers claim that there is a paucity of evidence regarding the effectiveness of specific interventions. The focus of this paper, therefore, is on the outcomes of a drama intervention designed to facilitate youth offenders' participation in group activities.

## Background

In New Zealand there are three residential youth justice facilities that exist nationally for the containment of young people with offending behaviours. The schools within these correctional facilities accommodate up to 126 youths and have security measures in place: perimeter and internal fencing, surveillance capability, alarm systems and comprehensive safety and security operating measures. Family visits are closely monitored and prearranged. These facilities include the provision for schooling; students traditionally receive individualised programmes that involve independent learning, rather than collaborative group learning that encourages individual accountability and develops students' social learning skills (Brown & Thomson, 2000). There is a need for innovative programmes that not only address the offending but re-engage these educationally displaced

youth in learning. To address this need, a university drama lecturer was invited by the principal of one of these schools to implement a programme that encouraged cooperative group learning. Her colleague, a behavioural psychologist working in the prison at that time, was to join and support her in this work.

This particular intervention took place in one of the residential homes where youths had been either remanded or directed into protective care because of offences in the community. The length of stay in the school varied from offender to offender, dependant on the offence committed. The youths attended a normal school day – from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon – where they worked predominantly on individual programmes designed by the teachers in the classroom. Due to court appearances and family group conference commitments during the week of the intervention, attendance varied from day to day. At most, ten youths, who ranged from 14 to 16 years of age, were present for the intervention and of the ten youths, five were Maori, two were Samoan and three were European. Four teachers were involved in this intervention. Different teams of five social workers rotated to provide care and protection for the young people and observed the work each day. Prior to the drama intervention, the university drama lecturer (hereafter referred to in first person) made two whole-day school visits of observations in one classroom, with one and a half hour meetings for planning with the staff after school. During the one-week intervention, the students worked with one process drama, role plays involving interactions in cars (a context they chose) – and an indigenous myth, wrapped in Maori customs, to devise and perform to their community members. The Maori female teacher provided the kapa haka knowledge to implement this aspect of the programme.

The major objectives of this project were to acknowledge youth offenders' prior knowledge and, through drama, to provide an opportunity for these youths to develop awareness, tolerance, responsibility, respect for difference and empathy for others within a cooperative learning environment. Within this inquiry, I aimed to identify strategies for providing learning relevant to the lived experiences of students in a youth justice school in New Zealand, and to find out how their work developed through the process. This paper examines the tensions involved in negotiating entrance into the youth prison, designing the curriculum, and engaging incarcerated youths in cooperative group learning activities. The following section discusses the methodology that framed this investigation into evidence-based practice in a youth justice correctional facility.

## **Methodology**

This single-case study design provided a representation that captured the conditions and circumstances of an everyday setting (Yin, 2003). A bounded system, constrained by time and events, was designed to highlight individual exemplars and explain why certain outcomes, the emerging process and the observed group interactions might happen (Denscombe, 2006). Due to the extended periods of time spent with participants at the research site, ethical issues were anticipated (Cresswell, 2005) and four participant perspectives were presented: students, teachers, social workers and myself. By weaving participant in-action and post-action reflections – journal entries, focus group and individual interviews – with researcher, teacher and Child Youth and Family (CYF) worker field notes, I gained some insights into how these participants thought and felt, and what they experienced within this context.

Grounded theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss and cited in Strauss & Corbin, (1990), was used to carefully examine the data in order to answer the research question: what approaches to teaching and learning foster student engagement in a youth justice school in New Zealand? This systematic, qualitative procedure was used to generate an approach that explained an educational process of activities, actions, events and interactions that occurred over time (Cresswell, 2005). As student learning was at the centre of the research process, I presented this experience through student voices and the voices of their teachers and observers. I undertook content analysis as the theoretical orientation for interpreting the text as part of the coding of participant written journal responses (Berg, 2004). This analysis supported my exploration of the emerging themes arising from participants' thoughts and responses throughout the week-long intervention. The adopted content analysis approach (Glaser, 1992), with manual sorting of the data, enabled me to closely explore the data in light of the research question, to simplify and organize the data, and support the emergence of participants' thoughts and responses throughout the work. In this way, the findings were grounded in the data. Categories derived from the data using an inductive process of sorting, as outlined in Glaser (1992), will be examined in future papers.

As humans are inclined to use storytelling or narrative as a natural way to convey their experiences, I provide a personal narrative to present this paper.

### **Use of narrative**

Educators have always used narrative knowledge – the personal stories of teachers and learners – to inform their own practice in the classroom. Bruner (1986), amongst others, identified narrative knowledge as a unique way of knowing, a legitimate way for humans to construct reality about their lived experiences. Experience and narrative are interconnected and narrative knowledge is a way to present educational inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, 2000). The writings of Bruner (1986) and Clandinin and Connelly (1998, 2000) provide an approach for using personal narrative in this paper – it offers transparency to story meaning making in the form of research text. The rationale for field notes contributing to this narrative follows.

### **Use of field notes**

Prior research experiences informed my understanding of the necessity to write regular, prompt field notes (Denscombe, 2007). This provided a reflection-in-the-action attempt to confidently make thoughts, observations and experiences understandable, memorable and shareable. In this way, this story about my experience of negotiating entrance into the youth prison, designing the curriculum, and engaging youths in cooperative group activities is accessible to youth prison and mainstream teachers and management teams. This story that follows begins with the section negotiating entrance into the youth prison.

### **Negotiating Entrance into the Youth Prison**

*I stand and wait at the closed window. The principal slides the glass and positions the book before me. I sign in. He closes the window. I wait. He moves through two doors to me. We walk the corridor. He unlocks the door. We walk through into an outside quadrangle. My eyes scan the space as he locks the door behind us.*

*Buildings frame this square.Â There are many doors that open on to the concrete path.Â My eyes move upwards to the full height.Â The rain drizzles in.Â We take the path to move left and turn the square to our right.Â We pass two doors.Â He unlocks the third. I wait for him to lock it after we enter.Â There is a short corridor that opens into the square shape classroom.Â Light filters through the high windows on the left.Â The room is devoid of people.Â Desks are assembled in a large square.Â There is a teachers' office at the end.Â There are three doors on the right wall.Â One is a time out room with a rectangular peep hole.Â We move to the first door.Â He unlocks the door.Â We enter.Â He locks it again.Â He leaves me to sit in the office.Â I breathe deep (Delia's field notes, day one).*

As can be seen from the vignette above, this school is secure and entrance to this school as an outsider is unlike other experiences in mainstream schools, as the students are contained. During observations, I wondered about the authenticity of this classroom due to the lack of group activity, student interaction and teacher movement between all class members within the space. Even though I was invited into this youth prison by the principal on the recommendation of my colleague, ethical considerations were complex in this context of the youth justice system.Â These were identified prior to the project commencing and are explained in the following section.

## **Ethical Considerations**

There were two classes in this residential youth justice school. However, an open selection process of participation was not an option for me, as the principal selected the class that I was to work with.Â His considerations were: the staff relationships in this class, staff members' interest in further learning and the identification of this project as a professional development goal for these three teachers.

Of significance was the concept of parental rights and consent. As these youths were officially remanded into the care of the state, it was difficult for me to determine who legally and ethically should give permission for the youths to be involved.Â In this case, the school principal determined this to be social workers who acted in loco parentis.Â Furthermore, it was important to emphasise to the students that they had a choice to participate, as the very nature of incarceration means that choice is restricted.Â I was concerned that the students might have felt an obligation to comply because of the context; therefore time was taken to discuss this with the participants.

The emotional wellbeing of the students involved had to be considered carefully throughout this week's work.Â Due to the nature of the activities, both staff and I considered the potential danger of triggering engendered emotions that might be difficult to contain, and cause distress to participants or others who take part in the class activity who are not participants. A process drama, role plays and a devised drama were to be explored through a distancing frame of alternative perspectives.Â Once I had written the process drama, the management team considered the ramifications in order to write a risk management plan that would support and be followed by staff during the process.Â It was decided if students experienced anything that caused concern they would be given the opportunity to ask for time out.

The students in this school were not named publicly during court proceedings unless there were very unusual circumstances.Â These offenders were *name suppressed* due to their age. Therefore, confidentiality was an ethical risk to be considered.Â Also discussed was the risk

that the stories that emerged from the process may have legal and ethical ramifications. For this purpose, the youths were not to share personal stories and during the process there was to be no reference to the youths' offences to the staff present in any of the content of the performance. Also, given the nature of the context, it was not ethical to take photographs or to digitally record the performance. To ensure participant confidentiality, a collegial peer review of any outputs of the project was used.

## **Designing the Curriculum**

Time was allocated to consider the contexts for learning that would be relevant and link to these offenders' life experiences. Due to the ethical considerations, time was required to negotiate the learning contexts with management (the off-site principal and two on-site assistant principals) and to consider and minimize the engendered emotions from inappropriate learning contexts. In order to meet these requirements, the curriculum became distanced by role and time and, therefore, few risks were taken in the learning content. However, this may be a limitation of the research as this risk free environment may deny the students of contextually responsive learning opportunities. Drama contexts focused on building trust and positive relationships, exploring what makes a hero and the restoration of *mana* (personal standing). These were important contexts considering these were the very issues that the boys were living through. This notion is supported by Bishop and Glynn (2000) who place value in creating socio-cultural contexts where "learning takes place actively and reflectively" ... "where they safely bring what they know and who they are into the learning relationship and where what students know and who they are forms the foundations of interaction patterns in the classroom – in short, where culture counts" (pp. 7).

The overall aim of the project was, through drama, to provide an opportunity for these youths to develop awareness, tolerance, responsibility, and respect for difference and empathy for others. I envisioned students participating and engaging in the learning. The week I entered the work, the youth cells were being renovated so the students were living in the *whare nui* (meeting house) which put the students under pressure to adjust to change. This meant student numbers were low in this classroom and no new admissions were allocated. At times, this resulted in a smaller group and the students were outnumbered by adults on some days. This meant that students were more visible and, therefore, less willing to participate in classroom activities. This was a difficult aspect of the project. However, student confidence to participate increased over time.

This work was linked to levels two and three of the drama discipline in the arts leaning area in our New Zealand values based curriculum. As they had little prior experience in drama, they would be developing practical knowledge in drama (level two), developing ideas in drama (level three) and communicating and interpreting drama (level two). This work was designed so students developed competency in thinking, managing the self, relating to others and participating and contributing (MOE, 2007). By the end of this work, I wanted students to be able to reflect, question and build meaning in a drama; use a literacy strategy to make meaning of a text; use elements and conventions to shape a devised drama; and apply an increased capacity for listening, focus, motivation and connection to school. These strategies were designed to engage students in learning. This aspect will be discussed in the following section.

## **Student Participation over Time**

I began the first session with a process drama – *The Golden Shadow* – specifically written for these students. I wanted these youths to actively identify with imagined roles and an imagined situation to explore heroic behaviours and why a youth might choose to be heroic. I hoped individual contributions would be accepted, used and modified by the group. In this process drama, specifically designed in this instance for our exploration and not intended for an audience, the students were asked to work in role as inhabitants of the small country town of Waimate, New Zealand and investigate what it is to be a hero. Through visual prompts, questioning and teacher in role, I encouraged students to participate and co-construct the story. To assist students to engage in dramatic play, I invited them to create a map of our make believe world. A CYF worker one's (CYF1) journal comments regarding students' participation in this activity provide insights into student reactions to this way of working. CYF1 noted that the young people contributed good ideas when designing the drawing of their town, and that some young people were a little apprehensive to begin with, evident in their choices not to participate in the map making. Instead they tagged their books. However, according to the CYF1, after a little while most of the group settled in well and got on board and contributed positively. Other students chose to interact more, one on one. CYF1 claimed the young people were listening to what was going on. At times young people were a little shy. However positive encouragement from the staff helped the young people to contribute. CYF1 claimed that the attitude and behaviour overall was good, especially considering that the different way of working made it interesting to most young people (CYF1 journal, 1/08/08).

It seems then that this was a new way of working for these students and their teachers. These students did not contribute confidently and reflect. It appeared tagging was an immediate response to pen and paper for some. I required time to find a solution to this unacceptable behaviour. On latter reflection, I realised that my teaching was not sufficiently explicit for the students to gain the skills required and further modelling was necessary. T1 confirmed that although some students were not quite ready to participate, they were actively listening. She claimed the eight youth present were engaged the majority of the time. She was very impressed by student 1 (S1) who had very low self belief. She observed that although this student hooked in and out of the activities his obvious enjoyment was excellent. T1 reported S5's claim that these young people were doing more work at drama than at school (Teacher one journal, 1/08/08). T3 explained that S1 had a history of reluctance to express himself, however T3 noticed S1 did very well in his attempt to complete tasks. T3 claimed that the morning's work appeared to be a bit slow with the hot seating activity being the most animated activity. However, he acknowledged the town plan was good (Teacher three journal, 1/08/08). My field notes verify this supposition, suggesting that the students were engaged and drew the map well. I noticed it was hard for the students to build role. They were required to put themselves on the line and take risks in their learning which appeared difficult for them to do. For some students, this was the first time they had taken drama. During this first session, two students volunteered to be hot seated in front of the class which was excellent participation on their part (Delia's field notes, 1/08/08).

I identified a friction present for me in this work. There was pressure between teaching with my usual enthusiasm, teacher presence and passion and the desire not to intimidate these students. I wanted to set high expectations and demand the required standard for the work, yet provide the immense encouragement that these students required to prevent them from quickly opting out of the work. I noticed that if I demanded student participation, the students scattered from the teaching space at the earliest moment of unease, went to the desk,

picked up a book or asked for a pencil and began tagging. I realised these students needed time to develop role and experiment with pertinent conventions to scaffold this learning. My approach needed to be gentle to gain their trust. The work needed to be very structured. I noted these students relaxed a little, evident in their less upright, tough demeanour, when I smiled and told them what they were doing was working and why it was working. The students appeared attentive when they established eye contact, their eyes widened and they leaned forward (Delia's field notes, 1/08/08).

I noticed the power of the strong image culture evident in the students' side glances and their hesitancy to commit to sustained participation in the set activities which placed pressure on student learning. It appeared, too, more time was required to negotiate and build trust with and between these students as they were tentative in offering answers to questions. I assumed this was due to previous life circumstances. The teachers reported these students had untrustworthy adults in their lives which presented as a tension for these students and their participation in this work (Teacher focus group interview, 2/08/08). Participation in this work required the students to take risks in their learning in order to participate: to trust me to guide the process, to trust their peers to respect and honour their work, to maintain their *mana* (personal standing) and to trust themselves that they would not come to harm (Delia's field notes, 1/08/08). Beginning with this process drama, I demonstrated appropriate attitudes and actions and my commitment to this group. Students contributed ideas, responded to my questions, worked in role, made decisions and built belief in an imagined world through map-making. I had set the scene for cooperative learning to flourish (Brown & Thompson, 2000).

We began day two working as a whole class. We were now ready to explore what made a scene work in terms of relationship, time of day, setting and character intent in relation to position in space and character behaviour. According to O'Neill & Lambert (1984), students must draw on their own life experiences and knowledge so they select behaviour that is appropriate to the role. Students played out their understanding of the characters in this situation. The students responded to questions, sometimes tentatively, and we used hot seating, role on the wall, freeze frames and spoken thoughts aloud to develop role. CYF 2 asserted that the students were responsive to the activities, were really focused and keen to participate and contribute, and S2 had particularly responded well and thrown himself into role. CYF worker 2 identified the atmosphere as positive throughout the group – jovial and happy.

Students chose the contexts for the role plays, co-constructed the situations and I provided a literacy strategy to explore the chosen text. These strategies may have contributed to the changes in their participation and obvious enjoyment. According to O'Neill and Lambert (1984), active engagement in role play enables students to be capable of social interaction and co-operation. This was the case in this instance. After morning tea, T1 led the war formation in *kapa haka* (Maori cultural group). Some students were not so focused: their movements lacked body tension, they smiled and giggled and broke the regular facial expression. Others were focused as their movements were crisp and strong and their facial expression was tense as if going into battle (Delia's field notes, 02/08/08). At the end of the day, a possible explanation was provided by T2. He thought students were very tired, that they were not sleeping well and were flat as they had no energy (TFG interview, 02/08/08). We moved to devising. This way of working was extremely successful as all the boys were participating and contributing ideas (Delia's field notes, 02/08/08).

By day three, according to CYF3, the students were stepping outside their comfort zones. We began our day with feedback from the previous day's work, set expectations and shared the learning intentions for the day. Students were arranged into small groups and some students were allocated contexts to devise whilst others wrote raps. We shared our work, gave feedback and after an opportunity to rehearse in relation to given feedback, students taught one another their devised work and compositions. CYF3 stated that the tables were at the side of the windows, the boys were facing in, there were fewer distractions and fewer boys were wandering around the class. He claimed they were focused on the tasks (CYF3 journal, 3/08/08). During the final session, we improvised movement for our "combating the Taniwha" section. This took the form of offer and response using crumping, a dance genre. At the end of the day, S1 commented that he enjoyed rapping because he liked rap. He knew how to write it, so he could do it. He found things hard that he had never done before (S1 interview, 03/08/08). T4 asserted the boys had leadership. She suggested the day started well with individual positive feedback and the students were enthusiastic about devising and then teaching others. She noted the open questions I used and the specific feedback I gave to students. She expressed her enjoyment of the three days' work, because there were more choices in the work and she enjoyed working with the students as a group. She claimed there had not been the usual impoliteness from the boys (T4 interview, 03/08/08). It was evident she had enjoyed these respectful moments and interactions. The teachers and CYF workers outnumbered the youth most days. Living renovations caused low numbers, which made the youth visible in this group context. However, it appears that by day three students were willing to work "not just to be obedient but to be genuinely committed to the work" (Brown and Thomson, 2000, p12). This suggests they understood what they were expected to do. These youths enjoyed the reciprocity of the learner and teacher roles.

On day four we devised new scenes and rehearsed previously devised ones. We experimented with the slow motion convention. CYF5 claimed the drama intervention was working, as students were challenging themselves, working out of their comfort zones and taking on different roles. He asserted the students were thinking and experiencing opportunities to see what others felt like in order to be empathetic. He suggested these students could not build such empathy in their everyday lives, because they were too occupied dramatizing gangsters or rap videos (CYF interview, 4/08/08). S4 commented that, in the given story for our devising, the grandfather role gave us plenty to work with, plenty of scenes and plenty of different ways to work with other people (Student interview, 04/08/08).

Feedback from participants at the end of the week indicated that these students enjoyed the work, participated when they could relate to the learning contexts and fulfilled some of the intended outcomes. S2 liked acting and devising a scene because it was about cars (S2 interview, 3/08/08). S3 enjoyed creating the doctor character and writing about the good aspects of his character. He claimed he would like to have those good qualities (Student interview, 3/08/08). His awareness of other possibilities had developed and he made sense of these experiences and ideas. He had reflected on his learning. S4 claimed he had enjoyed the opportunity to do something different. He particularly enjoyed improvising and then teaching what he had choreographed to others. He claimed it was better than school work as he was able to show some of his talent. He gained confidence during this experience, evident in less side glancing, more up-right posture and his ability to take responsibility for others' learning. He had developed "the confidence to participate within new contexts" (MOE, 2007, p. 13). S4 admitted that during this week he had not spent so

much time in *time out*, because he participated in the physical activities and chose to write a rap (Student interview, 4/08/08). He was managing himself to develop “strategies for meeting challenges” (MOE, 2007, p. 12).

It appears this drama intervention also impacted in a small way on students’ thinking. Because of this experience, S1 claimed he would try to keep fit and just have a go at everything that came his way (Student interview, 5/08/08). S7 claimed this week’s work built his confidence, because he had no prior experience of drama, and now he could use his voice powerfully (Student interview, 5/08/08). S4 asserted he had learnt more during this week’s work than outside of the prison, because he had not been at school for a couple of years. He claimed this was the first time he had opened up (Student 4 interview, 5/08/08). The work was good according to S5 because it was different from boring school work (Student interview, 5/08/08).

Though students initially struggled to reflect, over time they were able to explore imagined roles, situations and relationships. They took their lived experiences to create an imagined world and to question and build meaning in a drama; used a literacy strategy to make meaning of a given text; made informed choices through drama; used role, time, space, focus, freeze frames and slow motion to shape a devised drama; used role on the wall, hot seating and spoken thoughts aloud to develop role and applied an increased capacity for listening, focus, motivation and connection to school. CYF workers noted aspects of my approach to teaching and learning that may have contributed to these positive outcomes for these students. These are discussed in the following section.

### **Approaches to Teaching and Learning, and Consequent Youth Offenders’ Engagement**

CYF4 observed the impact of my positive reinforcement on student engagement in activities. She claimed she saw walls come down as these students were not used to such encouragement. She suggested the students listened to me because of the passion in my voice and body language. She identified that I approached the work in this vibrant, novel method: softly, gently, passionately and non-confrontationally but also set clear boundaries. CYF4 noted I did not expose anyone off track, but engaged the whole group to bring them all back in and used positive reinforcement and encouragement to target wanted behaviours (CYF worker interview, 5/05/08). The absence of arguing among the boys during this week’s work was noted by CYF6. He stated the students were a lot more relaxed, that there was evidence of a lot of sharing and that the quieter students were participating rather than withdrawing. He noticed a decrease in tension as the anxiety of attending court was reduced. He asserted that students appeared less anxious, were not hiding and were not using the toilet as escapism. Additional quantitative data that recorded these instances would have validated this perspective. He suggested these changes in behaviour were a result of the mood and perceived the drama intervention as a valuable distraction from other things going on in their lives. He asserted students had stepped outside their comfort zones, broken down the more image conscious peer pressure and gained confidence (CYF worker interview, 05/08/08). I suggest my genuine and authentic approach was critical to the success of forming relationships with these students and being able to facilitate change from individualized learning towards cooperative group learning in this context. I was committed to the work and totally present to the students. The authenticity was about openness and empathy with the students (Harms, 2007).

Some teaching strategies appeared to be effective in engaging the students in the activities. T4 identified several successful strategies during this week's work, for example, beginning the day with positive feedback; acknowledging students' previous day's individual work; giving each student an opportunity to lead and devise; providing students with opportunities to teach others their work; as well as teacher enthusiasm, care and creativity that inspired and motivated students to participate (T4 interview, 3/08/08). T1 identified praise as key to student engagement in this instance. This experience was a learning curve for T2 in terms of challenging group work in the prison environment. He suggested the co-operative group learning, when students taught one another their choreographed work, actually gave students more ownership over the performance (Teacher interview, 5/08/08). This concurs with Christee, Tolmie, Thurston, How and Toppings (2009) suggestions that genuinely collaborative group work demands autonomy and independence. This group work and peer interaction was an effective strategy that enhanced student learning (Cohen, Kulik & Kulik, 1982) as students were given choices, worked to their strengths and were motivated whilst leading others in their learning. During his interview T2 asserted that I did not talk down to the students, as I talked openly and positively with them. He identified the progression of the work as fast, claiming I had a positive, passionate approach that indicated my enthusiasm about drama and the students responded to this. T2 suggested that I sparked up the students, stimulated their interest and gave them positive feedback which, despite their staunchness, they really enjoyed. He claimed I was explicit in my expectations (Teacher interview, 5/08/08).

T2 offered constructive feedback regarding an aspect of the work to improve. He suggested students be seated, perfectly still and quiet, before I talk to them. In the rush to meet the production deadline he thought this aspect had slipped a little (Teacher interview, 5/8/08).

## **Discussion**

These youths performed with their peers and teachers a short devised drama based on their interpretation of a Maori myth. The audience comprised their community members such as social workers, receptionists, and kitchen staff. Although nervous, the students remembered their moves, their cues, and could be heard by all in the room. This achievement should not go unnoticed; this was the greatest risk that any of them had taken during this week-long intervention. Feedback from the audience after the performance affirmed students' participation. Without the feeling of safety and trust of peers and teachers created by a safe learning environment, this would not have been possible.

During this week-long intervention, these youths were given choices regarding the contexts they used, the movements they devised and their interpretation of the given story. Students were able to work outside their comfort zones. As a teacher, I facilitated this by breaking down tasks and offering variations of specific tasks related to the lived experiences of these students. I believed the students had the capacity and the right to direct their own work. I was confident the students could achieve this and they had their teachers working along side them to support them to complete the task (Harms, 2007). I did not present as "the fountain of all knowledge" (Bishop, 2003, p. 226) but rather was a collaborator in the learning conversation. During our week's work, we built knowledge-in-the-action that contributed to a performance to this community. These students shared their ideas with others, and participated in set group activities designed to scaffold their learning and acknowledge their lived experiences. This student-centred approach, therefore, worked in some way to a shared power experience for these students. Students developed a sense of autonomy which is

important, because their need for independence, ability to take responsibility and right to make decisions, are vital to their process of rehabilitation. As Wilson and Tully (2009, p. 166) assert: “Addressing youth offender needs is a key priority for their reintegration and rehabilitation into the community.”

Another contributing factor towards a safe learning environment was the positive relationships built over time between participants. During this week’s work, created from a non-threatening, collaborative learning perspective, students were supported by their teachers to work in small groups and completed set tasks in which they were able to encourage one another to stay on task, suggesting that they respected one another (Brown & Thomson, 2000). In this way, positive relationships were built between all members of the group. Competent teachers foster positive relationships in classroom settings that are not intimidating and are caring, inclusive, non-prejudiced, and unified (MOE, 2007). Further evidence to support this notion was the change in peer engagement: students broke through the limitations of this peer culture, and the projections of tough demeanours to support and cooperate with one another to perform to their community. Students learn best when they enjoy positive relationships with their peers and teachers, when they are able to participate and feel acknowledged, valued members of their learning community (MOE, 2007). The social skills that develop in such contexts support youths in their future interactions with peers, as many youths depend on their peer groups as they progress through adolescence (Quinn & Shera, 2009). The established, safe learning environment enabled them to take risks in their learning and develop the necessary social skills to function in a group that devised and performed a drama to an audience.

It appears, then, that the qualities of the teacher in this context contributed to the engagement of students in the designed cooperative group learning activities. This is supported by Bishop and Berryman (2006) who maintain students narratives revealed that “the ways in which teachers taught, how they interacted with Maori students, and the teaching strategies they used, strongly influenced whether these students became engaged or not” (p. 254). The 2008-2012 Ministry of Education Ka Hikitia Maori Education Strategy supports this notion. “...effective teaching and learning depends on the relationship between teacher and student, and the active engagement and motivation of the students by the teacher” (MOE, 2008, p.20). The students’ response to my encouragement, compassion, positive body language, explicit feedback and the teaching strategies I used, contributed to their ability to participate in the learning and perform to an audience. There was an obvious change in mood as a response to my warmth and care. These students had broken through barrier perhaps as a result of this. I have also observed – in mainstream classrooms – the power and influence of teachers on students’ learning outcomes. Macfarlane’s (2004) “ethic of care” (p. 82) took on new meaning: these students understood they were valued as I showed I cared by my positive attitude and good teaching. I asked: how had this happened? I wondered what earlier intervention for our mainstream youth at-risk in their learning would prevent their entrance into a youth prison. This research indicates additional possible opportunities for further work with youth prison work as well as implications for mainstream students at-risk in their learning.

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## Biography



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