

If we are to reach real peace in the world, we shall have to begin with the children.

Mohandas Gandhi

Growing community one play at a time: How an experimental theatre project led to flourishing

A Paper Presentation for the Positive Leadership for Flourishing Schools Forum

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POS lexicon

Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 284).



Appreciative inquiry: focuses on positive effects of noticing, appreciation, and gratitude (Cooperrider & Srivasta, 1987)

Abundance gaps: “the difference between normal, acceptable performance and extraordinary or ‘positively deviant’ performance” (Cameron, 2010, p. 46)

Courageous principled action

Community

Self-efficacy

Flourishing

Virtuousness

Collaboration

Resilience

Awareness

Agency

Flow

Trust

Positive Spirals

Compassion



“People are beginning to envision a productive community—deeply connected people who tightly hold a passionate purpose” (Quinn, 2000, p. 227).

- **Grant-funded 3-week project** led by V. Ashok Kumar, freelance artist from India
- Highly stylized, emphasizing physicality
- After initial training, students were given permission to be in charge of their theatre troupe (with Rebecca as ‘director’ → facilitator)
- Boalian ‘directorless’ theatre format

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Reflection: It was striking how the members of BTB negotiated their diverse passions and opinions. Polarized concepts can be divisive, and yet BTB’s processes energized the group to continue its work **on a volunteer basis for 3 years**. I am also struck by the sense of community created by this project.

“Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014, p. 284)

Leadership strategy: Listening, paying attention

“I need to listen to them, what really bothers them? What really makes them happy? First couple of days, I just ask them, I just listen to them speak. [...]

With topic, this is happening, how do you feel? They come up with wonderment.”

(Ashok)

Resilience is helpful when linked with a sense of agency and responsibility.

Social Planning Toronto (SPT) created a plan to develop resilience in youth in shelters, using the following strategies:

- model positive thinking;
- teach children to learn self regulation;
- help children recognize emotions in themselves and others;
- share your own feelings;
- reward appropriate expression of feelings;
- address inappropriate expression of feelings;
- encourage creativity and exploration;
- encourage optimism and contentment (SPT, 2014, p. 41).

The theatre process

Minimalist theatre structure, emphasizing
content and images

Acting was supported with music, using hand
drums, bells and violin

No technology was used

Students conducted research, then wrote scenes

Student research examples:

- Talking with friends and family about issues, and recording various ideas and possible information leads
- Going to the mall. Observing behaviour while shopping and hanging out
- Going to the library and looking up some issues
- Reading about current events on the internet
- Observing bumper stickers and lawn signs and recording them
- Looking up laws on certain issues
- Finding blogs on certain social justice topics
- Journaling

Venues

- Plays presented at various middle & high schools
- Pieces of plays presented at festivals & fundraisers for causes
- Community events
- Theatre festivals
- Conferences
- PD sessions for teachers
- Toured American Midwest and later in India

A small group of BTB members went to India to participate in Natya Chetana's annual International People's Theatre Festival

- Developed nonverbal play on alienation
- Gave drama workshops in several major Indian cities
- Service learning component
- Sharing drama games with children in orphanages
- Cultural learning

Findings

Flourishing Spiral #1:

Artistic growth leads to personal flourishing

[Ashok] taught us a lot about acting and about *so much more* is into it than you really think. Like it's not just memorizing lines. And like *feeling*. It's more like, I mean, it's *everything*. Like your whole body. (Aruna)

I've become more conscious of the world I just become more interested in the things, and I see things ... and I'm becoming more conscious of the things that are happening at school, and I'm trying to do my best to do my part. (Ivanka)

I would be able to tell the world what my opinions were, and make the world the better place, but that's ideally. What I could realistically accomplish is at least to make sure that I myself can somehow make clear what it is that I feel about things. It's a way for me to build my own self-concept also. (Deilek)

I kind of felt like a social outcast, so BTB was my outlet to be with people ... I really did love working with Ashok, his willingness to help and you can tell that he seriously wants to help, his enthusiasm about theatre and social issues was really infectious. (Claire)

Flourishing spiral #2:

Collaborative growth: When we focus on the amazing in everyone, we build and preserve a sense of belonging and community.

Well, we think about what we've done and what we'd like to do. And then we, just, what would work best with a skit? And then we try out different ways to do it. And we figure out which way is the best ... [A] lot of times we agree on stuff ... so I think it's more of a democracy. (Alex)

If you want someone to do something, you can't force them to do it. They have to want to do it. (Taylor)

Internal motivation beats external motivation every time. (Günther)

Just to see their views on things, and you kind of like, learn how to think differently with them. (Shenandoah)

It allows you to look at all of the issues, or, not all of the issues but many issues that aren't necessarily addressed in school or by a class, or a linear type of education. It's a (pause) almost like an independent exploration of sociological aspects and relationships between people and entities which classes don't help you learn and you also get to see how different patterns and how people interact and how people either succeed or fail to understand the uniqueness in other people or in other cultures. (Deilek)

Flourishing spiral #3:

Critical growth leads to resilience.

CHRIS-Love! [pause for tableau] Despite the plethora of problems and negative emotions in this world, there still prevails a certain positive energy by blessing and positive emotions, the most prevalent of which is love. (©Omniphobia, p. 3)

Resilience is one of the positive states that interest POS scholars (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003). Hope is one of the virtues that critical theorist Giroux (2005) tried to galvanize when discussing some of the perplexing challenges facing his students in the moment. The character's optimism—hope—and resilience was diversely reiterated by many group members throughout the project. The hope that one can transcend difficulty with love is very mature and profound. It is perhaps this hope that helped to motivate the group to continue creating and producing plays for three years, exceeding all expectations.

Giroux (2005) argued that resilience grows when people take responsibility for the future by acting wisely today. He referenced traumatic social phenomena and the social benefits of acting virtuously in response. He invited graduates to develop and maintain resilience through awareness, compassion, and collective responsibility. Giroux reminded his audience that “the pursuit of happiness and the good life is a collective affair” (p. 215). Valuing interconnectivity makes for sound leadership.

KYLA: Domestic Abuse! [pause for tableau] Two thirds of marriages at one point or another will experience domestic abuse.

DRUMMER: Tickatackatickatak...BOOM!

BRI: Homophobia! [pause] Matthew Sheppard was the victim of a hate crime on October 6, 1998. 6 days later, he died from complications to his injuries. Now there's a group of activists trying to put up a monument saying that Matt Sheppard entered Hell on October 12, 1998, all because he was gay. [pause] Is it right?

DINAH-Ignorance! [pause for tableau] All Muslims are out to get us; HIV is spread through casual contact. [pause] Ignorance is much more than not knowing that $2 \times 2 = 4$, and consequences are farther reaching than failing a math test. Ignorance is the cause of hatred and fear in our society.

BRANDEIS: Nationalism! [pause] Millions of corpses at Wounded Knee, Sand Creek, Nicaragua, and Vietnam. [long pause] Is our flag big enough to cover them all?

PAT: Stereotypes! [pause] Some stereotypes are good...Look! She's Asian...She must be smart. But some stereotypes can be bad. Look! A male cheerleader. He must be gay...But either way, stereotypes present an image that may not be accurate. [pause] How do you think you are stereotyped?

CHRIS: Love! [pause] Despite the plethora of problems and negative emotions in this world, there still prevails a certain positive energy by blessing a positive emotions, the most prevalent of which is love.

School leadership is a complex synergy of emotion and leadership.
Crawford, 2009, p. 2).

Concluding propositions:

1. To engage, one must have agency. This includes a belief in one's capacity to use one's voice for societal good. Where are these spaces in our schools to allow for engagement with citizenship and development of youth leadership?
2. Engaging in deep, critical thinking is a positive outcome, as is learning to negotiate and to tolerate disagreement. It is this respectful reciprocity in the face of difference that will sow seeds of peace in one's community and beyond.
3. It is imperative that schools, as part of their holistic education, offer educative spaces in which to explore the complex current issues that youths face.
4. It is also imperative that schools offer experimental programs, with support for both teachers and students, so that they may explore facets of critical understanding and self-identity in a safe place. This is a method for developing strong civic engagement.