

Engagement, Authenticity, and Advocacy in “Youth Uncensored”: Ethics in Applied Theater Research With Street-Involved Youth

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Abstract

“Youth Uncensored” was an applied theater project with youth affiliated with an arts-based, nonprofit organization serving street-involved youth. The organization identified the need to educate service providers about the youth’s experiences to better meet youth’s needs. The youth were involved in all aspects of the process of creating workshops for service providers, from generating content for our scenes to devising, rehearsing, and performing scenes for service provider audiences, and participating in forum theater activations, in talk-back sessions, and in evaluating the project. For an evaluation of outcomes for youth, the youth created a 30-min video exploring the projects’ benefits and challenges. Through a close reading of the video, this article addresses the ethical issues that arose in relation to engagement, authenticity, and advocacy. Our ongoing efforts at negotiating this ethical terrain were crucial for the endurance and efficacy of the project.

Keywords

research-based theater, ethics, street-involved youth

“Youth Uncensored”

“Youth Uncensored” was an applied theater¹ research project affiliated with an urban, arts-based, nonprofit organization serving street-involved youth in Alberta, Canada. The organization identified the need to educate service providers about youth’s experiences in accessing services to better meet youth’s needs. Along with university and community-based researchers, youth were active coresearchers throughout the process of creating theater-based workshops (see Conrad, 2015; Conrad et al., 2015).

As a university-based researcher and applied theater facilitator, I had a relationship with the organization and many youth were known to me. We received funding for 2 years (2010–2012), through the organization, from a municipal source directed at promoting safe communities. Taking a youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach (Camarota & Fine, 2008), ethical practice was foundational. YPAR is action-focused, so the primary research products were the workshops we developed and facilitated. Stories youth shared were not regarded as “data.” We did not research youth’s experiences; rather, youth were positioned as experts engaged in knowledge production and action toward educating service providers. We conducted an evaluation of the workshops’ effectiveness for service

providers in the first phase (Evaluation and Research Services [E&RS], 2011).² We identified that the project was also having benefits for youth, extended into a third year, with additional funding, to evaluate what youth felt were positive outcomes for them through their engagement (University of Alberta, 2012).

Using forum theater, workshops explored what youth identified as common, suboptimal encounters with service providers meant to help them (Nicholas et al., 2015; Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). Boal’s (1979) forum theater involves activating “problem” scenes, devised and performed by individuals with vested interest in topics being explored. The scenes end at a high point of conflict, left unresolved. Upon replaying scenes, audience members are invited to intervene by stopping the scene, coming onto stage to replace characters, and try out strategies toward more positive outcomes. The highly interactive theater form is excellent for initiating dialogue. Our process and

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performances raised many ethical considerations: the focus of this article.

Through weekly meetings on campus over 3 years, youth were involved in generating content, devising scenes, rehearsing, performing, participating in forum theater activations and talk-back sessions with audiences, and in evaluating the project. We delivered a total of 26 workshops for a range of service provider groups, university students, academic and practitioner conferences, and community arts events. Our workshops were catered to specific audiences, selecting or adapting scenes relevant for that group.

Any youth from the organization interested in participating were welcomed. A total of 50 youth, ages 14 to 24 years—representative of youth who accessed the organization's services—participated over the first 2 years, with a core group of 10 to 15. Youth who expressed interest in performing were invited to perform. In Year 3, nine youth, most regularly involved in devising and performing, were invited to conduct an arts-based evaluation of the project from their perspectives. Working with two graduate research assistants, the youth created a 30-min video (University of Alberta, 2012) exploring benefits and challenges for them.

Through a reading of the youth evaluation video, reference to the service provider evaluation report (E&RS, 2011), scenes we created,³ and my recollections, this article addresses ethical considerations that arose in relation to *engaging* this particular youth population: maintaining *authenticity* in our representations, allowing youth to be seen and heard, and *advocating* with, by, and for youth. Our negotiation of ethical considerations required attention to situated ethical practice (Gubrium et al., 2014; Nicholson, 2005). We needed youth to feel respected, trusted, and cared for—their well-being was our priority.

Ethics of Engagement

The youth population we engaged were commonly labeled “high-risk.” A social worker with the provincial child welfare system, who partnered with us, was, at the time, director of the “High-risk Youth Unit” and guardian for several youth. The provincial government defined “high-risk youth” as youth aged from 14 to 22 years, whose substance use interfered with their daily functioning, whose decisions jeopardized their safety, who lacked healthy adult connections, and had experienced multiple residential placements and multigenerational child protection involvement (Smyth & Eaton-Erickson, 2009). Project facilitators⁴ noted that the youth also often struggled with mental health issues, involvement with the criminal justice system, street-involvement, racism, and negative school experiences. We understood substance use, criminal activity, disconnection from family, and so on, and accompanying social stigma, as qualities not inherent to youth, but symptoms of systemic

oppressions, which obstructed their receiving support needed to overcome life challenges.

The Problem With Labels

The label “high-risk,” was useful for communicating the urgency of youth's needs to funders and service providers, but added to the stigma that the youth experienced. Youth did not identify with that label. As one youth commented in the video, “I wouldn't call myself a high-risk youth, just a youth who doesn't have as much as other youth” (00:04:56–00:05:08). Other youth described their life circumstances similarly:

[Youth like us have had] shitty cards handed to them in life . . . Not everyone has mommy and daddy to tuck them in at night and tell them it's fuckin' okay. A lot of us are really alone and scared and only have a crack pipe to turn to. (00:20:54–00:21:11)

A lot of people that live good lives or lives that have been privileged, they don't understand what we go through . . . They don't realize that even waking up in the morning is hard, stepping your foot out into a school is hard, taking a bus is hard, anything is hard when you don't got what most people do. (00:31:40–00:32:12)

We did not use the label “high risk” in our work with youth, avoided labeling the youth altogether and created a scene (discussed later) that spoke to the labeling they often experienced.

Terms of Engagement

Lack in youth's lives making their survival precarious also made their participation in the project tenuous. To navigate ethical tensions around youth's engagement, ongoing attention to their needs was vital.

Subsistence needs. We successfully petitioned the university's institutional ethics board that small honoraria for youth were appropriate, as participation would keep from otherwise attending to survival needs. As such, youth were financially compensated for attending weekly sessions; we also offered food, bus tickets or transportation, and child care to support them. We charged organizations booking our workshops a fee, which was divided among youth who performed. These were some ways the project's aim to benefit youth was enacted.

Support systems. We mitigated some challenges in youth's lives by always having present three to seven adults trained as social workers, psychologists, or outreach workers, with established relationships with youth. When occasions arose requiring support, whether a youth needed medical attention, emotional support, or conflict intervention, individuals

were prepared to support them. On one occasion, a youth's run-in with campus security—having apparently been “banned” from campus—instigated writing a letter on the youth's behalf. We questioned the ethics of banning a young person from a public institution of learning and successfully advocated for their continued participation.

Adult participants and other youth became part of youth's support systems, and kept in touch with them even beyond the project. In youth's words,

I went to Uncensored and met a lot of good people, friends that I still talk to outside of Uncensored . . . Everyone was really nice to me. I've never been so freely accepted in my life . . . When I came here [racism] didn't exist. I didn't feel like I was judged . . . They gave me a lot of support, I guess, the whole community—taught me a lot of resilience-ness. Getting introduced to Uncensored . . . got me involved with good people. (00:07:59–00:08:04 & 00:13:58–00:15:28 & 00:33:55–00:34:05)

I've gotten so many awesome mentors out of the Uncensored group that I'm so thankful for and it's totally enriched my life. Everyone in Uncensored is my friend. They're like a family now to me. Those guys are awesome. I look forward to coming here every week. It's something I'm so thankful to have in my life. (00:32:37–00:33:10)

Processes for working together. Paying attention to youth's needs, project facilitators developed appropriate processes for working with them. We knew youth were talented and capable, but kept our demands minimal to avoid adding stress to their lives. Ideally, youth would have participated fully in all aspects of our process; however, circumstances demanded flexibility regarding their engagement to maximize benefit. If youth wanted to attend, but were not interested in our agenda, we welcomed them to engage in other creative activities of their choosing, whether drawing or writing. We always had materials available and made space for them to share. We accepted youth being there just for socializing, money, or food—engagement met their needs within a positive environment. Youth expressed they were sometimes frustrated by others' varied levels of commitment, exemplified by persistent late-coming or distraction by their cell phones. Nevertheless, it was important engagement was on youth's terms. One youth explained his initial experience:

How I got involved with Uncensored was my friend invited me. This is when everybody used to be part of Uncensored. I thought, well I've got nothing else to do on a Tuesday, might as well check it out. So, I went to check it out. I liked it. The first time it was kind of annoying because there were so many people. Everyone was being really loud, I didn't know what to do. I started drawing. (00:09:59–00:10:20)

This youth eventually did join in devising, became a core performer, and took part in the evaluation. Flexible strategies prioritized benefits for youth over research goals in

ways that enabled youth engagement based on their interests and capacities while the project benefited from expertise of diverse participants.

We generally did well in preparing youth for performances, explaining what they might expect, and simulating potential audience interventions during rehearsals, but in one instance fell short. The project was well underway; we had already presented several workshops, so the process was familiar to most. A young woman just joining us was eager to perform. She rehearsed scenes, so was prepared in that respect. While we explained forum theater, we neglected to adequately prepare her for the interactive process. She was unprepared to have stories questioned, plus this workshop was for the most challenging audience we encountered. The youth did an outstanding job performing, improvising during scenes and sharing during talk-back, but was emotionally exhausted by the end. In the video, she expressed being caught off guard:

I wasn't very well prepared for my first workshop 'cause we, like, rehearsed our scenes and stuff like that. I was like “okay cool, I get to do these scenes,” but then we did the whole intervention kinda thing, like where we talked to the audience and I had no idea that was coming. So, that was really interesting. It was kinda overwhelming at a point, like, 'cause people are very stubborn. I thought it was good, but it was very stressful and I was very nervous. After that I felt I could do anything. I was on top of the world. (00:28:01–00:28:36)

Following the performance, the group consoled her as best we could, acknowledging her fine job despite our shortcomings in preparing her. We should have taken more time to orient her, perhaps inviting her to observe prior to fully engaging. Although she described the experience as stressful, she also expressed how empowering it was.

Ethics of Authenticity

In applied theater, multiple ethical considerations arise when turning individuals' stories into scenes for stage—accentuated when stories are from vulnerable individuals (Mumford, 2013). Considerations of “authenticity” in performance are contested as performance can never reproduce the real. As performances are always constructed re-presentation, authenticity is never a given, but the product of ongoing negotiation (Garde & Mumford, 2014). “Authenticity” here refers to our aim to honor youth's realities as described by them. Allowing youth to guide the process contributed to authenticity in what they offered and how they were represented.

An Authentic Need to Tell

Our process began with youth telling stories of their experiences with service providers. Most youth were eager to

share. Applied theater scholars (Salverson, 1996; Stuart Fisher, 2008) contend that those who have suffered trauma are compelled to tell about their experiences—there is necessity to be heard. Youth's authentic desires to tell drew us all into ethical encounter as listeners. There was ethical demand to create space where youth felt safe, were listened to, heard, and their stories activated to do some good in the world. We did this through attending to their needs in a non-judgmental environment, by amplifying their voices and positioning them as coresearchers and educators in workshops for service providers.

Many youth expressed how opportunities to tell their stories helped them. In two youth's words, "Being able to tell my story, Uncensored helped me in that way . . . I didn't really have the motivation to go out and tell people what I've been through, but it helps me too, I guess" (00:07:37–00:08:34).

I was asked by [name] to come to this project where I could share my past experiences. I could also have a positive outlet to express myself . . . And together the group that we made has supported me through finishing my high school diploma. (00:27:14–00:27:35)

While not aimed at eliciting youth's testimony for their healing, we recognized that, for some youth, our work had this effect. Telling their stories were steps toward making change in their lives.

Youth not interested in collaboratively devising and rehearsing were invited to contribute in other ways. Some were active creators of original rap beats, lyrics, or spoken word poetry about their lives and happily shared. We recorded contributions or youth-performed introductory pieces for workshops. We used all youth's stories as bases for our work, captured youth's stories in ways they felt comfortable sharing, and worked to meaningfully integrate them into workshops.

Fact Versus Fiction

The fact/fiction distinction in performance informs questions of authenticity. In our introductions to workshops, we informed audiences that the stories shared were fictionalized accounts of youth's experiences—abstracted representations, often compilations of several youth's stories around common themes. They were self-conscious fabrications and could not have been otherwise. As Stuart Fisher (2008) insists, testimony is never entirely based on facts, but fragmented recollections "of emotional, physical and bodily associations, and remembrances" (p. 109). Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2008) concur that representation can never provide pure, direct, or true access to reality. Our scenes were based on stories youth chose to tell, selective elements they shared, perspectives from which they told them, and the

ways we shaped them for presentation were neither "real" nor "not real" (Shaughnessy, 2005).

Salverson (1996) claims "the overly literal is a lie" (p. 184)—the right distance between facts and their representation is needed to create space to question, wonder, and change. For Garde and Mumford (2014), "'inauthentic' performance can paradoxically create a sense of authentic contact with aspects of reality and social truth" (p. 152). They suggest that play between authenticity and fictionalization is an appropriate strategy for "engagement with the act of trying to grasp social reality" (p. 164). Our scenes told emotional and experiential *truths* of youth's experiences to grasp their social realities. Our re-presentations helped bridge youth experiences and audience understandings, which required ethical negotiation between performers and witnesses.

Gubrium and colleagues (2014) note that participatory research accounts involving creative representations rarely discuss the extent participants' stories are shaped by facilitators. Acknowledging my contributions as dramaturge/director, our scenes were influenced by my aesthetic vision and facilitators' shared commitment to systemic change. We had input into choosing stories to tell, details to include and exclude. For one scene, based on a youth's story about feeling seen by service providers only as labels applied to her, I sought means to visualize the labels for aesthetic power. We created labels with clips to cumulatively attach to a youth character throughout the scene until they were completely obscured. When the service provider character saw the youth, all they saw were labels. To amplify youth's storytelling, aspects were sometimes exaggerated for dramatic effect, presenting ethical tension to balance authenticity with aesthetic considerations. While facilitators had power to inform decisions about what went on stage, youth had opportunities to confirm our collective representations as true to what they wanted to say, thus maintaining some control over means of production; decisions around authenticity were made primarily by youth.

Authenticity Effects

With a core group of five to 10 youth who chose to perform, we needed to develop flexible performance strategies authentic to youth's realities. Scenes collaboratively devised through improvisation were only loosely scripted, indicating the scenario structures, characters, key dialogue, and stage directions. During rehearsals, youth familiarized themselves with these scripts, then re-created scenes anew each time through improvisation. We never expected them to memorize dialogue, rather emphasizing particular details needed to tell the story. Roles were flexible, based on who was present and who wanted to try which role. Youth were astute at being in the moment to respond to twists that their fellow performers introduced. In forum theater activations,

youth's responses were always improvised. In talk-back with audiences, youth spoke interchangeably from their characters' perspectives and from their own experiences. This improvised quality accentuated play between fact and fiction.

We asked performers to commit to performances, but sometimes, youth who had rehearsed, were unable to attend. Then, we needed to change up roles and details of scenes based on who was there. To accommodate last-minute changes, loose structures and flexibility were paramount. Youth's performances confirmed Kidd's (1984) claim that applied theater,

may lack the polish of professionalism but it will make up for this with the authenticity and concern of people who live the situation they are presenting . . . Lack of technical skill will be overcome by great energy and vividness. (p. 8)

Regardless of how prepared or underprepared, the impact of youth's performances was impressive—the power of their presence palpable. When they got onto stage in front of audiences, youth fully embodied their expertise and right to be seen and heard. They expressed the power these experiences had for them:

Being able to go on a stage helps me . . . it gives me a lot of confidence . . . I could never do this before. (00:08:04–00:08:23)

When we went to [city] . . . I liked how they brought us down there and we were honorary guests. They made us feel really important . . . The best part was when we got a standing ovation . . . I was like, damn, people are actually learning from us. I felt like they really respected what we had to say. Ya, I felt, like, really important at that moment. (00:14:33–00:14:54)

Uncensored does empower me. It gives me a voice. Before I was completely voiceless and alone and now I'm actually able to say what's going on and actually have people hear me and actually hopefully get some support out of it . . . Uncensored has definitely helped me . . . because you're constantly on stage and constantly challenging yourself . . . so it's really good. (00:32:29–00:32:57)

Representing Youth

Issues of representation pose ethical complexities to navigate; we needed to find balance between representing youth ethically (Preston, 2008), while maintaining authenticity. Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2008) relay how feminist practitioners overcame the problem of representing or speaking for others, by speaking only for themselves. For *Uncensored*, this ethical tension was overcome by inviting youth to speak for themselves. The uncensored nature of their contributions—their stories, language, and behaviors on stage—served to maintain authenticity. As Wilkinson and Kitzinger note, however, speaking for one's identity group does not

evade the problem of assuming all members of that group share similar perspectives. While youth spoke for themselves collectively, undoubtedly, nuances of individuals' stories were lost in our compilations. The collective stories, however, avoided implicating individuals in behaviors potentially viewed as undesirable.

The nature of our scenes necessitated youth characters presented as experiencing struggles related to substance use, activities outside the law, violence, family dysfunction, and so on. Realistic portrayals showed youth engaged in self-destructive behaviors or as belligerent and uncooperative to service providers, so presented them not in the best light. Our workshops emphasized these behaviors as symptoms of youth's life circumstances and sought to offer insights into sources of those behaviors. We had to find balance, then, in representing their behavior as not unproblematic, nor position them as powerless victims, which would have been disempowering. Youth found that authentic reflection on their experiences helped them better understand their struggles: "Uncensored has definitely helped me get through a lot of issues, to understand why I was addicted to drugs a lot better and helped me figure out a lot of things about myself" (00:32:32–00:32:55). Ultimately, by taking to the stage to portray themselves and engaging in dialogue with service providers, youth claimed their roles as artists, performers, educators, and researchers.

Authentic Purpose

Speaking about their struggles was an authentic response for youth. Some said they wanted to tell their stories to educate service providers to help other youth in similar circumstances. Some said they wished to, and ultimately did, pursue careers to help other youth. In the video, two youth commented, "If I can impact somebody, or one person, that's even what I want to do as a social worker, just improve the lives of other people . . . So, doing *Uncensored* helps me do that" (00:34:10–00:34:59). "In hopes that I could benefit someone else's life, I have stayed with *Uncensored* ever since" (00:27:25–00:27:29). These youth felt their experiences of struggle would benefit their work in helping others.

Youth's performances allowed audiences to see youth in new light, as indicated by comments from the evaluation of service provider outcomes. The workshop "helped me to understand these youth as articulate individuals who have well-founded opinions and expectations"; "opened my eyes to not only the challenges and hardships [youth] have faced, but more importantly their strengths and talents"; "really made me think about who [youth] are and what they might need instead of assuming that they are only going to give me grief" (E&RS, 2011, pp. 16–17). Through performances, service providers were able to see beyond challenges, deficits, and damage by which they previously defined youth.

Regardless of measures taken to represent youth ethically and authentically, when youth experience their stories presented for public scrutiny and analysis, objectification or “othering” of their struggles is inevitable and comes with risks (Sinding et al., 2008), as in the example of our performance for police (shared in detail in the following section) where a youth reported officers questioning him after the performance. In the video, this youth tells about regularly being targeted by police because he is Indigenous. Forum theater mitigated risks to some extent by allowing for dialogic performance (Conquergood, 1985); authentic dialogue was strategic for disrupting othering. The line between potential harm and benefit in representing others, however, remains ever blurry.

Ethics of Advocacy

Anderson and Wilkinson (2007) claim agency and self-respect are assets offered through personal storytelling. Promotion of these qualities was consistent with our partner organization’s engagement of youth through the arts. The aim of *Uncensored* was, essentially, to benefit youth—to advocate for, with, and by them. While some research approaches perceive conflict between research and advocacy, in participatory research, community-based arts and applied theater, advocacy is inherent (Chatterton et al., 2007; Nicholson, 2005). The processes we developed for working together foregrounded maximizing benefits for youth and minimizing potential harms.

Dialogic Performance

Working with Theater of the Oppressed techniques (Boal, 1979), youth were, more or less, framed as “oppressed” and service providers as “oppressors” (or potential allies). Although not using language of oppression, power differentials at play in life and on stage, between youth and those meant to help them, were central to our work (Nicholson, 2005). Our ethical intention was not to blame or implicate service providers in wrongdoing (Weinblatt & Harrison, 2011), but to engage with those more powerful to explore solutions to systemic oppressions faced by youth. Our workshops opened space for youth to confront, converse with, or educate service providers. Those who attended generally wanted to do better at serving youth’s needs and were open to conversation. These were “integral audience[s] . . . already interested and engaged” (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009, p. 192), committed to exploring this content even if critical of their actions. For some, it was the first time they had candid dialogue with youth about youth’s experiences. These were “dialogical performances,” described as bringing together different worldviews and value systems in conversation—a path to genuinely understanding another, and thus an ethical performance stance (Conquergood,

1985). Based on evaluations, the dialogic workshop space offered productive exploration of power dynamics to promote understanding of youth for service providers.

Mitigating Risk of Re-Traumatization

Applied theater scholars (Salverson, 1996; Sinding et al., 2008; Stuart Fisher, 2008) discuss dangers of re-traumatizing participants when engaging in retelling difficult stories. The incidents we depicted—youth’s ineffective interactions with service providers—were not among the most traumatizing experiences in youth’s lives, but their traumatic experiences, requiring assistance, were certainly implicated in their stories. Our portrayals often touched on these inciting incidents, with disregard from service providers compounding distress experienced, heightening youth’s vulnerability in retelling—a significant ethical concern (Sinding et al., 2008). Our efforts at attending to youth’s struggles and working to address them, characterized by care and community, mitigated potential re-traumatization. One instance of storytelling, for example, rekindled conflict between two youth. The outreach worker, through close connections with both youth, was able to intervene to avoid potential escalation.

Our fictionalizing of stories helped mitigate risk, while also requiring attention to authenticity as discussed above. We sought the right balance between portraying youth’s struggles for perverse entertainment value (“trauma porn”), while negotiating risk of difficult emotions arising (van Fossen & Ndejuru, 2017). To provide aesthetic distance, externalizing stories enough to avoid re-traumatization, those who performed never played themselves, although characters were sometimes similar to them or experiences depicted resonated with theirs. In the liminal performance space, youth were simultaneously playing the “not me” and the “not not me” (Schechner, 1985, p. 123). This captured authenticity of their presentations while providing a safety net. In the video, emotion in youth’s voices and faces when mentioning difficult experiences was evident, but they never implied portraying incidents was painful or re-traumatizing. Conversely, they described opportunities to tell their stories as personally healing and empowering. What youth shared in the video, however, did not account for the project’s affects for all youth involved throughout the process. If there were adverse effects from youth’s involvement, we would surely have learned of them from outreach workers who maintained close contact with all youth.

Avoiding Damage-Centered Research

Gubrium and colleagues (2014) discuss research depictions of difficult stories as potentially “reify[ing] existing stereotypes about marginalization . . . [with] tension over the potential for both emancipatory and oppressive outcomes”

(p. 1610). As many youth participants were Indigenous, in retrospect, Indigenous scholarship supported reflection on advocacy for Indigenous youth (see Conrad, 2020).

Unanga scholar Tuck (2009) calls for suspension of damage-centered research, depicting individuals as damaged or broken, in favor of research that captures desire, is generative, and engaged. Desire-based research shifts theory of change away from an oversimplifying binary of reproduction and resistance toward synthesis of oppression and agency, creating space for exploring complexities of personhood, including contradictions, complicities, and interdependencies. It does not ignore loss and despair, but emphasizes hope, vision, wisdom of individuals and communities, and celebrates *survivance* as “more than survival, more than endurance and mere response . . . an active repudiation of dominance, tragedy, and victimry” (Vizenor, 2008, p. 15). *Survivance* indicates presence as active, vibrant, and alive, and survival as resistance to dominant discourses of disappearance. Anishinaabe/Ashkenazi theater scholar, Carter (2007), highlights significance of stories, the power of re-creation stories and re-creative acts as “survivance-intervention” (p. 61). This ethical stance was exhibited in our work.

Our project addressed experiences of youth in dire need and so featured damage narratives. However, our representations did not blame youth for their struggles, rather identified the complex web of circumstances leading to their struggles and highlighted their strengths. Our project offered counter-representations to how youth are usually perceived, showing them in new light. In one scene, for example, a youth deemed “problem student” for late-coming and falling asleep in class was revealed as a loving caregiver to parent and infant sibling.

Representing Service Providers

In advocating for youth, we minimized curtailing how youth depicted themselves or service provider characters. We worked with youth to consider service providers’ perspectives, to portray fair and realistic representations. In one scene, a youth was stranded on the city’s outskirts after a party with no money or shoes—someone having stolen them. The youth called their social worker at the end of a workday asking for help, which the social worker was unable to provide—needing to attend other obligations. The social worker suggested the youth call the youth crisis line, but the youth had already burnt that bridge, had no minutes left on their phone, and had also gotten expelled from their residential placement. In devising this scene, we fostered youth’s understandings of professional boundaries constraining service providers. Nor did scenes suggest simple solutions to challenges of giving and receiving assistance; the forum theater interventions confirmed the complexities of aiding youth.

Ethical tension arose in depicting service providers—showing negative interactions with youth was not particularly favorable to them. These were undoubtedly uncomfortable spaces for audiences whose quality of work was questioned. As our intention was advocacy for youth, and as audience members were there in professional capacities, we were not overly concerned with sparing their feelings. As critique was integral to our work (Sinding et al., 2008), it ran the risk of alienating audiences, which it sometimes did, as one service provider expressed: “Sitting us in opposition to each other didn’t foster co-operation. It was ‘us’ vs. ‘them’!” (E&RS, 2011, p. 13). Mostly, however, audiences appreciated hearing directly from youth about their experiences.

Our most challenging audience included several police officers quite resistant to critiquing their own behaviors. As resistance or defensiveness is antithetical to learning, this was an ethical tension we encountered. One scene depicted a highly contentious issue in our city: Peace Officers’ treatment of youth when caught on public transportation without proof of payment. Youth were often charged and fined, although clearly unable to pay, leading to further charges, failed court appearances, and ongoing legal barriers sometimes ensnaring youth for years. The argument against such charges was that ensuing public legal costs far outweighed the few dollars youth had not paid to access public transportation.

The scene was set in a transit station. A security officer approached two youth aggressively from the outset. One youth’s transfer was 10 minutes expired. The officer asked for ID, but the youth claimed not to have it and refused to provide their name. The officer decided to charge the youth. His attempt to handcuff them escalated into argumentative verbal exchange and ended in physical altercation. When an officer came onto stage for an intervention, they attempted to convince the youth their behavior was the problem, rather than considering how the peace officer’s behavior might change to interact more positively with the youth. In their improvised response, youth held firm to their conviction that the officer’s expectations were unjust; the intervenor also refused to budge. The performed scenario was highly unsettling for youth and the officer, forcing us to stop the performance to talk through everyone’s concerns.

Although this situation was particularly frustrating, the youth nevertheless appreciated opportunities for such dialogue with police, as evinced by the following youth’s comments:

The most memorable workshop for me that Uncensored put on was because some of [the audience members] were really awesome and really worked with us well and the other half was really resistant. It was interesting to see that balance because usually people are really nice and they’re all like, ya, we should work with you that way instead of this way, and these guys were like, no, you have to listen to us because we’re right and you don’t know what you’re talking about, you’re just a stupid street kid. It was interesting. (00:10:20–00:10:44)

Uncensored gives me an outlet to speak my voice, to, like, cops. I get to talk to them about what they do to me. Some of them take and listen, but other cops, no. I remember one time we did a show for cops. Those cops still seemed like they were on duty while they were at our workshop. They were like interrogating me on the side while I was there, but I still got to speak a little bit. At the graffiti [workshop], I was talking to those cops. It was good because they took and listened. The cops from [another city], they were nice. They went back to [city] and did a workshop on attitude adjustment. I felt good about those cops. [The other cops] felt like they have to follow their guidelines instead of taking our advice . . . like, okay, we have to gain a little respect for these kids and build a relationship. (00:28:56–00:34:59)

Youth indicated that the workshops provided them opportunities for empowerment—to speak out, be heard, and make a difference. They were able to analyze the instance with police when they felt unheard by comparing it to other occasions they felt were more productive. The question remains whether this workshop had any impact on how police officers view youth or might respond to them in future.

Unanticipated Repercussions

Applied theater scholar Thompson (2008) notes that, however altruistic intentions of an applied theater project, it is always bounded by historically structured power dynamics. Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2008) concur there is no possibility of completely evading the grasp of power as power is deeply implicated in constructing portrayals of others. It is prudent, then, to consider how our project performed within larger sociopolitical contexts and what adverse repercussions might have arisen.

Thompson (2008) suggests applied theater, as advocacy, can be both therapeutic and political in “shift[ing] between tactical and strategic performance practice” (p. 121); “tactics” enact private temporary resistance, whereas “strategies” maneuver toward public structural change. Arguably, our project succeeded at its tactical outcomes in giving youth opportunities for moments of empowerment, but there also remained many unresolved ethical tensions. Was youth empowerment enough to justify exposing their struggles? How might our representations have hindered youth, in ways not considered? Did our project have any lasting structural impact? Did listening to youth’s stories really change attitudes and behaviors of service providers? Or did it merely expose youth to the gaze of service providers, whose listening was sometimes conflicted? Did exposing youth make them vulnerable to appropriation by public opinion? Did it reinforce the view of street-involved youth as broken and damaged, despite efforts not to? Did it merely serve to feed the “trauma industry?” Although answers remain elusive, such questions must be asked in relation to any applied theater project.

Concluding Thoughts

Our commitment for Uncensored putting youth’s needs first demanded flexibility and ongoing efforts at negotiating ethical terrain. Our success at enacting a situated ethics—attending to specific contextual needs—allowed for endurance and efficacy of the project. Stuart Fisher (2005) asks, “Can the performative nature of applied theatre create an opening for the possibility of a genuine ethical encounter; an encounter that brings the community to a clearer and more defined understanding of its own situational context?” (p. 252). Ultimately, the truth of youth’s situations illuminated through the project showed that youth can claim power and agency to affect their own lives.

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Notes

1. “Applied theatre” describes a web of performance practices . . . played in spaces that are not usually defined as theatre buildings, with participants who may or may not be skilled in theatre arts and to audiences who have a vested interest in the issue taken up by the performance or are members of the community addressed. (Prendergast & Saxton, 2009, p. 6)
2. Evaluation of service provider outcomes conducted by Evaluation and Research Services (2011), University of Alberta, showed that “81% of exit survey respondents [80] and 85% of follow-up survey respondents [20] indicated they found the workshop useful or very useful” (p. 7).
3. I referred to loosely scripted scenes we developed, photographs, and video recordings of some scenes.
4. Project facilitators included me, the applied theater researcher; the social worker/guardian; two outreach workers and a volunteer from the organization; and four graduate student assistants with expertise in psychology, applied theater, and/or participatory research.

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