

Theatre-Arts Pedagogy for Social Justice: Case Study of the Area Youth Foundation in Jamaica

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In this paper I describe and analyse the socio-educational significance of a theatre arts approach to learning for young adults in Jamaica, implemented by the Area Youth Foundation (AYF). Briefly outlining the genesis and development of the AYF, I provide snapshots of the experiences and destinations of some of its young participants. The paper discusses AYF workshops to show how the pedagogy was shaped by the expressive arts and based on the critical praxis approach systematized by Paulo Freire in adult education and Augusto Boal in theatre. Based on interviews with AYF's leader and some of the learners, I discuss how the foundation's motto, "Youth Empowerment Through the Arts," is played out in workshops and creative productions that are simultaneously learner-driven and teacher-guided, with the powerful impact of inspiring politically thoughtful creativity and skills in youths from less-privileged communities.

This paper is a case study of a theatre-arts approach to learning for young adults in Jamaica, implemented by the Area Youth Foundation (AYF), a non-profit, non-government organisation. The essay is based on qualitative methods that describe and reflect on the socio-educational significance of the pedagogy and learning practised in AYF. Following a case study approach proposed by Robert Yin (1984), I study the phenomenon within its real-life context, when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are fluid, using multiple sources of evidence. I first set the Jamaican context that frames the work and development of the AYF. The content of the case is drawn from information that I obtained from AYF participants—students and the executive director/leader—through semi-structured interviews, conversations, and observation of their workshops and rehearsals. Themes that arose from the transcribed material are described and analysed. I relate this to my theoretical understandings of literacies (Hickling-Hudson, 2007) and Freirean pedagogy (Hickling-Hudson, 1988), and I apply these to explore the significance of the work of AYF.

Stating my background, in the tradition of qualitative research, I start by indicating that I was introduced to the AYF by Sheila Lowe Graham, a Jamaican friend and colleague who established AYF and leads the implementation of its work. Over several visits to Jamaica between 2000 and 2012, I was excited to see more of the work of the group, for it seemed to be establishing the kind of alternative approach to education that I knew was desperately needed. My interest in this field stems from my Caribbean origins, upbringing, and experience as an educator working in the 1970s and 1980s in the less-privileged schools, teachers colleges, and adult education programs in Jamaica and Grenada (see Evans, 2009; Hickling-Hudson, 1995). My commitment gradually became one of developing a postcolonial approach to curriculum

design and pedagogy (Hickling-Hudson, 2011), postcolonial in the sense of celebrating the culture and interests of my students and challenging the legacies of colonial oppression.[1]

Context: A Socio-Political Framework for Understanding the AYP

The effects of economic and educational underdevelopment are clearly visible in Jamaica, a society that has been wrestling with complex decolonisation and development issues since gaining independence from Britain in 1962. On one level, the society of 2.7 million people seems to put forward a successful face of thriving modern sector enterprises and a prosperous standard of living for affluent groups. But below that surface, the majority is affected by a downward spiral of educational and economic ineffectiveness that contributes to a 20.1% illiteracy rate (Jamaican Foundation for Lifelong Learning, 2008), a high unemployment rate of 14.2% in 2012 (Statistical Institute of Jamaica, 2013), a high poverty rate, and a high rate of crime (United Nations, 2007). Hostile rivalry between supporters of Jamaica's two political parties (a legacy of the British "Westminster" system) has turned the poorer inner city areas of Kingston, the capital, into dangerous places for their inhabitants. Party supporters and drug "dons" on both sides obtain guns, mainly from the USA, which are often used against the rival party or gang. The murder rate averages 60 per 100,000 inhabitants—the highest in the Caribbean and the third highest in the world (*Caribbean Journal*, 2012). Many of the murders occur in the "garrison" communities of inner-city Kingston, so named because of the political rivalries that force the divided residents to barricade themselves against perceived enemies on the other side.

The movement of decolonisation in Caribbean societies, as in many developing regions, has been characterised by contradictions: on the one hand, the struggles of the people to address the injustices of the deeply stratified society inherited from British colonialism, and on the other hand, continuation of the privilege, elitism, exploitation, and deprivation that are features of these injustices. Much of the crime and violence in Jamaican society stems from these deep divisions.

The socio-educational status quo also reveals divisions and associated contradictions. Excellent schooling is available in Jamaica and most of the Caribbean. It is the kind of schooling that is world-class in content and prepares students to excel in difficult academic examinations and move into higher education and high-status employment. But it is only accessible to a minority, as shown by figures describing examination performance in the Caribbean's high-status school leaving examination, the Caribbean Secondary Examination Certificate (CSEC). A small percentage of school-leavers earn "passing" grades in five or more subjects, qualifying them to pursue university studies and professional careers. Most students fail to attain five passes, and even worse, the majority of the 15-19 age cohort does not even sit for the examination.[2] The destinations of the latter group of young people include unemployment (37.0% among the 15-24 age group in January 2013, according to the Statistical Institute of Jamaica), subsistence living, or technical and vocational training and middle to low-level jobs. The low educational levels and high unemployment rate among a large minority of young people limits their socio-economic chances, and in the words of a UN report: "makes female youth vulnerable to sexual exploitation and adolescent pregnancy and puts male youth in an extremely vulnerable position, which might lead to participation in criminal gangs" (UNFPA, 2011).

AYF participants, ranging in age from 16-25, are the victims of the inadequate and inappropriate educational provision in marginalised schools that is imposed on most young Jamaicans who come from impoverished urban and agricultural communities (Evans, 2001; Hickling-Hudson, 2004). Some who join Area Youth are non-literate or have low levels of literacy or a sub-standard education. Many dropped out of school, and others left without completing examinations that offer entry into jobs or further education. They are unemployed or semi-employed at minimum wage. They come from an environment of economic precariousness, political division, physical danger, and frequent trouble with the police (see Levy, 2009). Some youth also have to deal with other types of trauma, such as hunger and physical and sexual abuse.[3] One of the AYF participants whom I interviewed recounts traumatic events in her school environments:

I went to X Primary, then Y Primary [naming two inner-city schools]. It was pure violence. We used to hear shots, and I vividly remember when I saw a woman lying in the road dying, with the blood running from her . . . We were afraid, as girls, of being pulled into a dark building. Mummy had to take me aside and counsel me what to do in case . . . Then I got to go to Z Technical High School. There was a lot of violence. The school needed a back wall—it led into (naming the city streets) and men would come in freely. I remember a schoolboy dying there, at school. It seemed to me that that came from an ongoing problem. There was a little fat boy and they would take away his lunch money every day and he would have no lunch. I'm sure he didn't mean to stab them, but he did and the guy died, and he's now in prison. If you saw anything you couldn't tell, for they would call you an informer. I remember another person being chopped and the blood spraying—I cried and cried.

Framing and Designing the Study

It is against this background that I discuss in this article the value of the educational approach of the AYF. Drawing on a socio-political theory of literacies that I put forward in earlier work to analyse the quality of adult education (Hickling-Hudson, 1995, 2013), I observe that the pedagogical approach of the AYF sets out to develop in its young participants the types of “literacies” in which they have been short-changed by the substandard schooling they receive in Jamaica. The AYF develops these literacies by utilising a unique style of pedagogy,[4] some aspects of which draw on the dialogic learning approach popularized by Paulo Freire (1972).

I argue that “literacies” may be understood as sets of competencies, text-based knowledges, and interactional behaviours that are the foundation of one's level of social influence. The quality of an education system may be determined by how well or how poorly it develops these literacies, categorised as:

- *Humanist literacy*: the interpersonal and intrapersonal skills and knowledge of self and other in relationships in different contexts;
- *Epistemic literacy*: knowledge of content and discourse in academic disciplines;
- *Technical literacy*: the technical skills and knowledge of working procedurally; and
- *Public literacy*: competence in contributing to the public sphere and deploying public structures for the social good.

On visits to Jamaica in 2000 and 2004, I received permission from the AYF project leader to study aspects of the project and had the opportunity to visit AYF headquarters. I was introduced to group members working on costumes, scripts, sets, and other theatre activities, and over a few days, four males and six females agreed to talk with me about their experiences in the project and more generally. These were “opportunity interviews,” conversations with AYF members who happened to be at the site when I visited and had the time and inclination to talk with me.

I used a mixture of tape recordings, for those who were comfortable being recorded, and notes. I asked my interviewees how they came to join Area Youth, what they liked doing in the group, and how it had influenced their lives. I also visited some of the AYF workshops and rehearsals for a drama production to observe the teaching and learning process between the young people and their facilitators.

In the years that followed, I went when I could to AYF workshops and performances, and continued talking with project leader and director Sheila Lowe Graham about the work of the group. This article, therefore, is in the genre of a reflective case study, examining the case of an educational program in social context, and reflecting on its significance in terms of pedagogy and social justice.

Development of a Theatre Arts Program for Inner-City Jamaican Youth

The AYF theatre arts education program, which began in 1997, throws into sharp profile the economic, political, and educational context of Jamaica. First, it reveals that lives of the young participants embody not only the injustices of Jamaican society, which relegate many people to acute economic and educational disadvantage, but also its warring politics. Second, the very high level of education of the founders and implementers of the program contrasts with the disadvantaged circumstances of the young participants.

Sheila Lowe Graham, founder and leader of the AYF, did her first degree in English, French, and Spanish literatures at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica, and holds a Master of Arts in drama from Catholic University of America, Washington D.C., U.S.A. She worked as a Senior Specialist in the Department of Cultural Affairs and then as Caribbean Coordinator in the Executive Secretariat for Education, Science and Culture at the Organization of American States, headquartered in Washington D.C. AYF co-founders Winston “Bello” Bell and Owen “Blacka” Ellis are both theatre arts graduates of the Cultural Training Centre, now called the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts, in Kingston, Jamaica. “Bello and Blacka” were, at the time, a popular comedy duo. The occasional teachers and guest speakers recruited for AYF workshops are also highly qualified. The facilitators of learning in the AYF are in a social segment of the society that positions them to exert influence in creating, implementing, and sustaining social initiatives like this program.

Although instructors receive an honorarium when there is a funded project, the nature of the work is mainly voluntary. Graham has been able to sustain her voluntary work managing the AYF over nearly two decades. Understanding her roles as founder, executive director,

facilitator, and project leader is central to understanding the AYF and its strengths and limitations as an example of socio-educational change.

Graham's commitment to drama and its possibilities for improving education in Jamaica led to the establishment of the youth group, which evolved out of a specific theatre project (see Graham, 2007). As the managing director of "The Company Limited," an innovative amateur theatre group, Graham and fellow dramatists aimed to produce Nigerian Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka's play "The Beatification of Area Boy." This play, in which young people are led into criminality by a charismatic leader in Lagos, Nigeria, echoed the situation in Kingston. The theatre that was selected for the production was a 200 year-old Victorian playhouse situated in a once-elegant section of Kingston that had degenerated into an urban ghetto embroiled in turf wars.

The theme of the play led the producers to see the possibilities of engaging the at-risk young people in surrounding areas in an experiment with using drama-in-education methods to challenge the situation of political conflict between neighbouring garrison communities in inner-city Kingston. She explained: "Our overall goal was to give youth in rival zones of the city an opportunity to work together—to create understanding across chasms of misunderstanding that were literally deadly: cross the street and you could be dead" (2004 interview with Graham).

In the months leading up to the production, Graham and her colleagues recruited 100 teenagers and young adults to participate in the adventure of theatre education. They worked with Graham and her team to learn to collaborate in creating performance pieces out of their life experiences and their hopes for the future. These pieces became the material with which the leaders created a revue they called "Border Connection," which was performed for Soyinka in lieu of a traditional audition. This musical revue became so popular that it was requested and performed for several years in communities around Jamaica, attracting large audiences. The theme of "Border Connection" addressed the violence and social decay of neglected communities, asking, in the first half: "How we come to this?" The second half of the revue projected positive solutions: "Yes, there is better way."

Of the 70 who performed in the "Border Connection" audition, 30 stayed on to work in "Beatification." The playwright himself spent several weeks in Jamaica to direct the play (see Soyinka, 2006). An important achievement was for the leaders to collaborate with Jamaica's leading vocational training institution, HEART/NTA,[5] in making the production a special training project for the entertainment industry. In that context trainees were assigned to various departments of the production. Twelve were selected by Soyinka to act in the play. Others were apprenticed to the experts who were contracted to work on the production. They learned skills as lighting and sound technicians, as well as skills in stage management, set and costume design and construction, and craft service. Of that first cohort, many continued into careers in those areas (2012 interview with Graham). The play ran for many weeks, enjoying box-office success.

Another popular revue they wrote and produced was the reggae musical, "Link Up," which was so successful that the group was invited and funded to perform it in the UK and other

European countries. After the first year, the “Area Boy” project was developed into a registered foundation to facilitate fundraising and financial management, and was renamed the Area Youth Foundation (AYF). Attracting sufficient funds to run the organization was difficult, and at one point demise seemed likely. Area Youth members were determined that the project would continue. The group produced a newsletter, worked out strategies for its future development, and asked the facilitators to continue to provide pedagogical and organisational support. This worked, and the Foundation is still in operation today.

The diversity of the audiences that attended AYF performances illustrates the range of people the group reached. The production of Wole Soyinka’s play was marketed to the ticket-purchasing, arts-loving, theatre-going people from middle and upper income groups who were attracted by the expectation of an excellent production of work by a Nobel Laureate. However, when the group performed in disadvantaged urban (and a few rural) communities, the audiences were mostly the people who lived there. Some performances were sponsored by different types of organizations. For example, a large public relations agency sponsored the staging of a special Christmas celebration performance in Kingston for their clients, who were some of the biggest private sector firms in Jamaica. The group was also commissioned to perform for the prestigious annual “Norman Washington Manley Award for Excellence” celebrating one of Jamaica’s National Heroes. This was attended by persons from the highest levels of government and the private sector. For ten successive years the group performed at impresario and philanthropist Chris Blackwell’s Oscar Night party at Strawberry Hill, an exclusive hotel in Jamaica’s Blue Mountains. The organisers of the event ran a lottery as to the Oscar winners, and proceeds were donated to AYF. On one occasion, the human rights organization “Jamaicans for Justice,” campaigning for state forces to be charged for killing a mentally ill youth, invited the group to perform on a street corner. This performance was attended by civil society activists, the media, and community residents. On another occasion, the group performed for HRH Prince Charles when he visited Kingston in 2001.[6]

In spite of its sterling work with up to 3,000 young people over 16 years,[7] AYF’s existence has always been precarious and dependent on fundraising. In the absence of government funding, AYF’s director has to devote much time to applying for grants from funding agencies, and carrying out other types of fundraising necessary to sustain the not-for-profit program. Over the years, the AYF has received sponsorship from various organisations to help it continue. Some of the funds went towards paying school fees for those youth who wanted to go back to high school to take exams they had not been able to take while in school. The grant agencies from which funds are sought may or may not decide to give temporary support to the project. The uncertainty of this financial situation is the most difficult problem AYF has to tackle (see Yard Edge Blog, 2008).

In the organisational structure of the AYF, the facilitator-teacher team shares responsibilities. Graham leads and organises the work of the Foundation and secures funding. The work of teaching drama skills, producing shows, and rehearsing with the actors is shared by Graham and others, including at various times Winston Bell and Owen Ellis, previously mentioned colleagues who are skilled musicians and dramatists. Recently, an alumnus of the AYF, James Bell, took the role of general and financial manager. Facilitator-teachers, some of whom are AYF alumni, work as workshop animators and participate in the creation and delivery of outreach activities.

The foundation's motto, "Youth Empowerment through the Arts," is demonstrated by the AYF's activities. The bedrock of all of the arts-based work in the AYF is the pedagogical process that helps the young people develop their life skills and their "literacies"—an issue I will develop further. In summary, however, it can be observed that the young people's learning involves a variety of social, educational, and artistic activities:

- writing songs and creating music videos;
- producing musical theatre performances both in Jamaica and overseas;
- working on film sets such as with the U.S. film *Third World Cop*;
- making video productions of local docudramas and documentaries;
- producing a set of "photo-novella" booklets about issues that deeply concern them (HIV/AIDS, unemployment, and drug and child abuse);
- sharing their newly-learned skills to assist development in other inner-city communities;
- training in entrepreneurship and life skills; and
- providing technical assistance and advice to members who wish to start their own businesses.

Learning Journeys in AYF: "It's a Home to Us"

The AYF project has had a deep personal impact on the young participants. From interviewing them, I learned that many see the project as an important source of stability, confidence, and growth. Participants referred to AYF as a "second home," and "the best thing I've ever done." Some talked about the new skills and knowledge they had acquired through the AYF. Others spoke of how AYF enabled them to go on for higher education, and others highlighted how AYF encouraged them to be non-violent.

During interviews, Graham informed me of the events and careers in which some of the young participants were involved after they completed their sojourn with AYF. As she explained, most participants had grown up in inner-city Kingston communities they call "war zones," referring to conflicts that originated between the two major political parties in Jamaica but are more likely to be between rival criminal gangs. Most participants went to government schools (new secondary schools, comprehensive schools, and the "senior primary" grades of all-age schools), which constituted the lower strata of schools in the Jamaican school system.

Some of the AYF participants I interviewed had happy memories, but their overall assessment of schooling was negative. Some said that they had wasted much of their time there, learning little. Others mentioned that their parents could not afford to keep them at school to complete the school-leaving exams. Some felt that they had been short-changed by the poor quality of the education they received. Some explained that their learning suffered because of frequent changes of school as their families were repeatedly forced to flee when community violence flared up. While some had taken school-leaving exams, they had attained few passes. Others had low levels of formal literacy. Most of them had no prospects or hopes of employment, and were just hanging around the inner-city streets with little to do.

Here is how two of the participants, Kenny and Mike, described their background and experience in AYF, focusing on the technical knowledge and skills they learned (names have been changed to protect privacy).

Kenny: I went and learn a trade--woodwork at a furniture company. I learnt a good amount, but I never stayed there, because of a fight in the men's room. . . . Me find out sey me have a talent in music—DJ, to make songs and shows. I had a singing talent from I was about 12. My cousin had a component set, and every night we would experiment with it . . . I saw Area Youth on TV but I never knew which part it was. They advertised a meeting and I went. I have a deep voice and I sing in the bass line. I've been in the group for three years, since it started. I learn a lot from the movie project. I saw what the camera assistant needed, and they put me to help. I had to deliver to them what they wanted.

Mike: I left school before I graduated, and went to learn a trade. I did cabinet-making, with Kenny. . . . Then we saw the “Area Boy” program advertised. I went to audition and sang for them. I've been with the group from the start. After the play, we got a chance to see how a movie is created. We worked on the set with *Third World Cop*. This group, Area Youth, has given us a lot of skills in theatre. I'm still not a big-big actor but I can handle myself—there's always a lot of things to do. That's why we don't want to leave this group—it's a home to us.

This excerpt from Janet highlights a learning journey that valued the opportunities provided in AYF seminars for personal and inter-personal reflection, growth, and conflict resolution. Her increased self-esteem set the foundation for her to take her love of drama further.

Janet: I was at home doing nothing and just used to sit on the street side with my friends. Then Bello [Winston Bell], Sheila and Blacka [Owen Ellis], they were in the park. And they announce that if you want to join Area Youth, you just have to sign a form. And I sign and bring it in, and I got chosen to be in the group. We did a lot of exercises at the Ward Theatre. We learn how to trust and things like that. We really learn a lot. I was so aggressive. I was so ignorant: if anybody said anything to me. I was, like, ready to jump at them . . . They (AYF tutors) teach me a lot of things, like self-esteem. I believe in myself now, that you can be anything you want to be, but don't let anybody come in your way, and don't let a negative vibe come in your way. They taught us how to live together, show respect, love one another. They learn us how to resolve conflict, not just jump at people. You get to know that you can resolve conflict in different kinds of ways, without fighting and quarrelling. It really do a lot for me. From primary school I love drama, and this gives me the opportunity now to go further, to do something with it . . . I love this group a lot. It's three years now I've been here.

In the quote below, Nadine emphasizes how being a member of AYF gave her a direction in life based on the theatre skills she was learning, plus information about the possibilities of further education. She also comments on the powerful and calming social effect of the AYF for other people.

Nadine: How I got into Area Youth—I saw the ads on TV and decided to try out the audition. And it's the best thing I've ever done. It gives my life a direction. I

wanted to go to a college, but didn't know how or what to do. But working with Blacka [Owen Ellis], who teaches at the college, opened my eyes to those possibilities. I'm doing makeup in our Film Factory. One day, I want to be a production assistant. Area Youth has a powerful social effect. Sometimes we do workshops in our communities, and people have told us that it helped them see things about violence and encouraged them to stop it. I try to be calm and non-violent now, although as a child I was violent: I would buck you and crab you up, scrape you with my nails. But my mother prayed about it, and I grew out of that behaviour.

Marlene's reminiscences feature the role of the AYF in helping her uncover her hidden talents, as well as a deeper self-confidence that made her realise she didn't have to "settle for a desk job." She stresses the social learning that had been important for her and others, describing how the AYF members gradually came to trust each other and passed on techniques that helped their neighbourhood communities change their hostile behaviour and strive to achieve their yearning for peace.

Marlene: I graduated from secondary school and I wanted to be a secretary, but when I became part of this group I discovered I had more in me. I discovered I could write, sing, dance. I write beautiful poetry. Being in the group showed me that I didn't have to settle for a desk job. Mr. Bell, Sheila Graham,[8] and Mr. Ellis helped me to develop skills and confidence. I've even been writing film scripts. How I joined them (AYF) was I heard they were recruiting. When I went, there was a long line—hundreds. But I got in. When we started the exercises we found that all of us in the different communities had one thing in common—we wanted peace between the communities, we wanted to bridge the gaps. There were community rivalries and that caused segregation and "don-ship." We wanted to try and eradicate those borders. Now people from Matthews Lane, South Side, and Tel Aviv are like a family, but before we wouldn't talk to each other. We couldn't socialise, because we were called "informers" and could be killed. In Area Youth we come up with dramas based on incidents in the community. People remember the dramas and it helps them change their behaviour. If a brother falls down, don't laugh at him—pick him up. Our group has changed the social behaviour of some of the communities. Even the baddest man want peace—he want a night's rest that he can sleep without a weapon in his hand.

Most AYF members who complete the program have been able to achieve employment that would not have been possible without their AYF learning journeys. The AYF encouraged and assisted many of its members to complete their schooling. Some participants went on to tertiary education and now have successful careers in Jamaica. Omaall, for example, earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the University of the West Indies, and is now a teacher, performance poet, recording artist, and film maker. Fogo, who owns his own business, is a lighting designer and does lighting for shows and special events. Claudine is an airline agent in Montego Bay. A few members achieved notable success overseas. Andre graduated from Columbus State University, Georgia. Craig has his own band, "In Transit," based in Orlando, Florida. Ricardo (also known as Billy) graduated from the University of Wolverhampton (UK) in 2012, and is still

broadcasting as “D.J. Chill” from the Midlands. He now works as a team leader in The Prince's Trust Team Programme at Birmingham Metropolitan College. Marlon is an actor who played in London's West End in the musical, “The Harder They Come.” Jessica, after playing Nala in the European production of “The Lion King,” went on to act in another production in Germany. Ricky has his own production company, writes his own plays, and is an actor in London.

The participation of another AYF member called Marlon in the program motivated him to take a path that led from non-literacy, to catch-up schooling and vocational qualifications. According to his posting on Facebook:

Marlon “Seek” Smith, August 2012

Ok face book friends time to let you all into my world:

- I learned to read in 2001. Since then I have graduated from Loyalist College, which is one of the best colleges in Ontario, Canada. In 2010 I went and got my high school equivalency diploma, following up in 2011 with a certificate in the skill trade of Construction Renovation Techniques.
- I was one of the luckiest people to have been a part of the Area Youth Foundation family. Because the love that I felt was like no other, I will always refer to those people as my Area Youth Foundation family.
- I think of myself as a boy trying to understand what a man is. My Area Youth Foundation family has helped me to stand on the road to that path.

However, even the AYF experience does not prevent some participants from suffering from problems of violence and upheavals in Jamaican society. Sheila Graham knows of five AYF members, ranging in age from 13 to 18, who have been shot and killed, and she says the lives of other young participants are being distorted by violence. For example, Jimmy has been unable to continue attending school, despite his desire to do so. At the age of 13, he became so motivated by the AYF project that he applied to go back to school and started attending a technical high school. He had to drop out because it is too unsafe to cross “enemy territory” to get to school. Tony is on bail after having been framed on a charge of illegal possession of a firearm. His case has been postponed several times because the police, having no evidence against him, fail to show up at court each time the case is called. Peter has been in jail since 2008, pending a hearing, because a woman told the police that he murdered her son. She knows he didn't, but according to her: “Somebody has to pay.” He was recently released after being held for years without charge.

Pedagogy and Learning in the Area Youth Foundation

AYF program pedagogy is built on a combination of insights from selected educators (see endnote 4). From my observation, aspects of the program particularly resonate with the learner-centred approach of Freirean pedagogy, and with the interactive drama approach of Augusto Boal. Paulo Freire views knowledge as a process of critical praxis, made and remade after reflection. He practiced his deeply held belief that knowledge must be dialogically created from interaction between learners and teachers. In this counterpoint to a colonial model of education, the teacher's style is dialogue with the learners rather than an authoritarian “banking” of information. Learners, guided by teachers, jointly investigate and analyse themes of significance

to their lives (see Hickling-Hudson, 1988). The learning and knowledge created through this “Pedagogy of the Oppressed” (Freire, 1972) is political in the sense that it identifies and challenges unjust and oppressive structures and patterns that characterize class-stratified societies.

The Brazilian dramatist, Augusto Boal, utilized drama as a vehicle for Freire’s dialogical and political approach. He developed a technique of ‘Theatre of the Oppressed’ (Boal, 1993) in which actors, during the course of the play, invited audiences to engage directly with them in representing or finding solutions to the problems being acted out on stage. This, in turn, influenced the technique of process-drama now utilized by many drama educators.

The dialogical pedagogy, application of knowledge, and socio-political consciousness-raising of these approaches are evident in the work of the AYF teachers, who, in using them, also develop the “multiple intelligences” (see Gardner, 2000) and the “literacies” of their students. The AYF teaching team helps the young people articulate their own experiences and turn these into creative works. In the process, the youths encounter many aspects of education that they have missed.

In spite of the non-formal setting of the AYF, there is a carefully structured curriculum, taught by the AYF leader and at least two additional tutors. Working through the curriculum takes approximately nine months. However, some members stay on indefinitely as AYF associates, who help when needed as facilitators or assistants in artistic productions. The AYF curriculum includes these phases:

1. *Introductory and closing activities*: The young people, in small groups, talk about the best and worst things that have happened in their lives, and share their vision for themselves and their future. This enhances a sense of sharing and trust. The life skills that need to be acquired if they are to achieve their vision become the basis for workshops. Each session ends with a relaxed winding down of activity and further dialogical reflection on what was learned.
2. *Developmental activities*: The tutors select topics that relate to the particular problem that has come out of the initial group discussion. In workshops, topics such as the following are explored in some depth: a) interpersonal communication; b) coping with conflict; c) uses and abuses of power; d) gender relations, parenting, and family life; e) healthy lifestyles; f) taking a stand on social issues; and g) the world of work.
3. *Artistic activities*: Song writing, theatre productions, creating music videos and photo-novellas, and working on film sets are some of the artistic activities that emerge from the process.

Workshop guest speakers raise topics such as sexuality, family life, group relations, psychology, and the development of Jamaica and its social structure and tensions. Guest speakers may include prominent people such as newspaper editors and university lecturers, or leaders from the community who share the challenges faced by the young people and have learned to overcome these challenges, sometimes bringing about change that ameliorates these problems. The speakers relate to the group in an entertaining way, through anecdotes that illustrate social issues

and invite discussion. These structured sessions exploring social issues help the youth to develop a wider knowledge framework.

AYF's leader expresses the teaching/learning significance of the process in this way:

The discussions with the participants give us the basis for teaching and working with them. We now know who they are, what they are thinking, what is important to them. Everything flows from that. Our building blocks are who they are and what they already know. Everything they create comes out of this—they write a poem, create a dance, or a song, or do a small skit. Then we can further develop the storyline from that material. It can even become a musical stage show that develops as we rehearse it. The group talks about the story expressed in the skit, poem or song they created. Who is the hero? The protagonist and antagonist? What are some of the ways in which it could end? We, the facilitators, become directors who will make it work as a work of art. We might say: "That piece doesn't work there, let's try it somewhere else." (2012 interview with Graham)

An important feature of the pedagogical process is the development of the humanist literacies of the young AYF members. They learn to interact with each other in a positive way instead of in an aggressive way. Observing that many of the youth started the AYF program full of aggression, Graham felt that this stemmed from a subliminal anger at how the society marginalizes them and their communities. Inequality of income, education, and social standing combine to intensify a sense of grievance. The facilitators aim to get the youth to work out alternatives to aggression. "We ask them to remind themselves constantly that a 'diss'[9] is not a crime! It doesn't have to lead to a fight! They have this cosmic inferiority complex . . . Anger is constantly breaking out—everything is a cuss-cuss!" (2004 interview with Graham). The work of developing self-knowledge and self-understanding has the goal, of "having access to your own emotions, knowing yourself" (2012 interview with Graham).

When the group staged a musical theatre production titled "Family," it emerged from workshop sessions in which they explored the intimate side of what happens at home. This opened social sores, such as abuse and lack of love and care. Some of the group members had, as children, been given away by their mothers (absent fathers being the norm[10]) to someone else to raise them because their mothers couldn't handle them or couldn't afford them. This left the youth with deep trauma. "If you are not worthy of love from your mother, who's going to love you? This reinforces the feeling of the lack of regard, lack of respect from the society" (2004 interview with Graham). The teaching team sometimes had to get the Family Court to intervene in cases where young women in the group had been sexually abused by males in their family or community. With these kinds of difficult family circumstances, getting the young people to think about who they are, to achieve positive knowledge of themselves, "is a constant struggle, a lot of what we do" (2004 interview with Graham). Part of this process is education to improve gender relations. It is notable that the ratio of young men to young women in the AYF is usually 60/40 or more. Graham thinks that young men are especially eager to become AYF members for many reasons. It appears that the practical nature of the program attracts them, that they are less willing than young women to go into other more traditional types of educational programs, and that they tend to be bolder than many young women when it comes to experimenting with unfamiliar

forms of creative expression (2012 interview with Graham). Given the crisis of disproportionate male underachievement in education in Jamaica,[11] it is important to explore why learning through the AYF is so attractive to young males.

The technical literacies developed in AYF workshops and performances are the basis of knowledge that will help the young participants to envisage and pursue careers. For example, through the *All in Pictures* photo-novella or comic-book project, AYF members created a series of illustrated booklets in comic-book style about issues that deeply concerned them, including HIV awareness, crime and violence, unemployment, and drug and child abuse. To prepare the young people, the teaching team taught them skills of constructing and writing stories—learning about plot, protagonist, antagonist, problem, resolution, and conclusion. The groups enacted dramatic improvisations on topics they selected; these became the basis of the booklets. Then they designed costumes and sets, acted out and photographed each scene for the booklets, selected the most suitable photos out of the hundreds they had taken, up-linked the photos into a computer graphics program, wrote “conversation bubbles” in Jamaican Creole and narration in Standard English, edited the booklets for final production, published and marketed them. Thus, the production of the photo-novella series involved an intense teaching/learning process that was both theoretical and practical. It developed the group’s understandings of socio-political issues, creative writing, and drama, as well as skills in digital photography, computers, editing and publishing printed material, and marketing.

The work of Area Youth members in creating musical theatre, film, and text develops not only their technical/artistic skills, but also their overall educational levels and the epistemic literacies relating particularly to Jamaica’s cultural industries. Having to learn a script is enormous motivation for systematic reading, and this leads to reading improvement. Those who are involved in writing scripts for the group improve even more. The young people might find themselves acting, casting, preparing costumes, assisting the director or the producer, preparing the location, doing makeup, graphics, sound, camera operations, or electrical work. These activities prepare Area Youth members to work in the entertainment industry, which is booming. As AYF’s leader observes, “they are learning rare skills which are in demand” (Graham, 2007).

Another way the AYF teaching team helps to develop the epistemic literacies of the young people is by organising help with formal schooling for any group members who asks. Tutors work with those who ask for help with reading and mathematics. With low levels of functional literacy, most of the youth do not have the skills to pass exams in the Jamaican educational system. AYF’s leader explained that they are good at oral expression in Jamaican Creole, but find it difficult or impossible to write exam answers in standard English (2012 interview with Graham). Therefore, extra help is essential for them. Although the overall pass rates in school-leaving exams are low, some group members have attended the Edna Manley College for the Visual and Performing Arts, completing a three-year teaching diploma in drama-in-education, and some have graduated from universities in Jamaica and abroad. Additionally, the Area Youth project gives some participants opportunities to develop leadership skills by encouraging alumni to work alongside project teachers as peer facilitators in workshops and community development projects.

It is also important to note how the AYF teaching team helps to develop the young people's public literacies, in the sense of their competence in contributing to the public sphere and deploying public structures for social good. This is vividly evident in the healing of political divisions between AYF members, and their use of drama, music, and art for social advancement in their local communities. An example of how AYF has contributed to peace-building in troubled communities was its organisation of *Peace Boat*, an unprecedented community sports and cultural celebration that brought hostile communities together after violent local elections in 2003 (see Graham, 2007). This is work with a socio-political impact. The AYF is reaching out to communities and helping to heal political divisions. The group decides to go to communities where they could have the most impact, or they simply go to communities that have invited them. They offer workshops using the group methods they have learned—talking about problems in the community and developing skits and songs. AYF members initiated collective mural creations in some of these communities, inviting residents to consider how they would like their community to be visually portrayed. The workshops start with doodles and informal sketches of participants' ideas. A visual artist later compiles these into a picture suitable for a mural, and transfers the drawing to the mural on a large, public wall. Community members then paint the mural, filling in the colours.

The Mountain View community in Kingston presents a striking example of the positive impact of peace work by AYF members collaborating with other state and civil society organizations. Former gang leaders of fighting factions came together and created a united Community Council. They all received mediation training and still collaborate to defuse tensions whenever there is a flare up. A location under the control of one area leader has been renamed the "Eastern Peace Centre" and is the site of a basic school, homework centre, youth club, football team, and recording studio.[12] The young man who operates the centre was the protégé of the area leader and himself a gang member. He began to change course by supporting AYF's efforts and then becoming an AYF member. He is now a UNICEF youth Xchanger and has travelled for UNICEF to Ethiopia, the UK, and the USA. He has received scholarships to international community leadership training programmes, and his goal is to study one day for a PhD in Anthropology (2012 interview with Graham).

Conclusion: The Socio-Educational Significance of the Area Youth Project

In this article I discussed how the Area Youth Foundation's motto, "Youth Empowerment Through the Arts," is played out in workshops and creative productions that are simultaneously learner-driven and teacher-guided. These productions and workshops have powerful impact, developing the humanist, epistemic, technical, and public literacies of the participants in the sense of their improved knowledge and competencies in a wide range of discourses and skills.

The poignant stories narrated by my interviewees illustrate their growing social understanding, increased conflict-resolution skills and technical competencies, and efforts to improve their communities—to summarise, their experience of absorbing the "literacies" embedded in the AYF program. The AYF has made a difference in Jamaican society by addressing a gap in the education system. It has worked successfully with several thousand young adults whose socio-educational needs were not being met, and it has served to carve out a respected and admired social niche for participating young people. This contrasts with the marginalisation these youth

suffered while growing up in divided and troubled inner-city communities. The theme “transforming lives” (Yard Edge Blog, 2008) relates aptly to the lives of most AYF members. For young adults who have been disadvantaged by substandard schooling, the powerful learning experiences provided by the AYF help them to have a chance of becoming successful and effective, not only in their careers and social relationships, but also in their ability to challenge and change entrenched public injustices, as suggested by their success in reducing antagonism and violence among different community groups.

AYF educational experiences are not intended to substitute for schooling. The project director pointed out that the work of AYF should be a complement to formal education, not a “remedial teacher” (2004 interview with Graham). However, if the approach were to be used as a component of formal education, it could help change Jamaica’s dysfunctional system. The unique arts-based approach of the AYF could be applied to changing the narrow confines and abstractness of traditional curricula in schools and adult education programs. As Mark Figueroa (2010) observes: “In the Caribbean, our students are required to be far too passive; they are trained to be risk averse and are forced to engage in endless rote learning in a school system that is oriented more towards passing exams than learning and developing life skills. Such characteristics are in conflict with male gender socialisation and an education reform that would benefit boys as well as girls.”

The cultural relevance and economic effects of creative and applied learning are of vital importance in an environment of high unemployment. Television programs and movies in Jamaica are overwhelmingly imported, especially from the USA. These and other homogenised products of globalisation are increasingly displacing local media content (see Gordon, 2009). The AYF’s success in training young people to create, develop, and implement artistic media and theatre products drawing on local roots is of cultural importance in this regard. The development of interpersonal skills and community interaction through AYF programs is particularly important in locations where community cohesion has been broken down. This interpersonal approach would almost certainly improve formal school curricula. Building on student knowledge would be a contrast to the neo-colonial tradition of valuing a single type of academic knowledge as supreme. The lesson is for education to focus far more than it has in the past on giving learners opportunities to develop the self-knowledge and interpersonal intelligence embodied in humanist literacy, to reflect on their life-worlds, and to connect with their communities.

Voluntary associations such as the AYF are helping Jamaica to achieve its goals of providing educational services to adults who have been poorly served by the formal education system. Pointing out that some 70% of the Jamaican labour pool has no certification, Jamaica’s Minister of Education, Hon. Ronald Thwaites, estimated that some 150,000 to 200,000 adults could benefit from new measures that the government aimed to put in place to expand access to adult learning--measures that included increased adult basic education through e-learning and a new high school equivalency program (Robinson, 2012). With such an urgent need to expand adult education, the Ministry of Education should support and encourage voluntary programs such as the AYF. Such a step would eliminate the precarious process of winning competitive grants for discrete projects that the AYF depends on to survive. A move by the government to recognise and support the teaching of multiple “literacies” would also address the challenge faced by the

AYF of depending on the goodwill of highly skilled volunteers. It could be of social and educational value for the Jamaican government to assist the continuation—and expansion—of this and other non-formal learning institutions that have demonstrated social worth and educational excellence over a sustained period.

Notes:

- [1]. As a Caribbean educator, I had the powerful experience of working with Paulo Freire for two weeks as one of the facilitators in a teacher education workshop in 1980 in Grenada (see Hickling-Hudson, 1988). This became a watershed in my educational development (see Evans, 2009, pp. 219-220). Another watershed was my deeper exploration of the interaction between literacies, pedagogies, and social stratification and how this relates to adult education (Hickling-Hudson, 1995, 2013). Since 1987, while continuing my work in teacher education in Australia, I frequently revisit the Caribbean to keep in touch with educational developments there (see Hickling-Hudson, 2004, 2006).
- [2]. The privileged apex of the school system in Jamaica and most Commonwealth Caribbean countries consists of private, fee-paying preparatory schools (Kindergarten to Grade 6), and independent fee-paying high schools which are “grant-aided” by the government (Grades 7 to 13). The majority of primary and secondary schools, entirely government-funded, are at lower levels of the educational hierarchy in terms of resources, teacher qualifications, and students’ socio-economic background, social status, and academic performance (see Evans, 2001, pp. 1-15, for an overview of schools and schooling in Jamaica). Jamaica’s high schools, taken as a whole, fail to provide adequate education for the majority of students. Examination results in the school-leaving Caribbean Secondary Examination Certificate (CSEC) were particularly low in 2012. In the core subjects, 46.2% passed English and only 31.7% passed Mathematics (see *Jamaica Gleaner* Editorial, August 2012). In the cohort of 50,000 students enrolled in Grade 11 in 2012, some 20,000 did not sit the CSEC exams. Of those entered, only about 17% passed five subjects including English and Mathematics (Henry, 2012).
- [3]. Dr. Patric Rutherford (2010) refers to a study revealing that 15.5% of the students who attend schools in the inner-city communities of Kingston suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder resulting from their experience of violence and abuse. Dr. Yvonne Bailey-Davidson (2011) points out: “The most recent data from the National Council on Drug Abuse show that 23% of (Jamaican) teenagers aged 13-15 years are having suicidal ideation and 22% have attempted suicide. Depression, anxiety, substance abuse, sexual abuse and domestic violence can predispose teenagers to have suicidal thoughts.”
- [4]. “AYF’s unique methodology harnesses the artistic disciplines of theatre and drama, music and dance as educational, social, cultural development tools to stimulate personal development and behaviour change, impart useful skills which enhance opportunities for employment and advance the imaginative talents of poor and excluded people in the creation of democratic and inclusive societies. It applies elements of the theories and practicum of Harvard’s Howard Gardner, U. Chicago’s Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, anthropologist Oscar Lewis, Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal of Brazil, Britain’s Dorothy Heathcote, Jamaica’s Dennis Scott and Honor Ford-Smith and those developed in over twenty years of collaboration of AYF’s founders Sheila Graham, Winston Bell and Owen Ellis” (written correspondence from Sheila Lowe Graham, 2012). See also <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Area-Youth-Foundation/114840015241111>

- [5]. HEART Trust/NTA is the acronym for the Human Employment and Resource Training Trust and National Training Agency. A member of the International Labour Organization, it organizes vocational and technical training and certification, and sets standards for the TVET system in Jamaica (see <http://www.worldskillsjamaica.org/index.php/item/1-heart-nta>).
- [6]. Information about the audiences is based on written information supplied in 2013 by Sheila Lowe Graham. As well as directing local performances, she was in charge of taking the young people abroad to respond to overseas invitations to perform, and provided the following information about the European audiences: “In London, ‘Link Up’ was staged in Brent, one of the boroughs with the highest percentage of immigrants from the Caribbean, Africa and Asia. The audiences were a mixture of white English people and ‘new English’ descendants of the immigrant population. The group also performed at Theatre Royal, Stratford. In Huddersfield, West Yorkshire, the group performed at the prestigious Lawrence Batley Theatre. Word of mouth from the London audiences sold out the two performances there. In Italy, excerpts from ‘Link Up’ were performed at the annual international Reggae Festival, Rototom Sunsplash, to audiences of reggae-loving Europeans. This was followed by performances at a Festival Village in Rome and then at Limone sul Garda, a tourist resort town in the Italian Alps. On another visit to the UK, AYF members performed in several disadvantaged urban communities in a London festival called Summer in the City, and in Liverpool in an international youth festival called Global Euphoria, which was part of the cultural programme for the Commonwealth Games—the opening of which was attended by Her Majesty the Queen.”
- [7]. The AYF director estimates that some 3,000 young Jamaicans have been learners in Area Youth Foundation workshops. However, records are not specific as to which participants were engaged long term or short term. Many thousands more have participated in outreach activities that take place in the communities (e.g., the Peace Boat).
- [8]. AYF’s director is variously addressed as Sheila, Miss, Miss G, Auntie, and Mummy (the latter two are normal usage in popular Jamaican culture). Very few call her “Mrs. Graham.”
- [9]. Jamaican vernacular that means “disrespect.”
- [10]. According to the 2011 census, 80% of children in Jamaica are born out of wedlock, and many of these do not have their father’s name on their birth certificates. Many relationships take the form of multiple sequential partnerships over the prime child-bearing and child-rearing years, with arguably adverse effects to family stability (see Henry, 2013).
- [11]. Of Jamaicans aged 15–24, 26.2% males and 7.9% females are illiterate (UNFPA, 2011). Females outperform males in examinations to enter high school, in school leaving exams, and at university (see Figueroa, 2004). Observations made by Barry Chevannes (1999) concerning the roots of problems in male identity in Jamaica remain relevant.
- [12]. This news extract suggests the benefits gained from the work to heal divisions and promote peace:
- Gunshots every night, burned-down businesses and corpses up to a half-dozen a day used to define the neighborhood of Mountain View on the eastern hillsides of Kingston, Jamaica’s capital. But not anymore. Now, the nights are filled with barefoot soccer matches under streetlights or block parties that bring together former rivals from local gangs. No one has been murdered in Mountain View for three years. “The dark cloud is moving away,” said Keith Nugent, 76, a tailor in the neighborhood who counsels former criminals. “Young people here are beginning to gravitate to a sense of life, and

function.” (*Urban News Hour*, 2013, retrieved from <http://urbannewshour.com/news/the-murder-rate-is-down-40-in-jamaica/>)

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