

Exploring school exclusion and oppression with Boal

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Abstract

This article is an overview of research underway which investigates early school leavers' experience of school exclusion and oppression. Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed has been implemented as a research methodology to provoke dialogue on this aspect of early school leaving, and to afford participants in second-chance education a space in which aspects of their stories can be given voice and made visible. In this paper I will present a summary of some of the work, and an illustration of how Boal's techniques have been adapted in an attempt to create a more transformative and collaborative research process.

Key Words: School exclusion, oppression, second-chance education, Boal, creative research methods

Excerpt from a focus group

'Good of you to join us Charlie'. The teacher raises his voice sarcastically as Charlie slumps into a chair, the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up over his head. 'Do you have anything to say for yourself?' 'Oh for God's sake,' mutters Charlie under his breath, rolling his eyes as if to say 'here we go again'. 'What was that?' 'Sorry, right OK? Sorry'. The teacher nods his acceptance that for this time a situation has been avoided, and makes his way back up to the board.

This is the opening scene to 'Dropped Out or Kicked Out?' a seven minute dramatization of a school exclusion, written and performed by Kildare Youth Theatre. I'm showing it on a projector to a group of five men between the ages of 21 and 49 in the education unit of a prison. The scene culminates with the principal being called for, after Charlie refuses to leave the class for using bad language. I pause the video.

'Would any of that be reflective of your experience in the classroom?'

There is a marked pause and some studied tea stirring before one of the group responds, politely but clearly conveying that the scene witnessed bears little similarity to his personal experience.

'Just the messin'. A lot worse than that one. Yea a lot worse. Anytime the teachers would turn around someone would get hit with something. Get a smack with something flyin' across. Rubbers going flying.' (Rory)

The others follow suit, keen to contrast their experience with the dramatization now that the cat is out of the bag with regard to how far removed the performance is from their reality.

'Do you see the way he was told to leave the class? We would have been dragged out of the class. And he wouldn't have said I'm going to get the headmaster. You would have just been taken out and whipped to bits like.' (Kevin)

'If you were talking like that in the class (in the video), the teacher, the nearest thing to them, the duster whatever they had, just thrown at you.' (Simon)

'When I came to this country I had an English accent on me... I just couldn't get Irish. I couldn't even pronounce the words... so they used to just kill me. They used to just bait me. And the more they'd bait me the more I just switched off... where I just sat down like yer man on the telly (in the video).' (Alan)

Context

In January 2015, prior to the field work of this research study, I facilitated a drama project with Kildare Youth Theatre with the objective of creating a short filmed dramatization of a school exclusion. All of the group had been members of the youth theatre for between one and three years and were therefore experienced in dramatic play and performance. All, bar one, were in mainstream secondary education. 'Dropped Out or Kicked Out?' evolved from eight workshops, which followed Boal's format for Theatre of the Oppressed (2002).

'Dropped Out or Kicked Out?' is currently being shown to focus groups, who have experienced school exclusion and who are now in 'second chance' education. Participants are asked to comment on how the piece should be changed to make it more realistic/reflective of their own experience. While participants in this study are not expected to act out their suggestions and modifications as

would be typical in a Theatre of the Oppressed workshop session, the dramatization will be modified and re-made based on the feedback. The revised piece will be shown as part of the dissemination process of this study.

To date, there have been four focus groups involving 22 participants, 4 female and 18 male. Fifteen individual interviews have been conducted following on from the focus groups. Participants range in age from 15 to 59 with an average age of 26. This is a work in progress.

School exclusion

Literature on early school leaving consistently focuses on the characteristics of, and the consequences for the early school leaver. In terms of characteristics, we know that gender is a predictive factor in school completion, with males significantly more likely to leave school early. We know that early school-leaving is especially high among students from families of low socio-economic status and among ethnic minorities such as travellers; and we know that drop out is far more prevalent among children with lower levels of intellectual performance (Byrne & Smyth, 2010; Downes & Maunsell, 2007; Eivers *et al.*, 2000). In terms of consequences, early school leavers are more likely to become lone mothers, unemployed, imprisoned, alcohol or drug dependent; are more likely to have poorer physical and mental health, and unsurprisingly given these ill-fated odds, have lower levels of self-esteem (Smyth & McCoy, 2009; Byrne *et al.*, 2008; Byrne & McCoy, 2009; Freeney & O'Connell, 2009).

It could be argued that early school leavers who have experienced exclusion, are the same as early school leavers only more so. This cohort is ten times more likely to have special educational needs, between three and ten times more likely to be in care, five times more likely to be economically or educationally disadvantaged, and far more likely to have an emotional behavioural disorder than their peers (McCrystal *et al.*, 2007; Duncan & McCrystal, 2002; Parkes, 2012). The consequences for excluded early school leavers are also magnified. Huge proportions of offenders have been expelled (O'Mahony 1997; ACJRD, 2007 cited in IPRT, Barnardos & IAYPIC, 2010). An unpublished report on heroin addiction and young people conducted in New York, found that in a sample of heroin users, 80% had experienced some form of school exclusion prior to their heroin use (Wisely 1997 cited by Duncan & McCrystal, 2002; Moran, 2001). Finally, research conducted by Patricia Moran evaluating four early intervention substance misuse projects (2001), presents a clear link between school exclusion and homelessness.

However, focusing chiefly on the characteristics of early school leavers and school-excludees does little but create further stigmatization. ‘Branding’ or ‘labelling’ is a theme that has emerged consistently in conversations over the course of this research.

For Kevin, his label, acquired in primary school, stayed with him throughout his schooling:

‘If they didn’t know who was messing they’d just pick the worst person out of the lot... That’s what used to happen to me.’ (Kevin).

Rory found that the area, and the estate that he came from, automatically branded him a thief:

‘If something goes missing I’d be dragged up the principal’s office ‘just tell us where it is and we’ll forget about it’. And I’d be ‘it’s nothing to do with me’ like.’ (Rory).

Statutory response to school exclusion and drop out

Youthreach is a national programme of second-chance education and training in Ireland, located within the Further Education sector of the education system, designed to target early school leavers. Since its establishment in the 1980’s, Youthreach has been a fundamental element of the response of the Department of Education and Skills and the Government to early school leaving and educational disadvantage (DES, 2010). In a report by the Joint Committee on Education and Skills for the Houses of the Oireachtas (2010), Saint Vincent de Paul expressed concern stating, ‘it is important to ensure that Youthreach is not being used simply to remove underachieving or ‘problematic’ students from mainstream education’ (p. 241). Indeed, an evaluation of Youthreach cited examples of questionable ‘co-operation’ with schools willing to offload students considered ‘troublesome’ (DES, 2010, p. 41).

Certainly, there appears to be an element whereby the grouping together of ‘troublesome’ young people increases the risk of anti-social behaviour, in particular drug use. A survey of participants attending alternative education projects in Belfast, showed an increase in drug use prevalence rates, with school excludees reporting substantially higher levels of substance abuse (McCrystal *et al.*, 2007 p.14). While some participants in this study have had predominantly positive experiences in alternative education settings, for others such as Rory and Leo, it has marked another step down a slippery slope, particularly with regard to exposure to drugs and criminality:

'When I got into XXX, I was even more into taking drugs. Cos the people around there, they're all doing that. Look it, you'd be going in and be basically selling drugs to people in XXX. So you'd just be going in to make money...' (Rory)

'I was onto bleedin' smoking drugs, I was onto smoking hash, going out robbing cars, bleedin' robbing houses, anything at all. Cos I was mixing with different people there you know what I mean? Older people. Older young fellas.' (Leo)

Unofficial school exclusion

Charlie is in the principal's office with his mother. 'We think that Charlie would be more befitting a more alternative style of education Mrs Hughes. He could learn a trade...would you like to be a plumber Charlie?' 'But he's only 15. Could he not stay and do his Maths and his English first?' 'What we're trying to say Mrs Hughes, is that given the circumstances...we don't think we can have Charlie in the school. This a better course of action for everyone involved.'

This is the final scene of 'Dropped Out or Kicked Out?' I turn off the projector.

'Would your experience in the principal's office have been anything like that?'

The dramatization of an unofficial or informal expulsion, clearly resonates with the group:

'Spot on. That's the way they spoke to my mother. I wasn't expelled, I wasn't suspended, I was told to get out of the school. I left in second year and I was on the books. I had trouble trying to get in to another school then.' (Matthew)

'I thought I was getting expelled, so I thought 'I'll try in for another school', which I did...but they wouldn't take me cos I was on the books.'(Rory)

Unofficial expulsion has been highlighted as a potential cause for concern in many of the reports on this issue (Duncan & McCrystal, 2002; Parkes, 2012), and yet is often promoted as being in the best interest of the child/parent before permanent exclusion becomes inevitable. However, as highlighted by Rory and Matthew, this tactic can have far-reaching consequences, not to mention the fact that in failing to add informal exclusions to official rates of school expulsion, it is impossible to assess the true extent of this problem.

Working with Boal

‘...all theater is necessarily political, because all the activities of man are political and theater is one of them.’ (Boal, A. 1993. Preface).

The initial motivation behind working with Boal as a methodology, was to find a method which could encourage focus group participants to express their views on the subject of school exclusion and oppression in a more general fashion, conscious of both the sensitivity of the topic and the vulnerability of the cohort. Another was based on generating a means by which a more complex and sensitive understanding of young peoples’ perceptions of injustice within the school system could be achieved. Finally, it was hoped that by creating a media tool which could be used to ‘present’ the educational experience of an ‘at-risk’, it could foster greater empathic understanding, and aim to reduce the existential gap between those for whom the education system works, and those for whom it doesn’t.

Several of the participants of the study are acutely marginalised, in prison, in care or homeless. People with whom it may be difficult, for some, to find a sense of solidarity. Boal (1993) sees theatre as a weapon, and empathy as; ‘the most dangerous weapon in the entire arsenal of the theater and related arts’ (p. 113). To illustrate this point he gives the example of ‘wild west’ movies, where we empathise with ‘the cowboy who can knock out ten bad men...even when those men are Mexicans defending their land and even when the audience is Mexican!’ This, according to Boal, is the antithesis of stimulating societal transformation, in that it is designed to bridle the individual, adjusting him/her to his/her pre-existing conditions. In order to provoke individuals into changing society, Boal urges us to look to other forms of theatre, and proposes Theatre of the Oppressed, where the drama or story is presented from the perspective of the ‘oppressed’.

Theatre of the Oppressed (1993) turns the notion of traditional theatre, where there is a separation between the actors on stage and a passive audience, on its head. Just as Freire (1972) gave us the flipped classroom, and teacher-students and student-teachers, Boal gives us the ‘spect-actor’, and invites the audience onto the stage. In so doing, the spect-actor transforms not only the fiction of the performance, but himself. Boal sees this invasion as a symbolic trespass, a necessary step in the path to freedom from whatever it is that oppresses us. Boal’s theatre opens up thinking on other forms of practice, and how it is conducted.

Adult education aspires to be a transformative social movement for the creation of a diverse and just society (O'Brien, 2013). In adult and community education research, working with creative methodology and employing design elements such as Theatre of the Oppressed that work toward transmuting feelings, thoughts and images into an aesthetic form (Barone & Eisner, 2012), the possibility for research participants to trespass upon aspects of their own experiences, thereby transforming his or her social reality, might be opened up (Flint, 2015).

Boal in adult education research

Grummell (2007) argues that the growth of discourses of individualism and market competitiveness in adult education policies, where all responsibility for self-fulfilment is placed on the individual, constrains the emancipatory potential of second chance education, thus marginalising critical and emancipatory forms of adult education (p.1). The structural phenomenon of Theatre of the Oppressed whereby 'the oppressed becomes the artist' (Boal, 1995), allows for an interruption of status in that the so-called 'oppressed' gains agency and is called to speak, participate and author alternative narratives as a collective, thus moving away from the idea that social suffering is an individual's fault (Connolly & Hussy, 2013). Within the aesthetic space of Theatre of the Oppressed, which Boal describes as 'tele-microscopic' in that like a powerful telescope it brings things closer, these narratives can then be communicated and witnessed in a collective context.

I believe that incorporating Boal's techniques into adult education research not only provokes understandings that traditional research methodology might fall short of providing, but is also aligned with the ideals of adult education as outlined by Grummell (2007, p.6) 'empowerment, participative democracy and societal transformation.'

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