

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Storying worlds: using playback theatre to explore the interplay between personal and dominant discourses amongst adolescents

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Abstract: This article explores the ways in which playback theatre was used to interrogate the views of adolescents on their social context(s) and establish what the personal and dominant discourses operating in their views were. Playback theatre, with its focus on reframing personal stories to generate new perspectives on these stories, was an appropriate tool to do so. By referring to participants' reflections, we demonstrate *how* playback theatre intervened in the interplay between these discourses and how meaning(s) and understanding(s) were (re)imagined to negotiate new avenues pertaining to voiced issues.

Key words: playback theatre, personal discourse, dominant discourse, discursive repositioning.

Introduction

This article reflects on a playback theatre project with an adolescent participant group enrolled in the multi-branch NGO Khulisa¹ Social Solutions' Marokolong Awareness programme in Hammanskraal, South Africa (discussed in more detail later). The project aimed to interrogate the views that the group held on their social contexts. Our point of departure was that should the dominant and personal discourses operating within their views be identified, it may be possible to intervene in the interplay between these discourses to encourage participants to envision alternative modes of engagement in/with these contexts.

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In order to understand how playback theatre worked towards the ends of our project, the conceptual underpinnings of playback theatre as drawn from relevant literature explain our engagement with playback theatre. We specifically use the concepts of storytelling, the aesthetic paradox and witnessing to create a theoretical framework for reflecting on participant's responses in relation to the aims of our project. We then explain how these elements of playback theatre were used as tools for negotiating new understandings pertaining to voiced issues, as presented through participants' personal discourses. The purpose was not to determine the 'truth value' of stories, but to specifically work with participants' *perceptions* of their circumstances and experiences as illuminated in their stories. Our focus was on what the use of playback theatre activated in this context rather than on playback theatre per se.

Programme, process and participants

The Marokolong Awareness programme is one of a number of programmes that the multi-branch NGO Khulisa Social Services (hereafter Khulisa) offers. It primarily focuses on self-development and self-reflection to promote emotional development, confidence building, decision-making skills and community building amongst adolescents. The specific Marokolong programme that we were involved in was located in Hammanskraal (about 45 km from the capital city, Pretoria) and was presented within a lower middle to low income community that faces social ills such as substance abuse and crime, to name a few. The participants were a multi-cultural, multi-lingual group of both sexes², aged between 15 and 18 years. According to Khulisa the group faced a number of challenges, for example lacking adequate social skills, struggling with taking personal responsibility and having difficulty communicating amongst themselves and within the larger community. The group also seemed to think that the future is necessarily limited to what they see and experience around them.

As applied theatre practitioners, we proposed playback theatre as an addition to the existing programme, which Khulisa accepted on condition that the programme is presented in English (a major language of instruction in schools and the language of tuition of the programme), a social worker is present in every session and that we teach theatre skills to participants as well. A social worker provided verbal feedback at the end of each session and written feedback on two occasions. This feedback was not prescriptive and was mainly aimed at monitoring participants' emotional safety during the playback sessions. Although being offered as part of the Marokolong Awareness programme, our playback theatre programme—an addition to the programme as per our agreement with Khulisa—did not form part of the

prescribed curriculum. Our sessions offered an extended learning opportunity.

Based on discussions with Khulisa and the broad aim of the Marokolong programme, we followed a generic qualitative approach to the research. Participants were selected based on non-probability, purposive sampling and on the basis of attendance, willingness and availability. Participants who did not wish to be part of the study had the opportunity to participate in the sessions without their data being collected or used. The participants have not been exposed to drama before the start of the project.

We created a programme consisting of twelve, two-hour long playback theatre sessions over a period of six months with the group (more information will be presented later in the article). Odia Jordaan engaged with the research as participant-observer, using DVD recordings, journaling by participants, participant reflections and her own journaling to arrive at a thick description of the processes and responses. Marié–Heleen Coetzee acted as a critical friend and engaged in second order action research by promoting reflective inquiry.

We used elements of narrative analysis to identify and map recurrent patterns and markers that make meaning in the specific context of the playback theatre sessions. Narrative analysis provides a way of interrogating social constructs and value-systems and the boundaries that frame such values/constructions, as well as the dynamics that hold the values/constructions in place (Jaworski and Coupland 1999, 6). Thus, resonating with our research aims. We explored participants' stories broadly in terms of thematic content and story-threads; recurrent patterns in narratives pointing to 'red threads' (explained later); and the social context within which the stories have been created (as explained above).

Our own backgrounds as white, middle-class, first language Afrikaans-speaking women necessarily impact on our engagement with, and reading of, the research topic, the playback theatre sessions and participants' stories. We acknowledge the multiplicity of the experience of reality and knowledge, and rather than positioning this research as an 'absolute' we offer a perspective on our explorations in a specific context³.

Khulisa's observations of the challenges the participants face aligns to a large extent with the developmental phase of adolescence. Struggles to redefine identity and questioning values (developing personal discourses), often results in power-struggles and conflict, especially with figures of authority, feeling lonely and isolated, believing that no one else has similar

experiences or feelings, and they do not believe their parents (or friends) can understand how they feel (Levine and Munsch 2011, 243–244).

Our point of departure with the programme was that that if adolescents imagine the possibilities of ‘what could be,’ (Levine and Munsch’s 2011, 243–244) instead of just relying on ‘what is’, they may begin to see/envision alternative possibilities of engaging with their world and others as well as start imagining a different future. Further, that as adolescent relationships direct impact on identity formation, they reinforce and validate values, emotions perceptions etc. amongst each other (Reagan 2015 30; 75). For us, the question of how participants can be encouraged to reimagine themselves in relation to their social context(s) was paramount. It was our contention that playback theatre was an appropriate tool to do so.

Playback theatre⁴

Playback theatre is a group–orientated, participatory mode of theatre that primarily aims to encourage individuals to re-evaluate their positions within a broader social environment. Playback theatre centres on the actions of a troupe of actors and musicians and a conductor (facilitator/host) who interacts with the audience (participant group) and encourages them to tell stories about events or experiences in their lives. Themes can emerge from stories, or the conductor can introduce a theme. Our project involved both of these approaches to engage with the aims of the research. After telling a story, the audience member (teller) can select actors and musicians from the troupe to ‘play the story back’. The troupe interprets and re-enacts these personal stories through improvisation (including dialogue, music and movement). Participants generally do not perform as part of the troupe. After the re-enactment, storytellers and the rest of the audience get a chance to reflect on what they saw on stage in the context of similar stories. This process can be repeated a number of times.

The playback theatre troupe in our programme consisted of volunteers from a multicultural, multi-lingual group of women (20-24 years old) from varied socio-economic backgrounds, living in Pretoria. Their selection was based on availability and willingness to participate in the project. Whilst we acknowledge that the playback troupe’s personal backgrounds and belief-systems impact on the way in which the adolescent participants’ stories are performed and on what may surface in the facilitation of discussions (as no mode of participatory theatrical engagement or facilitation is neutral), an investigation of the subjectivities of the troupe in relation to those of the audience falls outside of the scope of the research. The purposeful

abstraction and reimagining of stories that playback theatre offers, allows for the coexistence of multiple subjectivities in the playback experience that can be mediated through the teller's feedback (we address this relationship later in this article). Thus, there is no attempt on the troupe's side at masking the overt act of interpretation of a teller's story.

Playback theatre fictionalises and abstracts the 'real' stories that the audience members tell, the troupe giving it artistic shape (Salas, 2000: 459; 289). In doing so, the stories are necessarily altered and transformed in 'playing it back'—a kind of comment on the story of that audience and performers are aware of. In this way, meaning and understanding are negotiated between audience, players, teller and conductor. Rather than offering 'solutions', playback theatre creates a space where critical reflection can take place and where different possibilities can be imagined and played out. As audiences get to know the conventions of playback theatre, a playback performance becomes a familiar event, contributing to a sense of *communitas*. For this, we accepted Hutt and Hosking's analysis of *communitas* which refers to a sense of communal intimacy captured in a communal space (Hutt and Hosking 2005, 6). The storytelling, playback performance, process and stage layout kindles *communitas* in playback theatre. Playback theatre encourages story-sharing and to find connections between stories. This fosters meaningful dialogue via shared understandings or experiences. Importantly, it allows the storyteller to see his/her personal story from a different perspective.

This shift in perspective is made possible by representing the 'real' world on stage in such a way that the audience can recognise the representation as 'real' (the world exists), but at the same time they are distanced from that 'reality' because they are watching the world being created and interpreted (Jackson 2007, 141). The story performed is, and at the same time is not, the same story that was told. This paradox creates distance that allows the storyteller to view his/her story from another point of view (viewing oneself as another), or even multiple points of view that offers the possibility of critically re-evaluating stories, events or experiences. The paradox of "sameness in difference" revolves around the principles of described by Park-Fuller as "stability in mutability") in telling and enactment, in telling and re-telling - the aesthetic paradox (Park-Fuller 2005, 9). 'Aesthetic' here refers to the structures and frame of performance as well as the theatrical (re)enactment of a story; and 'paradox' to the simultaneity of the audiences' awareness that they are situated in reality and absorbed in fiction at the same time. The former is captured in the form of playback theatre and latter will be the focus of our discussion.

The paradox emphasises the ways in which the (re)telling of stories assist in disengaging the story from a lived experience, dismantling “pre-reflective underpinnings” of stories, and overtly re-assembling these through performance and “discursive repositioning” (Park-Fuller 2005, 10). For us, this is how the constructedness of a story can be made visible. We view the audiences’ oscillation between immersion and detachment during a playback performance as central to understanding how the paradox operates and argue that it is the oscillation between detachment and immersion that shifts the audience between primary and secondary witnessing processes, enabling the activation of the paradox and facilitating shifts in perspective.

Wake (2010, 41) views a primary witness as someone who was present and actively involved with the event and a secondary witness someone who witnesses the testimonies of others. If we apply Wake’s position to playback theatre, the teller becomes a primary witness when recounting his/her story and the audience are secondary witnesses. During the performance, the audience becomes primary witnesses as they view the performance and witness the action taking place. The audience may empathise with the action on stage, while the teller becomes a witness to his/her own story. When the teller re-joins the audience he/she becomes a secondary witness. For us, primary witnessing involves immersion and secondary witnessing, detachment. The audience and the tellers move between Wake’s two modes of witnessing, as they move between distancing/immersion, intensifying the paradox.

Storying discourses/the discourses in stories

The importance of stories in constructing the social world – providing sense, coherence and continuity - is well documented. Lapadat et al. state that: “. . . the telling of one’s story is both a construction of self and a performance of self, in which the listener/reader/viewer is implicated as witness, audience, collaborator, and co-creator” (2010, 78). Stories exist within, and reflect, discourse. Discourse reveals the form, structure and means through which stories are expressed. The form and structure of stories, not only the content, reflect subjective accents and points of view.

Whilst discourse can be understood as the entirety of codified language used in a specified domain of enquiry, systems of thought and social practice that construct subjects and their worlds, language is not the only aspect constituting discourse. Following Kress and van Leeuwen (2001), we understand discourse as a multi-modal communicative phenomenon that can

also include non-verbal and sensory domains as well as environmental texts (architecture, public space, material culture, etc.) and media.

The discourses in storytelling maintain worlds and realities and situate people in relation to the operations of power in these worlds/realities. Dominant discourses conscribe individuals into their service and are often framed as ‘natural’ or ‘truthful’, rendering the means by which the dominant discourses maintain power invisible and supporting the forces that control the production and representation of meaning and perception. In a playback theatre performance, stories that illustrate similar circumstances or experiences, or that add information to these circumstances and experiences may resurface in a performance. Within these ‘story—threads’ (Hutt and Hosking 2005, 8) or red threads, themes may repeatedly surface as a recurrent pattern within a story, pointing to underlying social issues and value systems amongst audiences. We understand the ‘red thread’ as indicative of a dominant discourse.

Each person has a unique personal history of lived experiences as well as personal knowledge and opinions regarding his/her world and reality. This creates a personal stance supported by stories that according to manifests itself as an attitude within the dominant discourse—a personal discourse. This personal discourse may change in the process of interacting with others’ stories.

It is our contention that the interplay between dominant discourses and personal discourses impacts on understandings of the self in relation to a broader social context. The tension between the two can result in personal discourses being overwritten or subsumed by dominant discourses; effecting a loss of voice and agency. Intervening in this interplay between discourses may assist in positive (re)imaginings of the possibilities of/for the ‘self’ in relation to a broader social context. Our contention was reinforced by the notion that voicing and altering personal narratives in playback theatre can foreground alternative positions that may disrupt the supposed stability and continuity of dominant narratives through “story-threads of resistance” (Park-Fuller 2005, 6). We speculated that these would be found in participants’ personal discourses operating in their stories. We further speculated that we would be able to identify what Lapadat et al. calls “turning points” in the stories in relation to the red threads that may activate shifts in perspective (2010, 78). We now turn to a discussion on what our playback sessions surfaced.

Engagement, interaction and interpretation

We will not discuss each individual playback theatre session. Rather, we will extract aspects of sessions that resonate with the aims of the project reported on in this article and map a trajectory of progression in relation to these aims.

The ‘outline’ of each of our playback sessions followed a general cyclical pattern: an invitation by the conductor to tell stories, the telling of a story, the enactment of the story by the troupe, an invitation for the teller to respond and/or an acknowledgement of the teller and the next invitation to tell. The sessions ended off with reflections on the stories through focus group discussions and journaling.

The stage was set in the same way before each playback session. As per playback form, the conductor was seated downstage right next to the teller’s chair. The musician was seated downstage left, with guitar on the floor. The actors upstage centre (in a half circle), seated on chairs (also used as props). Upstage right was a stand covered in different coloured cloths (cloth tree). Each session started with a pre-show where actors introduced themselves to the audience. Each performer shared an emotion with the audience that was then acted out through fluid sculpture⁵ by the rest of the group. Thereafter, the audience was asked to share with the group a feeling or emotion, played back by way of fluid sculpture or pairs⁶. The pre-show gives the audience an indication of what to expect and elicits participation and was followed by a warm-up where audiences elaborated on the emotions they were sharing (thus telling a short story) which was then played back through Narrative V and 3-part story⁷ in preparation for telling longer stories.

After the warm-up the conductor moved to the interview phase: inviting an audience member to sit in the teller’s chair, and tell his/her story. When the teller is done, the conductor asked the teller to choose actors to play characters the teller wants to see in the story. Once the actors have been chosen, the conductor announced the start of the performance by summing up the story and stating ‘let’s watch’—indicating that the performance will start. This was done as the noise levels outside the venue were high at times and tellers were not always audible. After the enactment the conductor asked the teller ‘Is that how it was?’. If the teller was satisfied the teller returned to the audience and if not the teller highlighted further ideas in the story and a re-enactment took place until the teller was satisfied.

The played improvised music while the actors took their place on stage to create atmosphere and signal a shift towards the main storytelling phase. When the music stopped, the actors began the performance. The storytelling in this phase included the aforementioned strategies as well as others to play back longer stories. Once the story has been re-enacted the conductor asked 'was that it?', allowing the teller to evaluate his/her story and absorb what he/she has experienced. Once the teller was ready, he or she returned to the audience and the whole process was repeated with the next member of the audience. When all the stories have been told the conductor brought the performance to a closure. During closure the actors remained on stage and the musician played whilst the conductor revisited the stories told. The actors then improvised to embody the key elements of each story before they ended in a freeze frame signalling the end of the performance. This was followed by reflection.

Although playback generally centres on 'telling' and not 'doing' on the audience's part, we specifically created space for participants to identify and embody emotions in the teller's stories as their own interpretations of this aspect of teller's stories in some sessions (discussed later). These deliberate and enhanced shifts between primary and secondary witnessing positions were done to aid participants in connecting to others' emotions and explore ranges in expression of emotion to better understand others' lived experiences.

The red threads we identified in our playback theatre sessions were:

- obligatory responsibility;
- absolute parental authority;
- a lack of mutual acknowledgement and;
- a lack of meaningful communication.

In discussing these, we will also identify responses to dominant discourses and 'turning points' that are indicative of personal discourses. We will then discuss how participants responded to playback theatre sessions in order to ascertain how their personal discourses may have been repositioned.

Obligatory responsibility and parental authority

The first session was an introductory session introducing playback theatre and eliciting the theme of happiness round meeting each other. The second

session introduced the theme of personal responsibility, which was selected in consultation with Khulisa. For the purposes of this study, personal responsibility refers to recognising the extent to which one's own actions and choices have contributed to what happens to oneself, in contrast to attributing responsibility for what happens to one, from external forces outside of one's control. From this point onwards, we were able to start identifying dominant discourses by mapping the 'red threads' in the participants' stories. As the pattern of sessions as explained above became familiar, participants became more comfortable in sharing stories.

Whereas the initial assumption was that participants need to come to terms with the idea of personal responsibility, which they seemingly lacked as they blamed others and external factors for their actions, it soon transpired that the participants have constant and multiple responsibilities that impact on the ways in which they engage with the world. What surfaced in the stories told from session two onwards, was the idea of obligatory responsibilities. Within their social context, and amongst the different cultural groups represented in the participant group, it is customary for the eldest child or the eldest child left in the household (primarily, but not exclusively girl-children) to be primarily responsible for household duties and chores, irrespective of school duties. This indicated that some participants had much personal responsibilities, in contrast to how their engagements in/with the Marokolong Awareness programme was initially read. From the participants' perspectives, the parent-child hierarchy justifies a 'logic' of absolute subordination with parents strongly displaying 'power-over' their children to emphasise parental authority and run households in line with cultural and/or societal expectations.

One participant's story illustrates the situation: she had washed the family's dishes before going to school, but on returning home, she found that her stay-at-home mother had had company during the day and the dishes were dirty again. Her mother ordered her to continue washing the dishes as they get dirty. An argument ensued, as washing the dishes repeatedly would impact on what she had to prepare for school the next day:

Participant 07: "They told me that it is my job, I am the child. I am the child so no matter what, I have to wash the dishes."

The obligatory responsibilities of the eldest child maintaining the household becomes a regulative practice, causing a sense of powerlessness to negotiate ways in which multiple responsibilities can be managed. Stories of

obligatory responsibility became a reoccurring theme (pattern) throughout the study and the story thread or red thread that emerged was that: participants perceived that, as child, you do not matter and you are not valued or recognised. The majority of participants, irrespective of gender, echoed this theme and its associated feelings of being overwhelmed by the responsibilities and frustrated throughout the six months of playback sessions. Participant 011 stated the following:

was yesterday. I was supposed to do my homework, wash the dishes and clean the house. I have a brother and a sister, my brother said I was on my own, my sister said I was on my own. Please, how do I do three things if I have only two hands at the same time, so I was feeling down.

And Participant 05 noted that:

Last week I had to wash my clothes and the dishes, do my homework and my mom wouldn't help me.

The naturalisation of these parental expectations (and seemingly, social expectations considering the recurrent pattern established across participants' cultural backgrounds) by continual reiteration and re-enactment conscribes the participants into their roles within the household, reifies parent-child power-relations and fixes the parameters of participants' identity as a 'child,' seemingly limiting possibilities for change. Siblings supporting these expectations extends the reach of the hegemonic hold such expectations have. The majority of participants felt that their needs were not acknowledged. Not being able to effectively pay attention to school work due to the emphasis placed on household duties negatively impacts on academic performance and so assist in limiting visions the future. This was illustrated in the story of Participant 05, when she was instructed to leave her schoolwork and attend to a guest in the house until the parent saw fit to release her from this duty. The impact of house work on school work and resentment towards their circumstances regarding how they had to submit to the role which had been assigned to them, in participant's stories are definite story-threads that reoccur across the playback theatre session, this becomes a recurrent pattern that point to personal discourses.

A lack of mutual acknowledgement and meaningful communication

The stories of participants in most of the sessions, but more pronounced in sessions four and five, surfaced perceptions and experiences related to parents not listening to their children and not having time for them. The idea

that parents do not acknowledge their needs and that they are ignored because they are children also resurfaced. The stories also included other figures of authority such as teachers and pastors. The themes of figures of authority not listening to them—a lack of mutual acknowledgement—were centralised. This constituted the third red thread.

Patterns of dominance and submission established in the domestic sphere seem to be duplicated in the public sphere as a number of participants' stories demonstrated. Being subject to their social realities without having the agency to engage meaningfully with the problematic around household values created a sense of disempowerment. This indicates how a dominant discourse can overwrite personal discourse.

Challenges around meaningful communication with parents appeared to be compounded by the participants' belief that they are not permitted to express their feelings towards parents or other figures of authority, especially prevalent in session 10. The 'truth-value' of this belief was corroborated by Mnisi (2013) who confirmed that, across the cultural backgrounds of participants, 'children' are not encouraged to voice opinions or express feelings related to parent-child interactions. We established that participants either kept quiet to avoid altercations with parents, or got into fierce arguments when they tried to assert themselves. This pattern was also visible amongst the participant group per se and prompted Khulisa to request communication skills training as part of the playback theatre sessions. The lack of meaningful communication was the fourth red thread.

Coupling voicing with negative repercussions encourages a culture of silence that adds to feelings of disempowerment and a replication of behaviour that supposedly signals power and authority in other spheres of their lives, such as school. The way in which communication ensues may indicate ineffective patterns of expression in communication. This permeates their interactions with their peers. In session nine, for example, participants told stories of how they would purposefully ignore others, take each other's belongings or bully others as a means of establishing authority and obtaining social legitimacy. Furthermore, repeating these patterns of behaviour over time and seeing it done by many others naturalises negative behaviour to the extent that it becomes an accepted 'everyday practice.' This in turn legitimises these kinds of behaviours. This was echoed in journals of participant 03, 04 and 06.

A prominent story-thread that formed a recurrent pattern throughout our sessions was that of isolation. For example:

I just feel like there's so much work to do and no one wants to help me.
I'm on my own (Participant 04).

Although loneliness can be seen as a normal part of life (and important for human development), feelings of isolation, loneliness and low socio-economic status can harm a person's subjective sense of well-being, self-esteem, motivation, self-control, intellectual achievement and general health.

Feelings of being overburdened and disempowered (as illustrated in Participant 04's statement), coupled with a lack of effective and meaningful communication seemed to intensify feelings of isolation amongst members of the participant group. Integral to 'isolation' was feelings of rejection, a lack of intimacy and deprivation of meaningful social and emotional connections with others. The discrepancy between the desired and the actual quality of an individual's social network (in this case mutual acknowledgement and meaningful communication) can further enhance feelings of isolation, adversely affecting socialisation as described above.

Within the dominant discourses (as flagged by the red threads), personal discourses of disempowerment, isolation and being ignored/unacknowledged rendered participants invisible. These discourses also encapsulated feelings of frustration, resentment and anger.

Having established participants' views on their social context by mapping dominant and personal discourses operating therein, as well as the interplay between discourses, we will now discuss how playback theatre encouraged self-reflective discursive repositioning.

Playing it back

In the first session, although participants were hesitant to share stories, the participants' feedback indicated that they could all relate to at least one of the stories that were told during the performance. As the sessions progressed participants stated that even though their experiences might have been different, they found some commonalities amongst the different stories and experiences. These statements foregrounds the stability/mutability interplay that Park-Fuller views as central to playback storying and that is key to creating a sense of community and intimacy amongst the group (2005, 9). By shifting witnessing positions and listening to each other's stories, individuals

not only give but also receive recognition from one another, thus reaffirming their place in the community.

The realisation that their experiences are not singular in the world was a starting point to building a sense of social inclusion and *communitas* amongst this group. This realisation built significantly over the course of the playback theatre sessions and was reflected in participant journals and the focus group discussions. They reported that they are able to relate to one another's experiences and feelings. Enhanced intimacy, acceptance and meaningful social connections with others may counter feelings of isolation, and *communitas* has the potential to mediate the understandings and experiences of isolation. The social workers Riah Hlongwane and Edgar Mnisi submitted an informal report based on their observations to Khulisa in which they also noticed this aspect as they wrote:

The group also showed cohesion and team work in the group (Hlongwane and Mnisi, 2013)

And

Being in this group empowered them; it built their self-confidence. They learn from each other; they learn from the crew and the facilitator (Hlongwane and Mnisi, 2013).

The group-oriented and participatory engagement that playback theatre encourages, fosters a sense of togetherness, mutual identification and acknowledgement, as well as *communitas*. This in turn requires participants to acknowledge that they are not alone in what they experience or feel (despite changes in context or event), that they are being heard and that they are receiving recognition—actively addressing the idea of isolation. This was also reflected in focus group discussions. The sense of community and acknowledgement that playback theatre offers can assist in bridging the gap the desired and actual quality of an individual's social interactions. As Participant 012 observed:

the sessions are all about sharing very deep feelings being able to talk and sharing laughter which brings us closer to each other in some way.

It was initially challenging to encourage participants to express feelings or opinions related to their stories, due to the power-dynamics inherent in their relationships to parents, siblings and figures of authority. In sessions three – six, we offered participants opportunities to identify and respond to the emotions they recognised in the stories of tellers. This was done by naming

and embodying emotions in the stories to a small group, as individuals to the rest of the group and as a whole group. We drew attention to the personal uniqueness in expressing emotion by comparing expressions selected as a group to those embodied by individuals. For example, participants demonstrated how they interpret an emotion and how they would communicate it to the rest of the group. The troupe and participants then played back every person's emotion to the whole group. This seemed to have created an awareness of various possibilities for interpersonal engagement in relation to the feelings of others. This also prompted tellers to focus on the relationship content rather than the action content of stories. Participants indicated that they learned that there is more than one way (than anger/conflict or silence) to express an emotion and that expressing emotion appropriately in communication contexts can enhance communication.

In response to participants' feeling that their parents and other adults do not listen to them, that they are not understood, that they replicate negative behaviour in interactions with others and that communication around a problem often escalates to silence or a fight, aspects of playback theatre such as an enhanced emphasis on music in and outside of the playback performance were used to explore these ideas.

One example includes the use of a music circle in session eight and nine where participants engaged with using the musical instruments of the playback troupe to create an improvisational musical composition. Participants initially struggled to create music as they were focussed on their own instruments, tried to outdo each other or dominate the sound. Upon inquiring about their musical choices, participants recognised that they were making a cacophony. They stated that they were not focussed on the music, but on doing 'their own thing,' and that they were not listening to what others were doing. This self-reflexive moment demonstrate that the blaming of others/external factors or ridicule of others that manifested in some of the earlier sessions—that required a similar set of communication/listening skills—were mediated and that participants recognised their own role in the unfolding of the musical event. In repeating the musical circle a number of times, participants started self-correcting and assisting others towards the goal of the musical circle without being prescriptive, blaming or making fun of others. They would stop and discuss problems with each other, without prompting from the facilitator, before restarting the exploration. In acknowledging the group-context necessary for making the musical circle work, the idea of helping others and allowing others to help you, was framed

as a strength and not a weakness. This reinforces a sense of community, encourages meaningful communication and offers an alternative means of envisioning interactions with others and by extension, the social world. After the music circle, Participant 011 stated that:

we listened and gave each other a chance. We listened to each other; we discussed it and did it together.

This comment is indicative of the “turning points” (Lapadat et al. 2010, 780). Upon asking why the enacted stories seemed to work in a focus group discussion, participants stated that, it was because the players listened to each other, respected each other and worked together. During a focus group discussion, Participants 04 and 012 said that listening and paying attention to what other people are saying, helps one to focus and respond effectively.

Explorations such as the translation of musical sounds to words and phrases (which had an embedded emotive component) foregrounded the idea that communication is not ‘talking to’ but a dialogical interaction based on mutual acknowledgement. As participant 04 observed:

when you listen to people you can’t go wrong because you understand what it is what they mean.

To facilitate dialogical interaction, participants recognised the need for listening to each other and being aware of the complexity of communication (not only words) that impacts on engagements with others. Participant 012 said that people outside of the study, including one of his teachers, told him that, whereas he previously never really listened to them or paid attention, they could see that he did so now.

Participant’s 09’s story (mentioned earlier) of her pen being repeatedly stolen in the exam impacted significantly on the participants. Participant 09 felt that the playback troupes enactment of her story and interpretation of her feelings was exact, which included emotions that she could not express at the time of the incident. Referring back to Park-Fuller (2005, 9); the story performed was not the story told as explained, but paradoxically, it was the same story—again pointing to the idea of sameness/difference. In responding to questions posed by the conductor, she came to the understanding that the centre of her unhappiness about the incident was not so much that she was being stolen from, but her friend’s unhappiness about having the pen she lent to Participant 09 being stolen. The stealing not only wasted exam time and caused stress, but impacted on her relationship with her friend. This

reinforces feelings of powerlessness and a fear of rejection. The process of witnessing at this turning point was underscored by a collective moment of listening that allowed the teller, as Hutt and Hosking (2005, 10) proposes, to “be present to” her own story in such a way that she could understand and make sense of the experiences around which the story was centred. In re-evaluating her own experience by means of seeing it enacted and being questioned about it, she could look at the experience as if, in Feldhendler’s words, the “self” became “another” (2008, 8).

When the participant group witnessed how this act (which most of the participant group initially considered a fine prank) made the teller feel, they reconsidered such actions. For example, Participant 06’s journal stated that:

stealing things that doesn’t belong to you, you end up making people sad and make them cry, and . . . you must respect other people’s belongings, before you take someone’s things trying to make a joke, think of how it will make them feel.

Participant 03 wrote:

if you steal something, make sure that you think first of how it will affect him/her.

Participant 04 came to the realisation that:

sometimes jokes are not good. . . . I have learned that if you do something, they will always have an effect

These comments signify a turning point—the way in which these participants viewed their social context shifted (albeit temporarily)—from accepting bullying as an ‘everyday’ social practice and mode of interpersonal interaction to realising that bullying impact negatively on others. This is also indicative of a shift from adolescent egocentricity to an awareness and understanding of the feeling-world and world-experience of a peer. The enactment of story distanced participants from the initial story and thoughts around the story re-positioned the participant group in relation to the pre-reflexive premises of their views on social behaviour.

Participant 09’s openly emotional statement that the playback troupe accurately expressed her feelings in playing her story back, and the other participants’ supportive responses to her feelings points to mutual acknowledgement and to the participant group re-thinking accepted ways of behaving.

Another story recounted how a group of friends had made fun of a stranger for the way she dressed, and how one person in the group then confronted the rest of the group due to their behaviour. Participant 04 played the role of the person who did not approve of the group belittling someone else. The first time Participant 04 played the story, she ended up making fun of the person—supporting the group’s behaviour. Through answering questions (why did you choose to do that?/what motivated you to say that?) by the conductor around her choices for actions, she realised that the difficulty in playing the role was centred around her usually being a ringleader for the kinds of behaviour she was meant to criticise. The challenge resided in trying to identifying with the ‘victim’. The conductor assisted the participant to step into the role again and gradually explore alternative ways of engaging with the story.

In viewing herself as ‘another’ and by offering multiple reiterations of the story and the antagonists’ role, the aesthetic paradox was invoked. It assisted in disengaging the story from the participant’s lived experience, questioned the participant’s unproblematic assumption of her place in a social hierarchy and through repeated performance, continuously re-positioned the participant in relation to her lived experience—a turning point. Participant 06 provides another example:

Seeing all those stories being played back to us, it made me feel like some of them happened to me; it made me put myself into the shoes of the people who were telling us their stories. It made me think of how it feels to be in such a situation.

This can be identified as a turning point and a meaningful engagement with a hypothetical situation. Here, the process of witnessing and engagement with the aesthetic paradox brought another element to the fore, namely empathetic engagement. Empathetic engagement with another’s and the stories of others has the potential to generate intimacy and become a building block for creating meaningful communication and relationships. We posit that empathetic engagement and discursive repositioning are interdependent and are activated by the turning points in stories.

Conclusion

The aim of the research project under discussion was to explore the relationship between dominant and personal discourses amongst a group of adolescents enrolled in the Marokolong Awareness programme. Through the

use of playback theatre, we aimed to support participants to voice their *perceptions* of their social context(s) and explore the dominant and personal discourses within those views. We aimed to encourage a process of self-reflective discursive repositioning that would encourage participants to envisage alternative possibilities, and understandings with regard to the discourses operating in their stories. This in turn could assist them in evaluating and re-imagining themselves within their social context(s).

The antinomical intersection of worlds and witnessing positions in our playback sessions activated an in-between space of engagement that facilitates a collision/collusion of worlds, witnessing positions, perspectives, stories and discourses that drew attention to the unresolved and paradoxical tensions between personal and dominant discourses in participants' stories. In doing so, this in-between space drew attention to the interplay between the stability/mutability of stories, which in turn draws attention to the conscious act of story construction. In doing so, stories and experiences are positioned as unstable constructs, rather than stable truths. This foregrounded the social construction of reality in stories and facilitated an awareness of the interplay between these levels of discourse. It is these conditions that allowed for personal discourses to be reimaged, and the interplay between personal and dominant discourses to be mediated.

We conclude that, due to the intersection between story/witness/aesthetic paradox (activating the third space), our sessions encouraged discursive repositioning (albeit temporary) allowing for varied understandings and perspectives to emerge—emphasising the construction of personal 'reality' in which meaning(s) and understanding(s) can be (re)negotiated and (re)imagined to potentially shift understandings of the self in relation to a broader social context.

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Notes

¹ Khulisa Social Solutions is a non-governmental organisation (NGO), founded in 1997 as the Khulisa Crime Prevention Initiative in South Africa that provides intellectual and emotional support to the participants in their programmes. Khulisa works internationally and partner with government departments, schools and correctional facilities and (mainly) low-income communities.

² Although we acknowledge that gender is an important marker or response and development in adolescence, an interrogation of gender differences with in the playback sessions falls outside of the scope of this article.

³ Journaling on the part of participants and the conductor, together with DVD recordings of playback sessions, reports from the Khulisa social workers, focus group discussions and a critical friend position assisted us to critically examine our assumptions about participants, the process and also become aware of how our personal subjectivities align (or not) with those of the participants (or the troupe).

⁴ For more information on playback theatre, See Salas (2000); Feldhendler (2008); Fox and Dauber (1999).

⁵ Fluid Sculpture is a non-narrative short form in playback theatre, where the actors step forward one at a time, repeating a sound and movement, all expressing one aspect of the teller's feelings.

⁶ Pairs (a non-narrative short form) are used to explain how a person can experience two opposing emotions regarding a single matter. During this form two actors participate, one standing behind the other, while an audience member participates by suggesting two opposing emotions. The actor in front starts the action, portraying one emotion, while the second one starts to enact the other emotion. The pair remains in configuration throughout the scene to create the visual sense of being one person, simultaneously experiencing opposing feeling (Salas, 2007: 38 - 39).

⁷ Narrative V (narrative short form) in which the actors stand in a V-formation, the person in the front narrates the teller's story in the third person using voice and gesture. The other actors mimic these gestures without looking at the narrator; they also echo key words and use sound to emphasise certain phrases. In '3 Part story', also a narrative short form, the conductor breaks the story into three sentences. After hearing all three sentences, the actors begin to enact the story one by one. One actor begins by embodying the essence of the first sentence and freezes, the second actor embodies the second sentence etc. The actors may interact with the preceding actor, but once frozen must remain so.