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Karen Nelson

University of Guelph, knelson@uoguelph.ca

Keely Kavcic

University of Guelph, kkavcick@uoguelph.ca

Courtney Primeau

University of Guelph, cprimeau@uoguelph.ca

Kimberlee Walker

Theatre of the Beat, kimberlee@theatreofthebeat.ca

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Theatre of the Beat's Restorative Justice Theatre Program: Highlights from the Baseline Evaluation

Karen Nelson, Keely Kavcic, Courtney Primeau, Kimberlee Walker¹

This report highlights the findings from the evaluation of Theatre of the Beat's (TOTB) Restorative Justice Theatre Program, which works with incarcerated persons at the Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVIW), a federal prison in Kitchener, Ontario. The project was conducted by the Research Shop, part of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI) at the University of Guelph, in partnership with Theatre of the Beat (TOTB), a not-for-profit theatre company with a process rooted in restorative justice principles and a passion for promoting conversations around social justice.

Introduction – TOTB background

Founded in 2011, Theatre of the Beat (TOTB) is a Canadian non-profit touring theatre company that works to catalyze conversations on social justice and its intersections with the benefits of the communities in which it finds itself. The program at the Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVIW), titled Restorative Justice Theatre, specifically aims to create theatre pieces with individuals who are not typically exposed to theatre in an effort to effect positive personal and social change. Although a relatively new idea in Canada, correctional settings globally have been using drama-based interventions for several decades. Prison theatre programs vary in scope and intention, with some institutions using theatre to explicitly target offending behaviour, and others being more open-ended or recreational in nature. While this program is not explicitly offense-focused or clinical in nature, the program's intent is to support reintegration into society through meaningful experiences of personal growth and reflection. It also serves as a mechanism to bridge gaps across the racial divides of the prison and facilitate friendships that might otherwise not exist. Part of this reintegration includes participants learning specific skills through theatre work.

¹ This paper and the research behind it would not have been possible without the guidance and assistance of many people. Our community partner, Theatre of the Beat (TOTB), collaborated with us through the entire project. We also acknowledge the important contributions of Elizabeth Jackson, Principal Investigator and Director of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute (CESI), for her continued guidance throughout the project. A special thank you to former CESI students Amanda Jenkins and Jessica Boule for their help in the early stages and CESI staff Kendra Schnarr for her assistance with data collection. Finally, we'd like to thank all participants in the program, and staff at the GVIW, for offering their time and trust to us. We are grateful for your contributions to this project.

Originally titled 'Prison Theatre Program', TOTB currently used the title 'Restorative Justice Theatre' as its creative process is rooted in the principles and methodologies of restorative justice. The TOTB methodology has been greatly impacted by Augusto Boal's work. While many of Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed" techniques are used, TOTB has not publicly labelled the program as such, or experimented with more advanced techniques. This is something that the facilitators are considering doing more of, however this has not yet been named as a main focus of TOTB's programming. They offer the following reasons as to why:

- The term "Theatre of the Oppressed" can be a barrier. Whether or not prisoners should feel "oppressed" is a discussion that would stir up many opposing viewpoints. In other settings, this style of theatre is referred to as "Theatre for Living" and/or "Theatre for liberation", which are perhaps more helpful terms in this type of setting. TOTB realizes that conversations about oppression are valuable, however they are perhaps best suited to small groups of people who have a high level of trust and an equal power dynamic – this is harder to achieve in a prison setting.
- Some of the participants, specifically those with life sentences, have expressed that they do not want to make theatre about prison or engage in discussions about being in prison while in the rehearsal hall. Participants have shared that this time together is an escape from the reality of institutional life, and they would prefer to engage in lighter topics. This has resulted in the group completing quite a few comedy pieces.
- TOTB facilitators have basic knowledge of Theatre of the Oppressed techniques, through attendance at conferences and additional trainings. However, they do not consider themselves to be "experts" in this style of theatre. They have been able to bring in experts as special guests on two occasions, but do not have the budget to do this regularly.

TOTB understands that forum theatre is very powerful. In a prison setting, stirring up strong emotions is generally discouraged. TOTB agrees that this should only be done in a situation where it is safe for participants to do so. The institution may not always be the best place for participants to process strong emotions regarding oppression they have experienced in their lives. It is very important for facilitators to

consider the impact that this art form can have on participants and institution staff, as well as on the ability of TOTB to provide future programming.²

TOTB provides education and experience to participants through a variety of theatre techniques throughout their programming year. Each programming year is generally broken down into the following components:

- **Introduction Theatre Workshop Series** (five workshops) wherein participants develop basic skills such as projecting, enunciating, facing the audience, characterization, as well as learning theatre terminology. These workshops also include lively games and improvisation exercises that help participants build confidence and relationships with each other as an ensemble.
- **Specialized Intensives and Performances** (five workshops) offer participants a chance to learn from guest facilitators who are experts in a particular style or theatre discipline, such as puppetry, playwriting, physical theatre, dance, etc. The program also hosts experts in theatrical forms specifically geared towards advocacy, civic engagement, and social justice awareness. Workshops on Theatre of the Oppressed techniques such as Forum Theatre and Rainbow of Desire have garnered significant engagement from program participants.
- **Published Play Series** (15+ workshops) provides a chance for participants to have a “classic” theatre experience of performing a published play. Play selection involves participants reading several works, discussing them, and voting on which to perform. Some participants who are not interested in performing take on roles such as stage management, costume design, set construction and lighting. Participants get to perform at least twice – once for their peers at the institution, and again for a small selection of guests from outside. This audience of invited outside guests is typically made up of TOTB staff and supporters, as well as other community members interested in Applied Theatre.
- **The New Play Series** (11+ workshops) involves participants creating their own theatrical work in a collaborative group process. The group is guided through a process of choosing a meaningful theme, and then improvising scenes, songs, and poetry that relate to this theme. Participants also perform their own work two times.

² Concerns about TO jokers and socially conscious theatre makers responsibility to be critically conscious of contradictions when working in oppressive institutions arose during the review process. Some of those are discussed further in “Editorial Comment: Liberatory Theatre in Institutional Contexts” elsewhere in this issue.

- **Newcomer Nights** (4 workshops) offer a series of introductory workshops held periodically throughout the year for inmates who were unaware of, or have yet to try the program, or are new to GVIW. The content is similar to the “Intro to Theatre” workshops, allowing newer participants to catch up.

TOTB has completed three programming cycles to date. The pilot year consisted of a variety of theatre workshops that culminated in *The Identity Project*, a 30 minute play created and performed by five participants. This play was a mix of songs, poetry, and short scenes through which participant’s explored different aspects of their own identities including racial identity/heritage, gender identity, motherhood as an identity, as well as the struggle to overcome an “inmate” or “criminal” identity. Many of the games from Augusto Boal’s “Games for Actors and Non-Actors” were used to help group members become comfortable working together as an ensemble.

In the fall of 2018 participants produced a published play by local playwright, Ciaran Myers and in the spring of 2019 participants at GVIW devised a short piece about racial diversity and stereotyping. Participants also devised a physical theatre piece for the institution’s June 2019 PRIDE assembly that told the story of one participant’s transgender identity through movement and music. Facilitators used Boal’s “Image Theatre” techniques to create this piece by asking participants to create images in small groups based on their own life experiences. The images were paired with rhythm and music and worked through in the rehearsal hall. After discussing participation observations and reflections extensively, it was collectively decided to put a variety of images together and set to music. The result was a four minute music piece that used tableau and movement to stylistically show participants’ trans and queer coming-out stories, experiences of painful rejection, as well as hopeful images that depicted LGBTQ acceptance and the steps to get there. This piece was performed for a gym full of inmates, staff and special guests.

In the fall of 2019, participants at GVIW created a play titled “This is Not the End” that focused on the themes of personal growth and self-acceptance. Facilitators also used Boal’s “Image Theatre” techniques to create this piece.

In early 2020, participants rehearsed the published play “30 Plays in 60 minutes” by the Neo-Futurists. Participants worked hard rehearsing this comedy and performed an excellent dress rehearsal right before

the COVID-19 lockdown. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the group was not able to perform as planned.

All programming at GVIW is currently on hold due to COVID-19. Theatre of the Beat sends frequent messages of encouragement to theatre participants inside, and eagerly anticipates being able to return to the prison to continue creating art with and for incarcerated people.

In 2018, TOTB approached the Research Shop, part of the Community Engaged Scholarship Institute at the University of Guelph, to conduct an evaluation of its Restorative Justice Theatre Program. The Research Shop works with local and regional organizations to carry out high impact community engaged research. It is managed by one staff supervising up to 20 graduate students from across campus. It does not operate as a fee for service model and typically works with organizations from non-profit sectors.

Aim and purpose

The purpose of this project was to evaluate Theatre of the Beat's (TOTB) Restorative Justice Theatre Program at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVIW), during its sessions from May 2018 until April 2019. While the evaluation ended in April 2019, the program itself continued to run after this date. Specifically, this evaluation aimed to address the following questions:

- What are the staff members' (i.e., TOTB facilitators and GVIW staff) and participants' perceptions of the theatre program?
- What are the audience members' (i.e., inmates at GVIW not involved in the theatre program, GVIW staff, or any others watching the performance) perceptions of the theatre program?
- How do these perceptions address objectives outlined by the TOTB, and how might they better inform the programming offered?

Methods

A variety of tools were used to assess the perceptions of the program amongst facilitators, inmates participating in the program, audience members for the theatre performances, and GVIW prison staff. To address our research objectives, several different data sources and methods of data collection were used. These included:

1. Field notes written by TOTB workshop facilitators

2. Observation notes by the research team
3. Surveys with audience members at the performances
4. Surveys with participants of the program
5. Key informant interviews with TOTB facilitators
6. Surveys with GVIW staff

Findings

Positive Impacts

Most participants expressed that the program improved their personal growth, including developing confidence, improving moods, promoting positive behaviours, and overcoming nerves. Just over two thirds (67%) agreed that their confidence increased and 61% agreed that they are less nervous when public speaking. One program participant reported that it “allowed me to come out of my bubble, develop better confidence, self-esteem, and social skills.”

TOTB facilitators echoed this personal growth as they described the growth that they were able to witness through their interactions with the participants each week. One facilitator explained that the program gives participants an “opportunity to express themselves, and a positive, open space to do so. It allows them to feel open to expressing themselves.” Another facilitator stated “...it gave a lot of [participants] an opportunity to be creative and to be open and emotional and even vulnerable in ways that they hadn’t experienced in the institution thus far, and I am really proud of that.”

Improvements to personal wellbeing

Program participants indicated that the program positively impacted their personal well-being, and provided them with joy, coping mechanisms, teamwork skills, and new relationships with other participants and facilitators. All participants reported that their overall experience with the program was positive. Nearly three quarters (72%) of program participants indicated that their emotional wellbeing improved as a result of program participation, and 78% indicated that they were better able to cope with stress.

Participants described how the program positively impacted their relationships with other participants, and fostered relationship building and new friendships. The majority (94%) of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the group worked well together. The program also provided opportunities for participants to interact outside of the theatre group, as one facilitator commented, “...participants in the program shared

that they also have been practicing when they see each other on the compound...it's neat to see folks from the different cliques making friends with each other – friendships that might not have happened if it were not for this program.” The positive relationships between participants was evident to the audience, as 100% of audience members agreed or strongly agreed that the performers seemed to work well together.

Additionally, participants described how the program experience has given them an escape from their everyday lives in the institution. One facilitator perceived that, “they’re interacting with people they enjoy, and that they’re laughing, and creating memories, some said that it feels good to laugh and smile, and to inspire the audiences, and prompt discussions...”. A program participant echoed these comments, stating that the experience “...has been filled with joy, positive and creative energies, and self-confidence building. We laughed but also dealt with real life problems, personal issues. This has brought me great relief from the mundane gloom and jail politics, into a healthy space.”

Learning (and enhancing) new skills

TOTB participants indicated that skill development, related to theatre and creativity, was an important benefit of participating in the program. Overall, 83% of participants agreed or strongly agreed they learned new skills as a result of program, and 100% indicated that they benefited from the program. One participant highlighted the potential transfer of these skills to job opportunities, explaining that “this experience has been a good start for future careers that might include stage performances.” When asked if they were able to be creative, 94% of program participants agreed or strongly agreed, noting that the program facilitators helped foster creativity among the group.

The majority (78%) of program participants agreed or strongly agreed that their communication skills had improved, and 67% felt that they are more confident now with public speaking. Program participants also indicated that the program helped with their interpersonal skills and teamwork abilities. One participant said that they “...used to have trouble working in groups, but now I am a bit better at working in groups and contributing. It isn’t so bad anymore.” Participants also expressed that the program gave them the opportunity to develop and utilise conflict resolution and anger management skills. One participant notes: “...I have a voice and I don’t need to avoid conflict. I need to figure out the best possible way to express my anger and conflict.” Similarly, another participant explained that they benefitted from the program learning, “...emotions controlling; stress managing; and relationship reinforcing and establishing [sic].”

The audience members at TOTB performances also highlighted the perceived skills of the program participants; 100% of audience members agreed or strongly agreed that they were impressed by the performance, and that they enjoyed watching the performance. The performance also appeared to evoke an emotional response in some audience members, with 86% agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were inspired by the performance.

Connecting with others in a safe space

All of the participants who completed the survey reported that the workshops provided a positive environment, and 94% believed it to be a positive experience overall working with the group. Of those who attended the show as an inside guest (i.e. inmates of GVIW), 100% believed that the performance was positive, and many indicated they were happy it was something offered within GVIW. The respondents of the GVIW staff survey indicated they also believed TOTB provided a positive experience at the institution.

In part, the positive experience can be attributed to the efforts of the TOTB facilitators to generate a cohesive working group. As one facilitator noted, “we purposely spent a lot of time with drama games and ensemble building, so that we would have a tight-knit, trusting group”. The group became cohesive as a result of these efforts; at one point another facilitator noted, “the group was not fragmented along social lines for once, everyone was listening to each other and sharing stories, it felt both very simple and very much like progress for a group that has occasionally struggled to get along with the subgroups of folks from different backgrounds”.

Facilitators wanted participants to have a positive experience and feel like their thoughts and opinions were being considered when developing the theatre material. With the effort to create a positive group experience, multiple facilitators noted that they worked to create an atmosphere without hierarchy for the participants. Facilitators explained that they, “tried very much to make it a more collaborative environment, one where we weren’t telling them what to do but were kind of overseeing what their ideas were to our suggestions and things”. The positive atmosphere created by facilitators was reflected by participants: 94% indicated they felt respected and heard by facilitators.

Challenges

Prison culture and interpersonal dynamics

As one facilitator explained, “there’s drama in the drama club”, when discussing the impact of prison culture on the group dynamic. Another facilitator highlighted that, “one of the most complicated things is that the individuals bring cliques and history that is kind of set and established in the institution outside of our program.....so sometimes it seemed like there would be issues between two groups of people that we never really knew what it was about and we could see that that was sometimes effecting kind of group dynamics”.

While facilitators noted that this dynamic could sometimes make group work challenging, at some points participants seemed to challenge the facilitators’ own position within the group, and the differences amongst participants could make structuring the performance difficult. As was noted, “In-groups and out groups, unspoken prison hierarchy, and racism I believe are all at work here in making the casting challenging.”

This hierarchy was also seen to result in unfavourable interpersonal dynamics, with what some facilitators described as bullying behaviour occurring. This behaviour appeared to have an impact on the group participants, as it was noted that one participant stopped attending following exclusion from others in the group. In addition to this exclusive behaviour, it was noted that, at times, members of the group would also make fun of others for their personal characteristics, such as difficulties with speaking and emotional/mental health struggles.

A final interpersonal dynamic that resulted in challenges for the group were personal relationships that occurred among the program participants. As the facilitators explained, “we found that when people from SU [the secure unit] would come, that there would be other individuals from gen[eral] population [medium security] that wouldn’t normally come, who would attend basically so that they had the opportunity to hang out with their friends from the secure unit.” This in turn resulted in others joining the group on various weeks to see people from the secure unit, which “caused some issues with people’s attentiveness and willingness to participate in the activities.” This was then explained to cause conflict within the group, as “other participants [believed] if they’re not [t]here for the theatre stuff they shouldn’t be [t]here at all.” As one participant noted, “some people are there for only treats or [to] socialize with their friends and that I find is a

hindrance [sic] to our growth". One participant highlighted a need to address this behaviour, by writing that "we will need to have a system if participants are not engaging or disrespects [sic] group agreements/norms."

Future Considerations and Barriers for Consideration

Some participants and TOTB staff mentioned that other opportunities in theatre, such as costume and set design, play writing, and other technical skills, could keep those participants who have been involved for a longer term interested, as well as attract new participants. Participants expressed an interest in pursuing more technical skills associated with theatre, such as costume planning and design, working with lighting, and stage design. In regard to future performance opportunities, inmates who attended the performance indicated they would be interested in watching, or participating in, future plays on social justice issues. One inmate also noted that it would be beneficial to program participants if the facilitators or guest facilitators were more representative of the GVIW population.

While challenges exist around group dynamics and various artistic opportunities, it is important to note that some were the result of logistics of the program itself. The most frequently discussed logistical barrier was participant attendance. As the program did not have a "mandatory" attendance policy, some participants did not regularly attend every week's session. Additionally, new participants were free to join the group until a mid-way point, leading to a larger number of potential participants for various roles, with few returning regularly. As one facilitator described, "we're always looking for more people to come but we do encourage the same people to come every week, so that we can have a good core group and so that we can in a sort of traditional sense put on a play when it comes time for that workshop series".

This was particularly true of secure unit inmates, who would attend less consistently due to institutional policies and procedures. As one facilitator noted, it makes it "challenging that all of a sudden there's someone in the room that other people don't know very well, people don't feel very comfortable, and so it takes a while to try and build up that like rapport and comfort level when we never quite know who is going to be in the room". The inconsistent attendance was also highlighted as a barrier by regular program participants, who indicated frustration with new people coming sporadically over the weeks.

Another institutional challenge was the frequency of the program. Some facilitators emphasized that having more than one workshop a week may allow for better attendance, or an impact on a wider population at the Institution. One participant explained that they are “very thankful I had the chance to be in TOTB and wish it happened more than once a week.” This sentiment was also shared by one of the GVIW staff who noted that, the program has not yet “had a high enough profile to affect the overall atmosphere of the institution”, as it would “have more impact if it happened more frequently and [had] a dedicated space”.

A final logistical barrier highlighted was the capabilities of the program participants. As one facilitator explained, “we realized that the games that we were playing were more movement based games or more fast paced activities that some of the individuals couldn’t participant in as easily because of kind of like movement ability,” and that this posed a deterrent to some participants attending future workshops, as they may have felt uncomfortable, or that the program was not inclusive for their participation. Other facilitators noted that the inmates capabilities were also sometimes dependent on their skills, noting that sometimes “individuals in our workshops may not be fully literate, in terms of reading or writing skills, but are also really good at hiding those...so that’s maybe one problem in terms of not knowing how much to engage them on reading or writing activities”.

Conclusion

The data collected in this research demonstrated that TOTB’s Restorative Justice Theatre program is meeting its objectives through the positive impacts found in this study. Numerous positive impacts were found relating to skill development and wellbeing. Participants noted they were more creative and had improved several skills, including communication and public speaking skills. All program participants reported the program provided a positive environment, and most participants reported an improvement in their emotional well-being and ability to cope with stress.

While the results of this evaluation are mostly positive, several challenges and opportunities for future growth were found as well. The main challenge, as experienced by program participants and TOTB staff, is around group dynamics. It was noted that some elements of prison culture could have a negative impact on the program, such as dominant behaviours and bullying. It was also found that some participants and facilitators perceived some group attendees to be there in a socializing capacity only – resulting in

distractions and frustrations for the regulars of the group. TOTB may wish to prioritize looking into practises to address issues group dynamics in this environment.

Some logistical barriers were identified as well, such as including participants from the secure unit, having more frequent programming, and trying to encourage regular attendance. In an effort to continue to interest regular participants, as well as attract new ones, respondents suggested adding a wider variety of artistic opportunities as well as making programming more accessible by removing physical and other barriers.

It is clear that this program meets its objectives and offers many important positive impacts to participants, and likely the institution as a whole. This report can be used to help inform potential changes to the current program, as well as to support and advocate for future programming funding for the program.

Limitations of the Report

The results presented in this report may not reflect the opinions of all program participants, audience members, TOTB staff and facilitators and GVI staff. The evaluation was not a random sample of the participants, and the results cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the study sample. The measures in this evaluation were taken during the programming – ideally it would have included pre- and post-measures to have a greater understanding of the impacts. However, this evaluation provides valuable evidence that restorative justice prison theatre programs have the potential to create positive impacts on incarcerated people – especially those in the Grand Valley Institution for Women, where the TOTB program takes place.

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