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EQUAL TO LIFE: EMPOWERMENT THROUGH DRAMA AND RESEARCH IN A DRAMA GROUP FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract
This article draws from findings of qualitative research of a community-based drama and theatre group for adults with intellectual disabilities. The article considers constraints experienced by people with disabilities and explores the ways that experiences in drama and theatre can be particularly empowering for them. The article also reveals the ways that participants can increasingly become collaborators in the research and are empowered through the research process and through the opportunity to have their voices heard.

Jo Raphael lectures in Drama Education in the School of Social and Cultural Studies in Education at Deakin University in Melbourne. For many years, Jo has worked and played in the area of drama and theatre across a range of educational and community settings. In 1998 she established a theatre group involving collaboration between adults with intellectual disabilities and pre-service drama teachers and undertook a qualitative case study of this group for her Master's thesis — Theatre of Daylight: Drama, Disability and Empowerment — that explored the benefits of drama for people with disabilities.

Keywords: DRAMA; THEATRE, DISABILITY; EMPOWERMENT; COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH; PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH.

Today we are touring Big Frog and I am with the actors of Aurora-Co in a mini-bus. We are on our way to do the final performance and we are aware that, after this production is over, there is no guarantee of further funding and the future of Aurora-Co is uncertain. I take out my tape recorder for one last interview. There is an air of desperation as people jockey for a turn to speak. Robert gains control of the microphone and commands attention. ‘I want to say something serious. I personally hope this is not the last drama group. I can’t speak for everyone but I got a lot of enjoyable experiences out of this and I also got a lot of learning out of this and I hope this continues.’ A cheer goes up in the bus. Neil, equally earnest, jostles down the aisle and

NJ, 28:1, 2004
grabs the microphone to make his statement. 'I want to say something about this,' his eyes meet mine and his voice is measured, determined and emotional. 'I want to keep this running 'cause be a good experience for other clients as well.' There are sounds of agreement and three more actors have converged awaiting their turn to speak.

This vignette is taken from research that I have undertaken with a community-based drama and theatre group for adults with intellectual disabilities (Raphael, 2003). I set out to investigate the ways in which people with intellectual disabilities might benefit from their involvement in drama activities and in creating, rehearsing and performing theatre. My interest in this study grew out of my involvement in this kind of work as a teacher and director over many years. What the research revealed about the ways that drama and theatre can be particularly empowering for people with disabilities was not altogether surprising to me. The greater surprise was my discovery of the ways that participants can become collaborators in the research and are empowered through the research process and through the opportunity to have their voices heard.

This research involved a qualitative case study of a group that I had worked with for two years before the study began. Data was collected over a period of twelve months and included records of observations, interviews, photographs and video-recordings of the workshops and performances. Interviews were conducted with the group of participants with intellectual disabilities and their principal carers including parents and congregate care residence staff. Throughout the study university students of drama education worked voluntarily with the group, participating in the drama activities and sometimes taking teaching and directing roles. The university students' involvement was not part of their course work but taken as added experience. They also collaborated in the research by offering their observations and reflections in interviews. Resulting from the interplay of analysis and data collection throughout this study, the benefits of drama and theatre were discussed under the emergent themes of expression, connection, individual development and finally empowerment, which is the focus of this paper.

The Drama Group
[‘Aurora-Co’ is the pseudonym given to the drama group; names of all participants used in this paper have also been changed]

Aurora-Co involves approximately twelve adults with intellectual disabilities, a disability support worker, between four and six university students of drama education and the teacher/director. It was formed in 1997 after the initiative of George, a participant in the group who had previously been involved in a drama project for people with disabilities. A process of consultancy between George who represented the participants, myself as drama education lecturer at Deakin University, disability service providers and representatives of the local municipality and Neighbourhood House resulted in two successful pilot workshops. Following this Aurora-Co was formed offering ongoing workshops in 1998. As well as general drama workshops, the group aims to present two public performances of work created by the group each year.

The participants with intellectual disabilities involved in the drama group are aged between twenty and fifty years. None of them lives independently. Some live with family and others in residential care. For all participants, although to different degrees, there is
a slowness of understanding. Most members of the group have adequate verbal skills and are able to communicate effectively with words although for about a quarter of the group speech is difficult and is slow and unclear. Only two of the participants have some reading and writing skills. Many members of the group show physical limitations even though they do not have physical disabilities. All participants attend voluntarily and most have been in the group since its formation.

Empowerment and People with Disabilities

It could be argued that people with intellectual disabilities, such as the participants involved in this drama group, are particularly in need of empowerment in their everyday lives. They experience the constraints of their intellectual and sometimes physical disabilities. These disabilities can also give rise to life experiences, relationships and conditions that contribute to feelings of disempowerment (Chesner, 1994). This disempowerment can be a result of feelings of dependency as well as the restrictions people with disabilities may experience due to over-protection or lack of recognition of their capacities. Isaacs (1996) suggests that a form of constraint experienced by people with disabilities is that of a person’s social situation and the web of relationships to which one is tied. For people with disabilities this must also include the limiting effect of others’ low expectations of them. People with disabilities may also experience more general negative societal constraints which include both physical and attitudinal barriers. Moreover, people born with disabilities may experience these conditions over the course of their entire lives.

Cocks and Cockram (1997) suggest that, in the context of learning disability and possibly even universally, ‘empowerment consists of two basic freedoms: freedom from avoidable and unnecessary constraint and freedom to develop towards one’s human potential’ (p.224). They add that empowerment needs to be considered within three contexts: personal, systemic and societal. The study of Aurora-Co revealed many different examples of ways that participants were empowered on each of these levels.

Equal to Life

George provided me with his own perspective on the benefits of drama for people with disabilities in regular e-mails.

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<th>The benefits are:</th>
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<td>that they can improve their speech, body movements and their intallantages;</td>
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<td>they can express their talents to the public;</td>
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<td>they can meet the group every week or more;</td>
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<td>they can contribute to their own theme stories;</td>
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<td>also it is theoptic for them to improve their mantaility. [sic]</td>
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George reminds us that participants experience challenges and successes in the workshop process as they work at building skills such as physicalisation, vocalisation and concentration. There are also challenges within improvisation activities such as taking on a difficult role. Wagner (1976) presents Heathcote’s notion that in drama participants ‘face challenge and crisis in imagination before they find themselves overwhelmed by them in real life. They gain the feeling of mastery over events, the sense that they are equal to life’ (p.228). This was seen to occur in drama workshop activities when participants were involved in problem solving. A challenge for one
participant came when she was involved in playing a role that required her to adopt a higher status. After finally mastering this, she announced to all 'I did it. I did it.' and then, demonstrating her pride in her achievement, pointed to heaven and exclaimed 'My mum will be proud!' Within the drama participants are able to move beyond their usual constraints and limitations towards fulfilling their human potential. Through the drama process they are able to learn new skills, expand awareness and understandings and begin to imagine new possibilities for themselves.

After performances there was often expression of an even greater sense of achievement as shown by the way participants congratulated each other. 'I just want to say thank you very much for all the drama people for doing a good job', offered one member and 'You did a really fantastic job. You should be proud of all yourself.' announced another. The requirements of creating, rehearsing and performing in a theatrical production can challenge and motivate people with intellectual disabilities to reach personal achievements beyond their own and others' expectations.

Beyond the drama group some of the participants began to take charge of their own lives in ways they had not done previously. Carers described 'big steps' in personal development and that drama got 'a lot of inner growth working'. They perceived improvement in participants' abilities to make decisions and be proactive and this, they claimed, could be directly attributed to their involvement in the drama work of Aurora-Co declaring, 'It's the drama. Purely and simply the drama'.

'Chuck 'em in the deep end sink or swim': Performance, Responsibility and Risk

Performance means responsibility and risk. Tomlinson (1982), when describing the work of Graeae Theatre Company (a professional company in the UK involving actors with physical disabilities) outlines the ways in which a performer is responsible to the audience and the risk performers take when they perform to an audience. Both responsibility and risk are relatively rare companions for a person with a disability. They usually come from an environment in which there is full understanding of their disabilities and in which they have been protected against the harsh realities of the world. Tomlinson explains that:

... it is something of a novelty for a disabled person (the performer) to be put in complete charge of two hours of a group of people's lives (the audience). It is rare for disabled people to be encouraged to take that responsibility in the full knowledge that if they do not succeed and that audience walks out, or expresses condescension or pity, they have failed. So responsibility and risk walk hand in hand, and for the disabled person who takes the responsibility — and succeeds — it is especially gratifying. (p.13)

When actors take the risk and claim the performance space, they have a responsibility to their audience. They also have the right to be given a chance by that audience. Robert claimed, 'there is nothing like performance I think... chuck 'em in the deep end sink or swim.' When asked to elaborate he added, 'I think there's nothing like performance, it gives you a great experience... you learn things all the time.' Clearly Robert relished the challenge of performance and related the challenge to the opportunity to learn, believing that if nothing is ventured, nothing is gained. Robert also acknowledged the
audience's responsibilities when after one performance he reflected, 'They were a good audience, very supportive and very appreciative of a good play.' According to Robert, the audience was good and, he proudly adds, so was the play.

**Performance, Power and Glory**

...performance gives the performer power. This is true of any performance by any person anywhere. The fact that an audience recognises a performance results in its attention being focused on the performer. ...Now all this may seem rather academic, but for a disabled person it can seem nothing short of revolutionary. For it is not generally accepted by society that disabled people are initiators of activities, that they are in charge, or can take command. (Tomlinson, 1982:10)

If this is true for the actors with physical disabilities with whom Tomlinson worked with in Graeae Theatre Company, then it is perhaps even more relevant to the actors with intellectual disabilities in Aurora-Co. The power to present disability issues through drama and to increase the understanding of disability amongst the general public was mentioned by George in his e-mail and others involved with Aurora-Co. Drama and theatre provide opportunities for self-advocacy. Performance also provides an opportunity for people with disabilities to make a contribution to the community by offering entertainment. The people with disabilities can be the givers rather than the receivers. They can offer something that is valued and this helps to increase self-esteem. As Tomlinson describes, 'the very fact of power creates status. In general the status of disabled people in society is low' and status 'breeds confidence and self-respect. It also breeds peer respect' (p.12). One participant, Rose, claimed performance was important because '...we get feedback and more people will come and advertise more'. Getting feedback from wider audiences is important to Rose. She believes that the group is able to show what people with disabilities are able to do and performances allow them to advocate for themselves and their abilities. Rose's notion of being able to 'advertise' is further reflected by Ling (2000) when she makes claims for the importance of participatory theatre as 'a model where space is created for Learning Disabled culture to be honoured, exchanged and developed' (p.3). The opportunity to advocate for themselves through theatre allows people with disabilities to be empowered within a societal context.

One of the parent carers closely associated with three participants described their feelings of pride in their performance work and their desire to have an audience with whom to share their work.

...they want everyone to be there to see all their work and how it comes out because they have enjoyed putting into it. Then you have Neil running up the phone bill something chronic trying to invite every Tom, Dick and Harry that he can think of to come along ...because he is proud of the work he is doing.

Similarly, carers from the congregate care setting described the reactions of the six participants who reside there after one of the performances. The words of one of the carers are represented in this transcript poem that aims to capture the rhythm and intensity of the original spoken words (Raphael, 2003).
Afterglow

. . . they were so proud afterwards
and one by one they were coming in
    and then the whole group came in here
    and told us all about it
    and then went off and had coffee together
and then came back and told us again
    and it went on for a few days afterwards.
    They were still living it.
Oh, they were just beside themselves.
They just careered around the place,
Individually telling me what they were doing
and how it went
    and who they saw
    and how much they liked it
    and how much everyone clapped
and then as a group they were quite emotional about it all,
very high
    and very pleased with themselves.

Words from the performers themselves as they reflected on the feedback from their audience are presented below.

The audience
They was thinking
I was doing a good job.
I had compliments from best friends.
They support me that night.
They were so pleased to see us
and what we can do.
My mum and dad
and all my friends that were there
thought it was really good.
Faaaaantastic!
My mum and dad were really pleased too
about the fantastic job we all done.
They said
that every year
we are getting
better
and better.
They thought it was
‘the best show ever!’
They asked us to
‘come back’
And said
‘Should be more!’
‘The Big Time!’: Fame and Fortune

The following transcript poem is designed to capture the feeling of ambition held by one participant in particular but shared by some others. The poem was created from the words of Jill spoken at various times throughout the drama workshop phase.

**Big Time!**
When we gonna hit the big time?
When we gonna do a play?
When is the newspaper photographer gonna come out?
When we gonna get in the paper?
When we gonna do it on a reeeal stage?
I love acting because
I’ve always wanted to learn acting
but I’d love to learn to act
on the professional stage one day
Hopefully
I’d like to be
in a famous group of drama one day.
I’d love to do another production
but I’d like to do bigger
The next one’s going to be bigger
and better . . . fantastic!
We want to have the theatre again,
the lights and everything.
I’m waiting to go on stage
I want to wear a costume
I want to be recognised
I just want to be recognised!

At the beginning of each workshop Jill invariably asked one or more of the above questions or made one of the statements. The university students involved also noticed this and one commented:

With Jill just that she like it gives her a purpose, like she feels there is no barrier that she can do it . . . With just like wanting to be a famous actor, like she could actually do it. It gives her . . . I can’t think of the word but . . . credibility. Like she is credible in what she is doing.

We considered why Jill feels as though she has potential to achieve so much in drama. Perhaps it is connected to the positive reinforcement she receives from her involvement or perhaps it is due to holding a dream of some day being ‘discovered’. Continuing this analysis, the university students discussed the fact that there is no prerequisite for drama, ‘you need no qualifications’. One student considered that for drama ‘they have all of the ingredients. In a world where their qualifications limit them in so many ways by doing drama they are suddenly open’. Drama can be seen as a way forward, offering hope and possibilities to dream and imagine. For some group members drama is also seen as a way to obtain much needed public recognition for people with disabilities.
George proved extremely effective at getting publicity and managed to get himself and Aurora-Co into the local press on a number of occasions. He is aware that the media is interested in presenting the views of people with disabilities. What you need, however, is something to say. The drama group provides something positive to report as well as presenting interesting photo opportunities. Having technology skills and an understanding of the power of information technology and the media, George created a web page for Aurora-Co and regularly talked about his ideas for a film and TV documentary. He saw the lack of funds as the only obstacle to his many ambitions in drama both for himself and the group. He had been successful in the past in receiving small grants and took it upon himself to apply to funding bodies.

Subject: Bad News!

Jo,
I just received the announcement from the Australia Council for the Arts from yesterday. The news was bad and the amount we were asking is $6.5 million, that includes other 228 applicates. The other lucky ones are $1.5 million.

That is a shame, but what we can do. Anyway, I see you next week.

[sic]

In other words the funds available were over subscribed and in any case we didn't get any. I was not party to the application and often wonder what would happen if George's application had been successful. I was also surprised to find out that George had also taken the initiative, on behalf of the group, to contact the popular primetime TV current affairs program 'Today Tonight'. His phone message to say that I should expect a call from the producer threw me into a mild panic. They didn't call, much to my relief and George's dismay. Through his actions George demonstrated his firm belief that the work of Aurora-Co was important enough to be publicised widely and worthy of being funded generously.

There is no doubt that having hopes, dreams and ambitions can be beneficial, particularly for people who may feel limited by their disabilities. People need to have something to strive towards. Even when ambitions appear unrealistic it is important to have them and imagine possibilities. Many an ambition has been fulfilled because someone dared to believe it was possible. George seems to agree with these ideas when he offers the following advice regarding Jill in his e-mail:

We should think about Jill because of her self termination to become famous. We should explain to Jill is not easy thing, but we will let her think about.

[sic]

Theatre and Rites of Passage: Power, Ritual, Status

During preparation for performances George became particularly obsessive about certain arrangements for the performance. He was very concerned about such details as the design of tickets and the programme, reserved seating for VIP's, thank-you gestures and speeches for the end of the performance as well as costume and make-up. At times
his performance role seemed almost incidental. It occurred to me that he was preparing for the theatrical event as fastidiously as one would a wedding, a twenty-first birthday or a similar rite of passage. This caused me to reflect on the theatre, ritual and rites of passage and I was reminded of Courtney’s theories.

We act our roles in everyday life according to the ‘rites of passage’ of our culture and the way we improvise our sense of status. Theatrical performances, on the other hand, are reflections of these dramatic processes: they are the tip of the iceberg of the total dramatic activity of persons in society. (Courtney, 1980:21)

O’Toole (in O’Toole and Lepp, 2000) also explains that theatre has the quality of a ceremony in that ‘a drama is always in some way a special event that provides the motivation and the occasion for people to come together’ (p.24). Jennings (in Jennings et al., 1994) in her discussion of the ‘theatre of healing’ convincingly describes the decline of ritual and ceremony in our western society especially in relation to rites of passage. She claims that humans need these rituals to help make sense of their world and suggests that theatre experiences can be a substitute for this loss and may have healing potential. Routon and Schneider describe the lack of control over their lives that people with disabilities experience and how this leaves ‘no small feeling of insignificance’ (1979:135). For most participants the performance was a highly significant event. If people in general are experiencing a deficit of ritual and ceremony to make meaning of their lives then arguably people with intellectual disabilities, who have less control over what they are able to experience, are in even greater need of this. Perhaps George, in attending to the ritualistic details of the performance, recognised its importance as a rite of passage. He claimed the performance event as a rite of passage that would deliver him to a position of greater significance and higher status among his family, his friends and associates and within society in general.

Finding Voice

If I lost my voice
Could I ask you not to speak for me
As you cannot know what I have to say.*

It was always my aim that the performances that we were to create would include, at their heart, the voices and ideas of the participants. I felt that if a performance was to be meaningful to them it had to come from them. If they were to have a sense of ownership, then they had to feel the ideas belonged to them. If it was to be empowering, then they had to feel that they were responsible for the performance. These thoughts are reflected by Clifford and Herrmann (1999) when they describe the role of the teacher/theatre director in their book detailing drama and theatre work with young people at risk. In particular they describe the importance of ‘creating a space where the participants feel their voices will be heard . . . their opinion is valued . . . and where their experiences will inform the work being undertaken’ (p.21).

When Aurora-co began to work on what was to be our largest production to date, the production that came to be called ‘Memories’, we began by brainstorming ideas. Some of the participants suggested we could do ‘Grease’ or ‘The Sound of Music’. I explained

* From a poem by Leigh Montford, artist with a disability quoted at Verve! Symposium, Melbourne, October, 1999.
that I felt we could be more original than that. 'We can do something about us', I suggested. There was a sense of agreement. I felt that it would not only be impractical and inappropriate to do a mini version of a popular production but a wasted opportunity, too. Like Hodgkin (1996:109), I considered the value for people with disabilities when they 'manage to elevate their status through expressing their own feelings in the work and operating within powerful roles'. It is likely that the group was drawing from their own limited experience of theatre when members mentioned wanting to do the popular musicals. It is also likely that, due to having less confidence born of previous success, people with intellectual disabilities are less inclined to consider their own ideas as the basis of performance.

When asked to give some suggestions of possible content for the performance the group was silent. Instead they gave suggestions about style or genre. 'Dancing and singing', suggested some and 'Let's have a few gags', said another. At this stage there seemed to be little awareness that the performance needed to be about something or that it was an opportunity for them to say something. A former artistic director of Back to Back Theatre — a professional theatre company based in Geelong involving actors with intellectual disabilities — explained that 'traditionally people with intellectual disabilities have been a fairly voiceless community' (Video, 1992). Here is a chance for them to be heard. However, this does not necessarily mean presenting disability issues but rather, as Bruce Gladwin, current director of Back to Back, suggests 'just people presenting themselves, whatever that may be' (Gladwin, 1999).

The theme of 'Memories' was one that was explored in a general workshop with the group earlier in the year. It seemed to inspire interesting ideas and performance work at that time and, when I suggested that we might explore it further in view of creating a performance, there was a positive response from the group. In the creative development stage a range of stimuli was brought into the group including old photographs, objects and music from the past. These helped to trigger memories and people began to offer words, ideas, images and stories in response to them. At first the participants had difficulty remembering but a trickle of memories soon turned into a strong flow of ideas and stories coming from every member of the group. These were recorded. From this collection of ideas the content of our production was taken. I recognised the value and dramatic potential of these stories particularly when told by the owner. When directing the actors with disabilities in Graeae Theatre Company, Tomlinson also discovered the value of their true stories and used them constantly. He claims that the 'reality of this theatre of personal experience has immense theatrical strength' (1982:26). Selman (in Prentki and Selman, 2000) also discusses the importance of personal stories that so often remain hidden and the power of these to make a connection with the audience. She explains that we 'love hearing and seeing our own stories on stage; our lives are validated when “people like ourselves” are performed on stage' (p.1).

In order to empower, the performance-making process had to allow for individuals to have a genuine opportunity for input. When participants' ideas are articulated, heard, valued and some of them selected to be tried out in performance it is an empowering experience. One of the university students commented on the positive feelings that this process inspired:

_NJ, 28:1, 2004_
And just seeing the excitement and joy on their faces when they get to contribute an idea. Just the thought that what they’ve contributed actually makes a dramatic piece, and it makes a good one. They just love that. Smiles! Just amazing, they really feel like ‘I’ve achieved something!’

Simply performing before an audience provides an opportunity for people with intellectual disabilities to present themselves. However, the opportunity to present their own ideas and stories makes the presentation even more worthwhile. They claim their right to speak, to tell others about themselves, to have a voice.

A Threat to the Group

When funds from the initial local government grant were used up and there appeared to be no other funding prospects, Aurora-Co was under threat of discontinuing. All of the participants were concerned although their responses varied. Some responded with feelings of sad resignation and others with anger and a passion to fight.

All the carers interviewed commented on the participants’ level of concern as well as their own and both interviews took off on a tangent of discussing possible funding options. The carers described the reactions of participants. Jen mentioned the outrage expressed by the three participants in her care in realising the continuation of Aurora-Co was under threat. She explained, ‘Robert reckons he is taking up a petition if it looks like something happens.’ One of the staff members from the disability organisation told me that Neil was so concerned that he had phoned to say that if Aurora-Co had to stop due to lack of funds he was going to get another job to help raise the money. Clearly Robert and Neil have the drive and believe they have the power to change the situation.

In contrast to this, the participants who dwell in the congregate care setting expressed sadness and bewilderment at the prospect of Aurora-Co discontinuing. Their carers reported that they were concerned and had developed ‘a bit of awareness that these things don’t just happen’. There was a suggestion that the participants simply took for granted that groups such as this one would exist for them and if Aurora-Co was under threat there was nothing they could do about that. Although they were not all at the stage of empowerment to know what they might be able to do to effect change, they were at least developing an awareness of what processes come into play in order for groups such as this one to exist. This is a step along the way to self-efficacy and an example of empowerment in a systemic context.

In this critical incident in the life of the group, I find many resonances with the definitions of empowerment put forward earlier in this paper. Here are examples of people who are prepared to express their concern, stand up for something they believe in, and endeavour to gain control over their future in regard to continued involvement in the drama group.

Drama Empowers, Theatre Empowers and Research Empowers

The way that all of the stakeholders accepted my request to consider Aurora-Co as my case study for research and so willingly became collaborators in the research took me by surprise. I’d imagined there would be a degree of suspicion or at best indifference about the research but there was only support, encouragement and involvement. Some
of the participants took on the research challenge and seized the opportunity to have their voices heard. George’s e-mails are an example of one member taking the initiative and contributing to the research.

As my awareness of the nature and value of collaborative research increased, I began to consider some other ways of involving the participants in the research process. Tuhiaiwa Smith (1999) writes about ‘Kaupapa Maori methodology’ and the importance of the researched ‘researching back’. She is concerned that ‘the voices of the researched become increasingly silenced as the act of organising, analysing and interpreting the data starts to take over (p.14)’. This caused me to reflect upon ways of presenting the data and allowing the participants in the research to ‘talk back’ to the findings rather than be silenced. My initial analysis had resulted in ‘data poems’ or ‘transcript poems’ that I had written based on the participants’ responses such as those included in this paper. I presented some of these to the participants in an informal group interview situation and asked them to comment. This gave them a chance to verify, deny, clarify or elaborate on the data and initial analysis. They seemed to genuinely appreciate this opportunity and enjoyed hearing their own words reported back or, as Rudduck puts it, ‘to hear their voices in print’ (1993:19). Although I was aware of providing opportunities for participants to collaborate in the research process, participants also seemed to be taking opportunities for themselves. Collaborative processes allow the gap between researcher and participants to be reduced.

The mini-bus vignette that opens this paper offers an example of the participants seizing the interview opportunity and taking the research agenda into their own hands. When listening to this interview later, I was struck by the passion in the voices. It was even more apparent to me that my interview had been hijacked by three of the participants. One of the first voices heard is Robert’s as he grabs my recorder, ‘Hang on, can I do the interviewing? I know how to hold the tape.’ Sally’s voice is heard ordering ‘Me first, then you, then her.’ Robert proceeds to ask the questions of other participants. Neil is also heard taking control of the interview for a time and proceeds to turn it around and question me. I wondered at this point, ‘Who is the researcher?’ Robert and Neil are heard at the end of the interview making pleas about ensuring the continuation of Aurora-Co. These participants seem to be feeling a need and desire to express their ideas voluntarily as well as elicit responses from each other to help put their view forward. It is like a desperate last chance for them. They also take the opportunity to make their appeals on behalf of others including members who are not involved on this day and possible future participants in the group.

This interview increased my awareness of the potentially empowering nature of research and the importance of researching in a truly collaborative way. Ely (Ely et al., 1991) rationalises this approach to research in Freire’s (1970) terms when she suggests, ‘the social responsibility of qualitative researchers is to avoid seeing and treating participants as passive objects and, instead, to work with them so that they become increasingly knowledgable, active, responsible and, therefore, increasingly liberated’ (p.229). In fact, through this revolution, both participants and researcher are liberated. As researcher, I am liberated from the dubious desire to speak on behalf of participants because they are speaking for themselves.
I always hoped that people with intellectual disabilities would be the beneficiaries of this study. I imagined this would be through increased opportunities for people with intellectual disabilities to become involved in drama and theatre groups such Aurora-Co due to the building of a rationale for the work. This study has shown some ways in which involvement in drama and theatre can be empowering. Through this study I also discovered the extent to which participation in the research process is empowering for participants when they feel that their opinions are valued, their voices are being heard and they themselves can be agents for change.

This kind of empowerment is particularly important for people with intellectual disabilities who experience limited opportunities to have their opinions heard. However, it is also important for myself as teacher/director and the university students as well as carers and support workers, as we are given cause to reflect, grow in awareness of, understand, articulate and improve the drama and theatre work we are involved in. Through collaboration, all participants had an opportunity to become informed and transformed through the research process. Positive change is not only a potential result of the completion of this research, change has already occurred in the process of it.

If we accept that people with disabilities are disempowered in many ways and that drama provides a potent means of empowerment, then there is a challenge that cannot be ignored, that of increasing opportunities for people with disabilities to be involved in drama and theatre experiences. In the clear and unequivocal words of one participant, ‘There should be more!’

Author’s P.S.
The group did secure alternative funding and is still in existence today.

Works Cited


