

# Social Justice

## Hearing Voices of Marginalized Girls Expressed in Theatre Performance

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In this article we describe a research project studying the strengths of adolescent girls in an open custody treatment group home. Although the literature is replete with research about the deficits of girls in conflict with the law, their strengths are poorly understood and seldom researched. Understanding these girls' strengths fulfills a nursing mandate to foster social justice by challenging the status quo of the prevailing social order. A theatre performance of the research findings resulted in a profound audience impact. Arts-based research and participatory action research offer new ways of accessing marginalized populations' strengths and challenging harmful societal assumptions. **Key words:** *appreciative inquiry, community health nursing practice, conflict with the law, girls' strengths, marginalized, participatory action research, social justice*

**T**WO university professors (from nursing and social work), a group home teacher, and a theatre director/master of fine arts student embarked upon a research project to study the strengths of adolescent girls residing in an open custody treatment group home. Although the literature is replete with research about the deficits and needs of girls in conflict with the law, these adolescent girls' strengths are poorly understood and seldom researched. From a social justice perspective, arts-based research offers new ways of accessing these strengths and challenging the sta-

tus quo of the prevailing social order. This article evolved from a desire to share the research process and the challenges it presented while engaged in creating the story of the group home, and to share feedback received from the theatre performance of the research. Portions of the script developed from research data are presented, as well as reflections on the impact the project had on the research team, the staff, and the girls themselves. As well, we examined the impact of the girls' stories on the actors hired to perform the play and on the audience who attended the performance at a social justice forum.

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### LITERATURE REVIEW

The mental health of adolescents is often considered suboptimal compared with other age groups in Canada.<sup>1,2</sup> The issues adolescents face include abuse, anxiety, depression, lowered self-esteem, loneliness, stress, and a significant number of suicides.<sup>1-4</sup> Even though many adolescents are mentally healthy, generalized societal labeling of all adolescents as troubled<sup>5,6</sup> and media perpetuation of stereotypes<sup>7</sup> ironically may cause

suffering to adolescents and reduce their opportunities to contribute to society.

Adolescents are often stereotyped as impulsive, unreliable, immature, incapable, hormonally driven, untrustworthy, criminals, or drug abusers.<sup>8,9</sup> A negative perception of adolescents may be related to a generalized lack of understanding of the positive contributions young people have made to society.<sup>5</sup> In their cross-Canada exploration of youth-engaged initiatives, Khosroshahi and Corriero<sup>5</sup> discovered that negative stereotypes of youth discourage many from making positive contributions to society and further creates an atmosphere of hopelessness for youth. Moreover, youth living with stressful life circumstances (ie, living on the streets, living in care, those who have been abused or those living in isolated circumstances) may experience even more difficulties with their self-image and self-esteem and some become involved in dangerous and self-destructive behaviors<sup>7</sup> leading to conflict with the law.

### Social justice

Marginalized populations such as adolescent girls who have had troubled backgrounds, that is, abuse, substance use, school drop-out, street life, or conflict with the law, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of media and societal stereotyping.<sup>9</sup> Mental health promotion activities with these adolescents may be of particular urgency, fulfilling a nursing mandate to foster social justice<sup>10</sup> by ensuring that mental health promoting activities are available for the most vulnerable of our citizens. Social justice and equity are distinctive primary health care values<sup>11</sup> and are considered key societal characteristics responsive to change to create mental health and well-being for children and youth.<sup>1</sup> *Social justice* refers to the availability of equality in opportunities for health within the structures of a society. "The extent to which a society provides opportunities for its citizens to develop socially . . . productive roles influences the well-being of individuals as well as the healthfulness of the whole population."<sup>11(p112)</sup> One example is the in-

equities that exist in the mental health status of adolescent females in conflict with the law. Unfortunately, when adolescents are in conflict with the law, they are primarily viewed as "at risk"<sup>12</sup> and further stereotyped as incapable of making wise decisions. Mental health promoting activities become more challenging as the adolescents internalize negative societal messages, which further reinforce a vicious cycle.<sup>9</sup>

Research rarely focuses upon the strengths of adolescent girls, especially those in trouble with the law. Recounting stories of their strengths, of overcoming adversity and surviving difficulties, fulfills 2 purposes: telling one's story may be a mental health promoting or healing experience<sup>13,14</sup> and when the stories are incorporated into an holistic overview of strengths this may lead to capacity-building experiences and assist with the development of mental health promoting program planning for adolescents in conflict with the law.

### Story creation theory

From a theoretical perspective, writing a story or a play provides an opportunity to create a shared humanity. Story not only gives shape to our world and experiences but is what we share with each other to celebrate our human bond.

The ability to consciously source our personal experiences into story and give it public expression is therefore a key skill if we are to "force reality to manifest itself . . . and [bring] forth the fundamental situations, big and small, of the human condition."<sup>15(pp7-8)</sup> Of particular importance is developing this ability within the margins of our communities among people who have been left silenced or unheard. "Unheard silence is not the loss of the player's voice, but the loss of listeners for that voice."<sup>16(p32)</sup> If we do not develop the ability to bring forward stories from the margins, we are allowing "amplification" to occur:

When a single voice is sufficiently amplified, it becomes a speaking that makes it impossible for any other voices to be heard. . . . ideology is the amplification of myth. . . . what ideologists are concerned to hide is the choral nature of history, the sense

that it is a symphony of very different, even opposed voices, each none the less making the other possible.<sup>16(p145)</sup>

By sourcing and giving expression to the stories at the edges of our communities we are helping to counteract acts of amplification. We are encouraged and assisted in these processes by a burgeoning interest in arts-based research. Arts-based research, long practiced in the fine arts, provides new and welcome opportunities for interdisciplinary inquiry into social justice issues difficult to address in conventional social science research.<sup>17</sup> Arts-based inquiry is influenced by a "radical or extended" epistemology designed by action researchers John Heron and Peter Reason.<sup>18</sup> In this way of knowing, the process of inquiry is guided by a journey through 4 distinct types of knowing. First we engage in experiential knowing. This is where we begin our project in the direct encounter, the face-to-face meeting, or the engagement with some person, place, process, or event. That engagement is then expressed in presentational knowing. This is the communication of our experiential knowing via various expressive mediums such as theatre, dance, visual arts, or poetry. The insights gained in this phase of the work then inform our propositional knowing, which refers to the theoretical, logical component of knowing expressed in essays, books, and conference presentations. Finally, all of these ways come together to create practical knowing. Each type of knowing that proceeds must come together to produce concrete action in the world that seeks to address the situation under investigation. These concepts helped to structure our analysis reported in this article to illustrate the knowledge-making possibilities for nursing practice with those on the margins of society.

#### **PROJECT BACKGROUND: PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROCESS**

This research project evolved from discussions between the first and fourth authors,

while working on developing a research base for an annual social justice forum at the University of Calgary. We wanted to create a societal opportunity for the voices of a group of marginalized youth to be heard, leading to a potentially positive experience of inclusion that could help shift societal conceptions away from the deficit lens. We were interested in social justice research that could be linked to the concepts of empowerment, experiences of voice, inclusion, and a focus on strengths; it is the foundation that creates openings for adolescent voices to be heard, and for their collective story of strengths and hope to be created.

This research fits particularly well for community health nursing practice focused on the principles (ie, accessibility, public participation, health promotion, and intersectoral collaboration) and values (social justice and equity) of primary health care. Research underpinned by social justice values creates opportunities to counteract and change the marginalization of adolescent girls in conflict with the law that at times precludes openings for them to tell their stories that may contribute to the development of mental health promoting professional practices.<sup>19</sup>

Participatory action research (PAR) was a natural fit for the inclusive, participatory action-oriented nature of the research project. PAR is a well-established interdisciplinary research methodology committed to social action and education to empower the voiceless/powerless to recover the confidence and abilities to transform their realities. "PAR's current challenge to action oriented intellectuals is to recover the passion and commitment to creating social justice in partnership with the marginalized and oppressed peoples of the world."<sup>20(p200)</sup> PAR is intimately interested in power structures and empowering strategies used in change processes. Empowerment is closely aligned with health promotion, providing a link between health and participation.<sup>21</sup> Insiders and outsiders are brought together as coresearchers, sharing and learning together.<sup>22</sup> The dual agenda of interrogating the meaning of democracy and

social justice, at the same time one acts to alter the social situation, shapes the potential of action research.<sup>23</sup>

This PAR framework used an appreciative inquiry lens. Appreciative inquiry is a strengths-based philosophy and research method that influenced our data creation. It informs and strengthens empowering processes by focusing not only on problems but also upon building from the best experiences and knowledge of a group. When research is conducted from a position of inquiry into strengths rather than deficits, the power of hope is present.<sup>20</sup> Appreciative inquiry was used as a guide to facilitate story telling and the construction of the collective story of the group home. Validity in this form of qualitative research can be assessed by its description and explanation, or in other words, by asking if the story creation is credible to the research participants.<sup>24</sup>

We postulated that providing these youth with internal and external valuing of their voices may create health promoting experiences, healing, and hopes for a better future. Two research questions were developed: (a) what are the strengths of the female youth serving open custody sentences at the treatment group home, under the Youth Criminal Justice Act? and (b) what is the collective story of resistance, strength, and hope that resides in the treatment group home?

The third author was invited into the beginning discussions of the project when the idea arose to study a population of girls residing at a treatment group home. The first author knew this program teacher in the group home, who also was an advocate of social justice. Excited about the possibility of researching the strengths of the girls, she joined and the partnership was born. Concurrently, the fourth author approached a celebrated theatre director who was a graduate student he was working with. The second author thus joined the team as the research coordinator, with a unique set of skills that were to become invaluable to the success of the project.

## Research ethics board process

We had to address ethical concerns about confidentiality and anonymity of data in a research process that initially planned the outcome to include a story-theatre style performance by the research participants. The first author met with the Chair and Research Officer of the Research Ethics Board to obtain advice on structuring the ethics submission for what was viewed as sensitive research with a vulnerable population. Measures were procured to protect the research data, including the stipulation that participant journals and artifacts would be returned to them immediately upon completion of the project, and audiotapes would be destroyed at that time. Further ethical considerations included the assurance that no privileges would be given to the girls or revoked by group home staff on the basis of whether or not girls participated in the research and there would be no repercussions if girls dropped out of the project. Any girls who had presentencing status would not be recruited for the project, for their legal protection. Participant protection layers included preparing the audience before the final presentation by telling them that no participant was to be associated with any particular component of the story, that no photographs or recordings were allowed, and that no questions would be allowed from the audience following the performance (this was due to potential concerns regarding entrapment/disclosure to the audience and resulting consequences for that performer).

## ANALYSIS: FOUR WAYS OF KNOWING

### Experiential knowing—Creating a play

The research coordinator's first duty was to make a connection with the girls and staff at the group home. Using personal metaphor creation exercises developed as a starting point for the discussions, he began meeting with the staff and clients. The approach of using metaphor creation exercises, he discovered, was a wonderful gateway through which to begin connecting individuals to

their own stories. Each participant was asked to bring an object that represents a central experience to their lives and to share it with the rest of the group. The object had to answer the following question: when you are feeling low, what helps to keep you going, what gives you strength? Starting from this point of connection, he met weekly with the participants to continue the exploration that the metaphor creation work had initiated.

In his reflections, he wrote: When I began meeting with participants of the project, I remained open, with no particular expectations of what I was seeking. My purpose was to open up a connection with the people I was meeting, and to see if I could bring forth their story. I had no idea what I would find once I entered into contact with their story. For these reasons, everything I encountered was a surprise and a revelation. At times, what I heard cut deeply into my self. Heron and Reason<sup>18</sup> highlight the need for skills in managing distress and developing emotional competence with the members of the inquiry group. I was able to reflect on my experiences in the sessions afterward with members of the research team, so the situation did not become overwhelming.

The story of the group home was thus created from data collected on several occasions over 4 weeks through workshops, conversations, and interviews with individual and groups of research participants. Participants consented to allow parts of sessions to be audiorecorded to help with keeping track of ideas for the group story creation. Four of these conversations (2 with a youth, 1 with a staff member, and 1 with a group of 4 staff) were audiotaped and reviewed by the research team members. Notes and direct quotes germane to the research questions and story creation were compiled from the tapes (because of the potentially highly sensitive nature of the conversations, verbatim transcripts were not prepared and as per the research ethics board requirement, the tapes were destroyed immediately following the performance of the play). Other data included personal reflections and po-

etry from individual participants' learning journals.

Once the research coordinator completed the inquiry work with the participants, the data were handed over to the research team, to sift through the material to discover the strands and themes. Elden and Chisholm<sup>25</sup> suggested participant-managed research should be viewed as a matter of degree, not instituted as a dogma. In this case, the research consent form specified that all the data would be compiled by us to provide a "bigger picture" of what they might mean combined. Within the tight timeframe, a plan was made and agreed upon by the participants that the research team would craft the play from their stories. A "critical subjectivity"<sup>18(p149)</sup> described as a way of building validity (through adding the research team members' perspectives on the data) was achieved through this initial level of separation. The interplay of individuals within the research group builds the critical subjectivity that Heron and Reason advocate.

Particular girls' strengths were identified, including artistic or writing ability, pride, resilience, loyalty, compassion, sense of humor, and a desire to build healthy relationships (see examples in script excerpt below). Four key themes (stigma, the house, girls' strengths and relationships) arose out of data analysis and interpretation, and subsequently became the headings for the components of the play. The script was then crafted with exemplary quotes so it was congruent with respecting the voices of all the participants. An initial draft of the play was completed by the first author and then further interpretation and refinement of the script occurred through research team meetings. After the rest of the research team had completed its work on the draft, the research coordinator added further input, questioning the order of the material used, the use of certain work, and how the voices would be presented—creating a unique blend of researcher analysis and interpretation, tempered with a seasoned theatre director's understanding of the creation of a script that presents the material



in a meaningful manner to an audience. Through this process the whole research team was able to work together using each person's skills to allow the central story to emerge.

Once a complete draft was ready, it was shared with all of the research participants, who were then involved in further refinement of the play. Each participant paid particular attention to components of the play they recognized as having originated from their own contributions to group discussion or to an audio-taped interview with the research coordinator. When the story was read back to the participants, they were asked whether they felt that the work was an authentic capturing of the sessions that had taken place over the 4 weeks with the research coordinator. Components of the script were modified on the basis of this feedback, until all research participants were satisfied that the script provided an accurate portrayal of their own meanings and delivered a story of the group home that they were satisfied with.

The next phase of the project was to take the script and create the public expression that would be presented at the social justice forum. For this phase of the work we engaged 2 professional actors to portray the voices of the story. Our method for achieving this task was to work through the material with the theatre artists, examining the connections between the dialogue, poetry, and other material that became the script. The structure of the script was developed to create a form suited to a live performance—to bring forth meaningful points that are comprehensible yet still consistent with the intentions of the original creators. Plays are seen once; therefore, they require narrative action and clear delineation of character. All of the research participants were thrilled with the distillation that had occurred with the play. To ensure that the story kept a connection with the authentic self from which it was created, and to honor the principles of PAR, the participants taught the actors how to embody their story for the stage.

In a conventional theatre process actors will work with the scripts they are given and build their own visions of the characters out of the information contained in the text. For our presentation we took a different approach to embodying the voices of the story. Each of the participants identified their voices in the script and then taught the actors how to realize those moments. This was achieved by the actors imitating the physical nature of the participants, their vocal rhythms, and any other physical mannerism. The actors would then become the participants and give voice to their parts of the story. The participants would then coach them in meaning, importance, and background to what had been expressed. The exchange between the actor and the participant became a remarkable part of the project. The actors were nervous about offending the participants in the characterizations, but the participants watched with amazement as their words and being took shape in front of them. The act of embodied self-reflection that occurred at those moments was electric. In that moment the participants were seeing themselves: not through a mirror that reflects the outer nature, but experiencing a glimpse of themselves being in the world. The look of joy and honor on the faces of the participants was deeply moving. We had not only sourced their story but also given it voice and presence. One of the academic researchers was present and found it an amazing process to watch the performance come together, as it was corrected by the research participants coaching and guiding the actors. The actors were thus able to heighten the aspect of presentational knowing within the project, both for the participants and for the audience at the forum where the play was subsequently presented.

### **Presentational knowing—Script excerpts from “*Undoing the Silence*”**

The following excerpts from the play *Undoing the Silence* were compiled from selected research themes: stigma, girls’

strengths and relationships. These excerpts demonstrate one dimension of the experiential knowing developed in the research and communicated through art.

Young Person (YP): Prostitution, drugs, rape, gangs, miscarriages, pornography, war, violence, witnessing death . . . homelessness, stigma, fear, anger, judgment, pain, loss, running, panic, paranoia . . . are normal for me. The whole world is on my shoulders.

YP: Why do I think this is fun? Why do I keep doing this to myself?

Staff: Violence is pretty much expected from these girls—the media says so. These kids are looked at like they're throw-aways. What are you going to do with a kid who acts out at school, does drugs? Well, people do things for a reaction; they act out as the only way they know how to get support. These kids aren't violent even though they've done some violent things. You need to see beyond what you're working with to who you're working with.

YP: I look different. I say hi to a little kid but the mom pulls the kid away "don't talk to her!" So I'm like "whatever." When we're inside ourselves, we can care less.

YP: How many of these people take the time to want to know who I really am? I'm judged and damned by all—my street family and the straights. Where do I belong? What is "real"? The falseness of my "friends" on the streets who beat me when I "owe" them? They promise me love, "we are family forever," "I'd die for you." It is hollow. Do friends beat you or rape you? Yet, who else says they're my friend or cares about me? Or reminds me of the good times we had while using in the past? Is my future my past? How do I create a different future when I know nothing else?

Staff: Society is damning.

Staff: How can we make people know that these girls are artists or good writers? Society sees these girls as not normal. When I see the girls' strengths and the strengths that are not pursued . . .

Staff: My hope for the girls is that they'll see their strengths as much as we do.

Staff: What fascinates me most about the girls is their resilience. Some of the things that come out of their mouths. These girls go through things that most people don't in their whole lives. And it amazes me that they're still okay and there's still hope for them, they have an opportunity to improve their lives. Even girls who run away again and again, at the end of it you still see improvements . . .

YP: Pride, self-respect, we learn to care. I've learned trust. There's a big change from not allowing others in, not allowing others to do things for you, and not "owing" someone for it afterward.

YP: Change can be petrifying, petrifying, absolutely petrifying. Here you have people to talk to; you can actually build a healthy relationship. It's a hell of a lot better than being on the streets. My advice to girls is "don't be afraid to be you." Know you have strengths.

Staff: It's hard for us to know the impact we're having on the girls so when we do see progress, its time to celebrate! We have to have faith there'll be progress. We cultivate hope that something has taken root enough that once they are out, those seedlings will continue to sprout.

### **Propositional knowing—Research roadblocks**

Many challenges arose in conducting this research—from proposal development and multiple approval layers, to communication with multiple players with investments in the outcomes of the project, to a completion deadline for presenting at a social justice forum at the university. There were many stakeholder organizations involved in the group home, requiring intersectoral collaboration to proceed with the research. Once the project was approved, the recruitment process resulted in 5 staff and 2 girls keen on participating in the story creation (at the time of recruitment, group home resident numbers were low). In the end, 1 girl (an alumni) did not return to the group home to participate in the project, so only one 18-year-old girl

directly participated in the creation of the play (however, she shared stories from 4 previous residents ranging in age from 14 to 19).

A communication issue arose on the day that the first discussion group/workshop was to occur. Even though a prior arrangement had been made with a girl's community school and the program staff for her to stay "home," the research coordinator arrived at the group home to discover the girl had been sent to her school. With the community school's blessing and assisted by one of the research team members, the project work moved to her school that morning. Otherwise, the opportunity for her to participate in the first workshop would have been lost.

In the end, although the ethics protection was followed strictly, the research participants did not participate in the story telling performance, for a number of reasons. Insufficient numbers of girls were available to participate in the project, so we could not ensure anonymity for individuals. A concurrent issue arose when a staff retreat was planned for the same day as the performance, and therefore some of the staff who had expressed a desire to perform would be unable to attend the forum.

A third situation arose. Once the script was completed we had very little time for rehearsals before the scheduled performance. The combination of the anonymity issue and timeframe concerns resulted in a change of plans. The research coordinator recruited 2 professional actors to perform the script, each to act out multiple roles. We hired them as research assistants and required them to sign an oath of confidentiality as they would be working directly with research participants. The 2 actors then underwent 2 days of rehearsal, coached by the research coordinator and the research participants, to act out the text in as authentic a manner as possible.

Other research roadblocks included the health ethics board's initial fear of causing harm to girls through the research process, divergent values with some stakeholders potentially believing there wasn't an important story to be told, fear of litigation, organiza-

tional staff turnover leading to disruption in researcher-organization relationship development and project support, and worry that research outcomes could potentially lead to glorification of harmful gang activities. Despite these barriers, administrative support, timely information provided by the group home teacher researcher, persistence, openness to doing whatever needed to be done, in-person relationship development (including multiple researcher visits to group home and to organizational stakeholders), and maximizing the divergent skills in our research team all assisted in the successful project completion and presentation.

Valuable lessons were learned about how to navigate multiple systems and potential barriers, how to keep momentum in discouraging moments, how to be patient, how to plan multiple things at once, the importance of being ready to act at the drop of a hat, and how to work together effectively as a team with different strengths. For example, without our research coordinator's theatre expertise we would have had many more obstacles when preparing for the performance, without our internal researcher's ability to persist and troubleshoot with potential workplace obstacles, and without our 2 academic researchers who procured funding and support from the university, navigated ethical hurdles, and prepared the first draft of the script, the project could not have been successful.

### **Practical knowing—Sharing the story**

The crowning moment in the research process was when the story was presented at the Social Justice Encounter, a forum with an audience of more than 200 people (from nongovernmental organizations, health and wellness organizations, the city, professionals, and the public interested in social justice issues). The presentation took place in a theatre. We created a basic set of chairs on a stage and augmented the mood through the theatre lighting. The actors wore masks and dark clothing. When the lights went down and the presentation began, the audience sat in



complete silence, drinking in the experiences that were presented. Audiences in theatres often listen at the empathic level<sup>26</sup> and hear deeply what may have been only partially considered before. For the participants from the group home who were at the performance, their story was no longer an unheard silence, but a shared experience.

In the end, collecting a story is powerful only if we give it public expression. In giving public expression to the unheard silence of girls in conflict with the law we are adding voices that question the “amplified” story—that is the common, unchallenged deficit-focused story versions about girls in conflict with the law. The play was an important means of dissemination of research findings in PAR. The creation of a story may help people recover connections to their authentic selves and support them to create and give further spaces for people to listen. Listening is a preliminary step to creating needed changes to promote the voices of the silenced and create openings for social justice and health promoting nursing advancements to occur.

### THE PLAY'S IMPACT

Feedback from the research participants able to attend the formal performance included an overall sense of delight with the performance. In addition, they were deeply moved by it and felt validated with the messages that were portrayed to the audience through the verbal and nonverbal performance. One of the researchers reflected:

I sat with [a participant] during the play. She turned to me with tears in her eyes that morning and said, “Finally someone understands what I lived” . . . she was especially moved by the fact people had watched the play attentively and given the play a standing ovation; she said it was a change to be judged with admiration for what she had lived through.

An attending stakeholder organization manager sent a congratulatory message to the group home and a group home program administrator indicated interest in explor-

ing future research collaboration. We also received feedback that a former group home staff person had attended the presentation and felt it was amazing. A few days later we shared the outcome of the performance at a celebratory pizza night at the group home. A participant who had been unable to attend the performance shared: “I like that the stories of our work here were told. That makes it seem easier to keep going here when you are alone with crisis some nights.” One girl later shared: “[The play] gave me a sense of hope and satisfaction. It was like watching my life up on that stage.” Feedback from our 2 actors included that they had been “profoundly affected” by their involvement in the project; it was a very different experience for them. The difference arose from their intimate involvement with the research participants to create the performance. When mixed with research, social justice initiatives become deeper and more moving experiences. The reciprocal nature of PAR was evident in their personal outcomes.

Fifteen university student volunteers recorded activities at the social justice forum, and shared their reflections about the play. Overall, they felt the “experience of feeling different hurts . . . [like] I’m judged by people who don’t know my life . . .” and “if more people respected [these youth], they’d have more opportunities to become who they’re meant to be.” Students appreciated the performance, and felt stories personalize issues for people while bringing forward problems in a realistic manner.

Some students were profoundly affected, precipitating an examination of their own worlds, “these presentations make me filled with anguish. I think I know what survivor’s guilt is now.” “I mourn the dead who will never have another chance. . .” “I mourn those who are still lost, roaming the streets, never at peace.”

Hope was viewed as something that must be cultivated, “I want to create something beautiful out of something tragic in my life” and “stories can be an intervention tool for others struggling in similar positions. . .”

"A story is what we make of it . . . hope is in the voices." There was also an expressed desire to see action: "solutions are inside us. . ." and "we have to walk the talk."

Other students examined the research delivery mode: "the power of 'doing' [becomes visible] through drama. We were challenged to listen to the voice and emotion." Student comments also included ethical questions: "Clearing research ethics to work with marginalized people is very challenging; but when does avoiding this research cause harm? What about voice? Who are we protecting?" We don't often seek permission from youth, but seek it from foster parents, ethics boards and government agencies. They felt if professionals don't have to hear the youths' stories, they may not look for them; and worse, never take responsibility for acting on them.

Nursing practice implications arose from suggestions from the students: "... have the patience to listen, to understand . . . we need to interact with people from a stance of curiosity . . . it's not enough to speak about the violence; we have to understand why . . . if there are problems in the system, we need to ask questions . . ." In addition, one student suggested "Bringing our personal insights to light is one way of activating our inner selves towards social justice. Recognizing what we already do may be a springboard to acting more thoughtfully, more deliberately to create a more just world."

Student recorders' conclusions included the following:

achieving social justice and change by storytellers takes more than one person. We need someone to gather the stories; someone . . . to take the stories and do something with them . . . storytelling is about voice. It can inspire people to come forth and get involved . . . each individual is a piece of the puzzle.

If we work for social justice, we have to fight for all youth. . .

and finally,

we will discover/recover an understanding of the world around us by realizing we possess powers

we might not fully recognize—power from within; heart-felt power. This power base is our advantage when living a social justice work-life.

One of the academic researchers reflected on the performance and its aftermath as well: One woman approached me following the performance of the play to tell me how much she had enjoyed our performance. She seemed overwhelmed by emotion and at a loss for words, repeating a tearful "thank-you!" over and over again. I later received an e-mail from a nursing colleague who wanted to share how amazing the presentation of our PAR project was, and how "blown away" she had been by the style of research presentation used to bring meaning to our research content. She finished with "this is something we should do more."

Other researcher reflections included the following: Listening to the actors perform the play felt a bit like giving birth—all the care, time, and effort that went into it, the heartache, headache, worry while trying to manage a difficult research process (as PAR may become at times), energy spent in protection of the research participants, and the required flexibility to change plans at the last moment. We did not know if the culmination of the research project in a performance would lead to the realization of our goal; if the audience would "get it," or if the performance could act as an impetus for health promoting change at the practice level. In reflecting on the performance later, one journalled: I realized it had a profound effect on me. In PAR research, a goal is change for the participants, and in this case the research team may also become changed by the depth of engagement required of them in the research process. I feel I learned so much from engaging in the research and from writing the script that I will never look at these girls and their stereotypes in society in the same way again. I thought I was open-minded, but I learned from them how to look beneath the surface of anger, independence, violence, and other protective behaviors and values, to value the person within.

## FURTHER IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Suggestions for how girls' strengths could be used in care arose from the staff and were embedded in the script. For example, staff described how they help girls understand the value of loyalty they've learned on the streets can be healthy when combined with compassion toward others. Listening to the girls, being open with them, recognizing their artistic, writing, or other skills, and showing respect for the girls' experiences are other examples of how staff built upon girls' strengths. Staff also helped the girls reframe their understanding of strength; for example, remaining in the program (instead of running away) when it becomes difficult is a sign of strength.

As a discussion of the specifics of individual girls' strengths or how strengths developed was beyond the scope of this research project, this area warrants further research exploration. Arts-based research projects present a means to question the status quo, to interrupt the societal stereotypes and images of groups of people who perpetuate social injustices and reaffirm the prevailing social order. Like this PAR project, arts-based research shows potential to open

new possibilities to guide nursing health promoting practices with marginalized groups of people. Risk taking and creativity in research designs may be called for if we wish to hear and act upon the voices of marginalized people.

## THOUGHTS

In order to avoid concluding this inquiry into the historic silencing of adolescent girls, we suggest that the "ending" of this project represents the beginnings of Carse's<sup>16</sup> infinite game. If we limit our inquiry to a finite game and come to conclusions at this point, we are abandoning the girls to their historic fate of unheard silence. If we extend our inquiry and accept responsibility for the girls for the long haul, we act in the spirit of social justice and continue to challenge the status quo and injustices sustained in society. We came away from this project knowing how to create safe spaces where we collectively can listen more deeply than before to the stories we all have. We have become familiar with Heron and Reason's<sup>18</sup> 4 ways of knowing, thereby extending our understanding of knowledge-making as a democratizing and caring force for nursing, and others.

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