

***Fighting Words* as Revolutionary Pedagogy: A Freirean Reading of Young People's Experiences of a Socially-Engaged Creative Writing Centre**

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Abstract

Standardisation and quantification intensify the impact of social class differences on educational opportunity and decrease the quality of educational experience for all students. Efforts to tackle educational inequality encourage conformity rather than address the underlying issues of the varied economic, cultural and social capital of diverse populations. Drawing on Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of critical pedagogy, this paper examines the impact of a Freirean inspired participatory arts initiative on youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds in a developed city in the western world. Focusing on the Freirean concepts of dialogue, democratic relations, voice, creativity and imagination, the authors present a case study of *Fighting Words* Creative Writing Centre, a socially-engaged participatory arts organisation currently operating in the non-formal education sector in Ireland. The research, a qualitative study conducted over a twelve-month period, presents data gathered from participants and other key stakeholders through interviews and questionnaires. The findings indicate that participants in *Fighting Words* demonstrate increased levels of engagement and motivation, improved confidence and self-esteem, recognition of and pride in creative ability, a stronger sense of self, a greater ability to work collaboratively, and improved literacy.

Key Words:

Freire, Voice, Dialogue, Creativity, Youth.

1. Introduction

The 2012 OECD Equity and Quality in Education report indicates that 'every OECD education system suffers from school failure and student dropout' (p. 17). The report cites lack of inclusion as the main reason for this occurrence, identifying that almost 20% of young people fail to reach a basic minimum level of skills to function in today's societies, and attributing the fact that students from low socio-economic backgrounds are twice as likely to underperform. The report highlights that a lack of diversity in approaches to education prevails and schools in lower socio-economic areas fail to offer a quality learning experience for children and young people who experience the most inequalities. In Ireland, the Government's response to addressing inclusion and fairness has been chiefly in the form of large scale funding and resourcing rolled out through a national programme aimed at delivering equality of opportunity in schools. While there have been some positive outcomes, success has been somewhat limited (Smyth *et al.*, 2015). The allocation of additional funding and resources to support students from lower socio-economic backgrounds in achieving educational potential reflects a meritocratic view of education which ignores the underlying issue of educational inequality, namely, the inherent cultural bias in an education system which perpetuates the dominant cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1974), reproduces bourgeois structures (McLaren, 2000) and upholds the role of education in maintaining the social status quo (Sullivan, 2002).

The present climate of standardisation and quantification, compels schools to deliver outcome-based curricula that measure educational success in terms of academic attainment and students' 'ability' to perform according to set criteria. All students, regardless of background, are expected to adhere to the structures of formal education systems including organised timetables, standardised curricula, terminal assessments and teacher-led models of learning delivered in traditional classroom environments. Recent research (Sahlberg, 2010; Noddings, 2013; Robinson and Aronica, 2015) suggests that the restrictions imposed by standardised testing and accountability impinge on the quality of educational experience and conflict with commonly agreed goals of 21st-century education such as cooperation, critical thinking, and creativity. Furthermore, Tucker (2015) notes that an emphasis

on performativity can diminish pastoral care provision and prevent schools from meeting the pastoral needs of young people. There is an urgent need for alternative education programmes and diverse modes of practice to improve educational opportunity and provide a quality learning experience for all youth (Yasunaga, 2014).

Freire sought to eradicate patterns of oppression perpetuated by what he termed 'banking' education, traditional pedagogical practices which place the power in the hands of the teacher and 'dehumanize' and disempower the student. Freire's work with young people experiencing inequalities in South America caused him to reject this authoritarian concept of education in favour of 'problem-posing education', a democratic and dialogical process which places student and teacher on an equal footing as partners of inquiry and active participants in the educational 'transaction'.

This paper examines the experiences of young people in a socially-engaged creative writing centre in a developed city in the western world. Drawing on Paulo Freire's (1970) theory of critical pedagogy, this paper presents a case study of *Fighting Words* Creative Writing Centre, a socially-engaged participatory arts organisation underpinned by Freirean principles currently operating in the non-formal education sector in Ireland. *Fighting Words* and its linked partners focus primarily on affording all youth, but particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds who tend to be voiceless in society, the opportunity to discover and realise their own creative power, to think critically, and to express themselves in their own voice. In contrast to the standardised formal education system, non-formal education is characterised by a high degree of flexibility (Yasunaga, 2014) and 'its readiness to adapt to heterogeneous populations with many and diverse educational needs' (Romi and Schmida, 2009, p. 258). Like formal education, it is planned, structured and may be teacher-led but participation is usually voluntary, motivation is typically more intrinsic than extrinsic and learning is usually not formally evaluated (Eshach, 2007). As non-formal education structures and curricula are not determined or restricted by state rules and dictates (Hoppers, 2006), it is often more learner-centred than curriculum-focused and less directive and more flexible (White and Lorenzi, 2016). All of these characteristics apply to *Fighting Words*.

2. Theoretical Framework

In his seminal work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire presents education as a political act. He criticises the banking concept of education as an 'instrument of oppression' that serves to propagate the needs of the dominant classes and to 'encourage passivity in the oppressed'. Banking education, Freire argues, renders knowledge as static, the teacher as a depositor and the student as a passive recipient. This form of interaction, he contends, inhibits dialogue, critical thinking, creativity and transformation – core principles, one might argue, of true education. In a call for a radical overhaul of education, he puts forward his ideas for problem-posing education, a critical pedagogy that he believes can liberate through a process of 'conscientization' (awakening critical consciousness). Emancipation, he argues, must come from the oppressed, not the oppressor, and awareness of self and self in relation to others is a crucial step in awakening a critical consciousness in society. Freire argues that everybody, particularly the disadvantaged and disenfranchised, needs to be aware of the power structures operating in society as social inequalities can only be addressed when those affected by it recognise their oppression. He argues that oppressed communities, often unaware of their own oppression, are constrained by a 'culture of silence' and forced to conformity. Often their unawareness is due to the fact that they have internalised their oppressor's values and, therefore, view their situation through the eyes of the oppressor and fail to see possible solutions or alternatives to their circumstances (Barroso, 2002). Freire's view of education as a means of social transformation stems from his belief that humans through their awareness of themselves as conscious beings and their capacity for praxis - reflection and action intent on transformation- have the potential to transform reality. He insists that once the oppressed realise that reality is not static, they can conceive of changing it. Furthermore, Freire argues that problem posing education through its use of dialogue and democratic relations is essential in aiding this transformation.

3. Background and Context

Fighting Words is a creative writing centre established by Irish author Roddy Doyle and his colleague Seán Love in Dublin in January 2009. Inspired by the creative

writing project *826 Valencia* founded by American writer Dave Eggers in San Francisco, Doyle and Love saw potential for such an initiative in Ireland. *Fighting Words* was the first project of its kind in Europe but others, inspired by the *826 Valencia* model, have since followed with new centres opened in London, Paris, Milan, Copenhagen, Amsterdam, Vienna, Stockholm, Barcelona and Belfast. In line with their mission statement, *Fighting Words* founders declare creativity and empowerment as defining purposes of the centre's activities.

Since its inception, *Fighting Words* has worked with in excess of 90,000 participants from all parts of the country, but predominantly with students from the greater Dublin region and particularly with schools based in North inner-city areas, where lower socio-economic status is more likely to be found. Consequently, many of the participants come from communities where people tend not to have much voice in society. 84.5% of the participants are of school age between 6 and 18. *Fighting Words* also offers its services to special and diverse needs groups and send teams of tutors out to groups who cannot travel to their premises, including places of institutional care and juvenile detention centres. All activities are free of charge. *Fighting Words* relies almost entirely on volunteers. Volunteers are selected through an interview process, subjected to reference check and police vetting and undergo specific training. They come from different walks of life. Among them are most commonly current or retired teachers, post-graduate students, writers or aspiring writers, journalists and librarians. They range in age from 19 to over 60 and are predominantly female. *Fighting Words* operates in close partnership with schools in Ireland. Workshops are offered mornings and afternoons during the school term. Each workshop lasts for two hours, involves approximately 20-25 students and is facilitated by approximately eight volunteer tutors (one tutor per three students). Schools can apply to enrol students in a once off workshop or as part of a year-long book project involving weekly attendance at the centre. The latter culminates with the publication of an anthology of short stories written and edited by the students themselves. The books are professionally published and are available for purchase in bookshops and online. Generally, students who attend once-off workshops are brought by their teachers and have no choice on whether to participate, whereas, students who take part in the year-long book project are given the option not to

participate. This research focuses on 15-17 year olds who have participated in the year-long book project.

The methodology utilised by *Fighting Words* is informed by 'the Socratic method' and requires tutors to engage in an open and democratic dialogue with students. The creative writing process is designed as a collaborative and democratic activity that encourages active participation. An initial story is developed collectively by participants in response to a scenario-based role play. Two students are invited to role-play the given situation to see what conversation might emerge from an encounter between the two individuals specified in the scenario. As the students carry out the role play, one of the tutors types the conversation and the words are projected onto a screen in real time. After a few moments, the tutor leading the workshop stops the role play and the group read and edit the words on the screen until they are happy it reflects the dialogue they witnessed. The group then proceeds to collaboratively create a story around the agreed dialogue. The lead tutor facilitates the collaboration through questioning while another tutor types the participants' responses. All students' ideas appear on the screen and the story develops gradually through a democratic editorial process led by the tutor. This phase offers students opportunities for working collaboratively with their peers. At a suitably dramatic moment in the development of the collective story, the group input ends and the second phase begins. Participants now move to an adjoining room where they are given the time and space to continue the story individually. Groups of three are assigned a tutor who provides individual attention. Tutors read the students' work and support their progress through dialogue centred on constructive feedback and questioning. In the final phase, the students reconvene and read their stories aloud.

Basic as it may seem, the screen is a significant element of the model both in terms of the collaborative creation of the story and the powerful effect it has on the participants. The founders of *Fighting Words* emphasise that the simple act of seeing their own words being typed on the screen is an important confidence building exercise for the participants. It helps them to overcome the fear of the blank page and enables them to take ownership of the work. Having their words projected back to them appears to inspire and excite participants, particularly those who do not see

themselves as writers. The founders stress that the collaborative writing approach used to begin the session is an integral part of the creative process and is a highly effective strategy for drawing students into the story and enabling them to write. Opening the session with these approaches sets the tone and firmly establishes the Freirean concepts of dialogue, democratic relations, voice, creativity and imagination as core features of the Fighting Words model. Here we see the tutor pose a problem and the students actively engage in dialogue with the tutor and each other to co-create a story. While the initial input is structured, students then have the freedom to take the story in unexpected and original directions according to their imagination. They subsequently share their stories, listen to alternative courses of action and reflect on the process.

4. Research Design and Aims

The authors identify *Fighting Words* as a socially-engaged organisation that uses dialogical, collaborative and democratic practices to give young people the opportunity to be creative, to think critically, and to develop and utilise their voice in order to prepare them to be active citizens in society. This research examines the experience of young people participating in *Fighting Words* and aims firstly, to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of *Fighting Words*' Freirean inspired practices on participants, and secondly, to determine whether their experience has supported their personal, social and emotional development.

We considered case study evaluation to be the best method to achieve the aims of the research because it allowed us to focus in-depth on the practices of a specific organisation. Case studies are preferred 'when the desire is to study some contemporary event or set of events' (Yin, 2018, p. 12) and are regarded as 'particularly useful for evaluating unique programs, programs with unique outcomes, and programs carried out in turbulent or unpredictable environments' (Balbach, 1999, p. 17).

The research investigated the perspectives of a range of key stakeholders including adolescent students (15-17 year olds) who had experienced weekly contact with *Fighting Words* over an academic year, teachers, school principals, *Fighting*

Words founders, *Fighting Words* tutors and the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Irish National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Questionnaires and semi-structured interviews were deemed the most suitable data collection methods. The questionnaires were designed to elicit the experiences and views of all the students (256), teachers (7) and tutors (41) involved in the project. While the questionnaires differed according to the target population, the questions were designed in a way which enabled, as far as possible, comparison of the responses. The questionnaires contained a mix of open-ended and closed questions and were designed to give a comprehensive range of responses to more than 20 questions relating to all aspects of the project. Interview questions were designed to give a comprehensive range of responses to all aspects of the project and to allow for triangulation with responses from questionnaires. Questions for the semi-structured individual interviews were planned for each of the following stakeholders: *Fighting Words*' founders; the CEO of the NCCA; and principals of schools participating in the year-long project. These key stakeholders were selected because their understanding of the *Fighting Words* model and/or the participating students saw them well-placed to comment on the model and its impact on the participants.

Data collection was carried out over twelve months. A total of 163 out of 304 stakeholders responded, giving a response rate of 54.3 per cent. Additional data were obtained from field notes we compiled during site visits to the premises. Over the period of a year, we reviewed the premises, attended workshops and events, and spoke with staff, tutors, teachers and students. We also attended a training workshop for tutors to observe how training was conducted and how the ethos of the organisation was presented. Field notes based on the researchers' observations of the physical space, the teaching methodologies and the interaction of students, tutors and teachers were documented and stored as field data.

5. Discussion of Findings

Three major themes emerged from the data: *Fighting Words* as a vehicle for dialogue and democratic relations; *Fighting Words* as a vehicle for voice and *Fighting Words* as a vehicle for creativity and imagination. The discussion that follows presents the findings and correlates the data with key Freirean concepts.

5.1 *Fighting Words* as a Vehicle for Dialogue and Democratic Relations

The democratic relationship between tutors and students in *Fighting Words* generate different dynamics from those existing in schools. The majority of teachers and tutors regard the supportive atmosphere and the interaction with tutors as key components of the *Fighting Words* model. Tutors are seen by principals and teachers as essential in motivating students to endure through a lengthy writing process and the tutors themselves also highlight the importance of their, often, arduous motivational role in helping students to build self-reliance and resilience. As outlined earlier, the methodology utilised by *Fighting Words* requires tutors to engage in an open and democratic dialogue with students. During both the collaborative story writing phase and the individual development and completion of the story, the tutors and students discuss possible courses of action, explore character motive and experiment with a constantly evolving narrative. Sharing their stories and listening to their peers' accounts adds a further dimension to the discussion as they hear different versions and other perspectives of the original storyline. The notion of seeking alternatives, considering a range of possibilities and realising that there can be more than one outcome is in itself a Freirean experience for students as 'they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation' (2017, p. 56). *Fighting Words* reflects the Freirean notion of a dialogical relationship between teacher and student. The tutors offer students support decoupled from the judgmental function often associated with the role of teachers and through dialogue reveal themselves to be what Freire termed as educational partners with the students as they assume a complementary mentoring role in the formation of the students.

Recurrently in the interviews, *Fighting Words* is described as an emotional and nurturing environment that supports without judging and creates a safe place for participants to thrive both academically and personally. The non-judgmental ethos is clearly perceived by students who, when asked to identify the best aspect of being involved in *Fighting Words*, responded with comments such as: 'The helpful and relaxed environment'; 'Having my say'; 'Constructive advice on my writing'; 'Having mentors supporting me'; 'Nobody judges you'. These observations are a recognition

of the difference between the dialogical approach adopted by tutors and the banking concept of education more commonly found in formal education environments.

One stakeholder identified the 'out-of-school' dimension as a key constituent of *Fighting Words*. She remarked that the physical space and the interactions with tutors generates a different type of educational experience for the students:

They're taken out of the formal school environment into quite a different space, into a space that's much freer, a space where everything is different, there's no desks, the organization of the space is different. They interact with different kinds of adults, they're not teachers who tend to be a particular class type, so they interact with different people in a different way.

This emphasis on a 'different' physical space and 'different' relations is also captured by a student who noted 'It did not feel like school' and by another principal who commented that 'the educational boundaries dissolve and the student, rather than the syllabus, becomes the centre of the educational experience'. 'The reference to boundaries dissolving is an acknowledgement of the greater freedom and possibility participants experience compared to the usual classroom environment and the confines of a formal curriculum.

The support of tutors is consistently mentioned by all stakeholders as fundamental to the success of the model. A number of stakeholders observed that engaging in dialogue and experiencing democratic relations in *Fighting Words* fostered improved teacher-student relations in school and enhanced students' capacity to engage in dialogue with teachers, peers and other adults outside of *Fighting Words*. Teachers commented that they felt a greater bond with the students and that they noticed a greater bond among the students as a result of their shared experience of the project. Principals observed a noticeable improvement in participants' self-esteem. One principal noted:

Their esteem shot through the roof! Some of those girls may have certain issues at home, broken backgrounds, alcoholism at home... coming into school is almost a relief for them. They never get the praise, the merit in anything, because they're average students, but going out there every Thursday... they were coming back having been praised by the tutors in *Fighting Words*, told they can do this, that they were wonderful human beings, that they were brilliant creative beings and I could see over the course of the year, their shoulders were physically up more.

The experience was also considered a positive influence in strengthening student resolve. Several teachers commented on students' 'perseverance and commitment

to a project' and principals noticed an increased resilience and tenacity among students who had participated in *Fighting Words*. Students also recognised an improvement in their stamina. One student said, 'I am able to complete a story and to persevere', while another declared 'I achieved a high score in my end of year exams thanks to my involvement in *Fighting Words*'.

5.2 *Fighting Words* as a Vehicle for Voice

As a creative writing centre, the concept of voice is central to the work of *Fighting Words*. Several stakeholders observed the value of *Fighting Words* in providing a platform for the student voice. One principal noted that it was a rare opportunity to hear young people's voice on social issues:

It's really facilitating the teenage voice and giving expression to their ideas particularly with societal issues that are not necessarily covered in the media by their peers because most of the stuff, when they're writing about, ye know, drink and drugs and sex, and what have you, is usually written from a journalistic perspective whereas this gives them a voice.

The opportunity to express their views and have their voices heard was identified as a significant factor in building participants' confidence and self-esteem. One stakeholder states that voice is at the core of the initiative:

Fighting Words, to me, is about voice. It's about giving students the tools to articulate views, opinions, ideas, concepts, questions, even if they're challenging, giving them the tools, giving them the space and giving them the confidence as well to find that voice.

Being given an opportunity to have their voice heard was seen to be an empowering experience for participants that encouraged them to use their voice elsewhere. Teachers noted that students were more likely to ask questions and to approach teachers with new ideas than they would have been previously. Some of the students' comments also capture this development: 'I am able to communicate my ideas more clearly now than I was before'; 'My skills have improved and as a result I am less hesitant sharing my work with others'; 'I am more confident to ask questions in class'; The data suggests that some participants found the confidence to utilise their voice in shaping school policies and contributing to decision-making processes by joining the student council and other fora that enabled them to engage with school management and the wider school community. One principal observed that *Fighting*

Words participants were more likely to take leadership and mentoring roles in the school. Significantly, most of the *Fighting Words* participants in that particular school went on to play active leadership roles in the school with one participant becoming head girl of the school. The principal felt this trend was due to the practical skills and the confidence, initiative and sense of agency students acquired as part of the *Fighting Words* project.

These findings can be related to Freire's concept of praxis - '*reflection and action* directed at the structures to be transformed' (2017, p. 99). The decision to take on leadership roles is an indication of the participants' awareness of citizenship and their realisation that choosing such roles gives them the power to shape, influence and ultimately 'transcend themselves... so that they can more wisely build the future' (Freire, 2017, p. 57) and transform their experience of the world. Their understanding of their democratic right to exercise their voice, and their willingness to use their voice to benefit themselves and others suggests that their experience of *Fighting Words* has inspired confidence, self-awareness and empowerment. Consistent with Freire's notion that emancipation must come from the oppressed, not the oppressor, Malhotra *et al.* (2002) and Tremblay and Gutberlet (2010) highlight that empowerment can only occur when the individuals concerned are the agents of change. In Freire's words they have developed:

their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation (2017, p. 56).

While all students were considered to have benefited from having their voice heard, the resultant increase in confidence seems to have been particularly pronounced among participants who might traditionally struggle to make their voice heard. A significant number of stakeholders commented that the project had a profound impact on notably shy participants. According to tutors it is 'a valuable outlet for those who are shier and less comfortable with self-expression', while one principal was particularly struck by the fact that less vocal students were willing participants:

One of the students in our school had very low self-esteem and suffered from depression. It was very surprising for me when I realised that this boy was getting published because to me, he was withdrawn and he was quiet, and so you know it's not just the more articulate kids who participate in class that like it, it actually can reach out to someone who is ordinarily quite quiet.

A principal observed that it was a hugely affirming experience for ethnic minority participants and participants with poor language skills to have the opportunity to tell their stories and have their voice heard:

One of our girls was an ethnic minority student who was very poor at English, she wrote a wonderful story which *Fighting Words* kindly translated from Polish into English. It was good to show that, she too could write her story.

A number of principals remarked that the opportunity to have their voice heard was particularly significant for special needs students. One principal noted that participating in *Fighting Words* 'was the makings of some of our special needs students. It would have done absolute wonders for their self-confidence and their self-esteem'. According to one of the founders, this was one of the unanticipated benefits of the project. He remarked that some of the workshops with special needs students have been especially engaging:

I'm struck by parents of children with Asperger's about what it has done for their children... and for the visually impaired... I think the workshops with those children are just the best fun ever... a few days ago we had a group up from Cork... adults with a range of intellectual disabilities and it was just the most fantastic session. They had a fantastic time, they wrote a fantastic story together, they wanted their books and so they waited and... got a late train home.

These findings suggest that *Fighting Words* provides a space that enables participants to acquire a voice and a platform for that voice to be heard. The findings also suggest that *Fighting Words* is particularly effective at reaching the more marginalised members of society.

5.3 *Fighting Words* as a Vehicle for Creativity and Imagination

The data suggests that the freedom to imagine and the opportunity to think critically and creatively are central tenets of the *Fighting Words* initiative. Creativity -as the opposite of rote learning- and empowerment are cited as defining purposes of the activities offered by *Fighting Words* by both of its founders. They frequently describe *Fighting Words* exclusively as a creative writing centre with two main characteristics: making writing accessible and giving an opportunity to participants to be creative by compensating for what they perceive as a lack of creativity in the formal education system. This perception echoes Freire's criticism of the banking concept prevalent in

formal education systems and the need for alternative models of pedagogy. The founders see creativity and critical thinking as essential elements in the development of the individual and contend that there is insufficient opportunity for young people to develop these skills in school. One of them expresses concern at what he sees as a lack of 'real' education in western society:

There's no freedom to think in school and, you know, I think if you're really educating children, they have to have the freedom to think. It's not just an Irish issue, this is why the model that we have and that's now in other countries and which we have adapted from the U.S., it's the same thing being said... that the education system in so many of the countries of the developed world is so restrictive. There's little opportunity for anyone to be creative.

The lack of opportunity for creative expression in formal education is highlighted by a number of the principals who recognised that *Fighting Words* gave students a freedom to develop their creativity and imagination not found in the curriculum. One principal commented:

Everything is about getting the curriculum covered. You have to do the poetry, you have to do the novel, and yes, there is a chance to write but it's hugely constrained, it's not complete freedom to write what you want. Sometimes as teachers we'd say, 'now do you really need to put it in that language?', whereas in *Fighting Words* they have freedom to use that language, and that's us as teachers putting our middle-class values on, you know, on what we think is normal.

The opportunity to draw on their own life experience was emphasised by another principal who added that students realised that their communities had something unique to offer:

Our children here in the city centre are very vocal, they're very orally able but yet when it comes to writing things down that could be a downfall.... They've such imaginations and such life experience that they usually don't get to share, so for them to discover that their stories are just as important as anyone else's, was truly a remarkable realisation for them.

Tutors also recognised that *Fighting Words* gives participants 'a chance to be creative outside the formal school environment' and 'encourages creativity as it allows students to make mistakes'. Similarly, students' comments indicate a positive disposition towards risk-taking, a willingness to experiment with ideas and an appreciation of their imagination: 'It got me to think outside the box'; 'There are no right or wrong answers'; 'No idea is bad/stupid'; 'One student noted that 'writing is a really worthwhile activity' and the majority of students mentioned an improved

confidence in writing. Some principals observed that the project supported the development of literacy in participants and the publication of the book helped promote literacy across the school.

All of the key stakeholders commented on the sense of empowerment and confidence that participants gained from the *Fighting Words* experience. Several teachers and tutors commented that seeing confidence developing in students was 'one of the best aspect of being involved in the project'. A number of the stakeholders referred to the tremendous sense of pride and achievement that students experienced from their involvement in *Fighting Words*. In particular, it was noted that students were immensely proud of the fact that they had created something entirely from their imagination. Several of the students' comments capture their delight at this accomplishment: 'I learned how to write a story'; 'I am surprised at my own ability'; 'I had a good story in my head and I did not know about it!'. For many participants, the feeling of success was heightened by the reaction of others to their work and the fact that other students in the school now looked up to them. One principal noted:

They were so proud of themselves to have their book launched, to be sold, to become writers, published writers – a lot of those girls, their self-esteem has just blossomed and they hold their head up high and they're kind of role models now to the other students, the other students in their year group thinking, wow, you did that, pure role models.

The night of the book launch was described as an 'enormously uplifting' experience for students and their parents and a cause for great celebration in the various schools. Principals commented that the parents were immensely proud of their children's creative achievement and that the participants were animated by their parents' response.

6. Conclusion

Positioning *Fighting Words* as a Freirean inspired space, this paper examines the impact of a socially-engaged participatory arts organisation on young people's personal, social and emotional development. Based on the perspectives of participants and other key stakeholders, the findings indicate that *Fighting Words* is especially valuable in providing a formative and positive experience for young people

from lower socio-economic backgrounds and other marginalised backgrounds where they may not have previously had a strong sense of agency or voice. Observations from various stakeholders indicate a range of positive changes in participants' behaviour and attitude which stakeholders attribute to experiences gained through *Fighting Words*. The findings demonstrate that participants' experience of this space and the learning that occurs there causes young people to conceive of themselves differently. Participants in *Fighting Words* demonstrated a range of behaviours that suggest increased levels of engagement and motivation in school, improved confidence and self-esteem, recognition of and pride in creative ability, a stronger sense of self, a greater ability to work collaboratively, and improved literacy.

Fighting Words seeks to empower youth by providing them with an opportunity to engage in dialogue, experience partnership and democracy, and develop their creative power in the hope that these experiences will ultimately pave the way for them to become active citizens in society. It engages participants in a creative, collaborative process that requires them to be creative, to think and to imagine. Articulating and sharing their ideas helps participants gain a sense of self and their right to be heard. Learning to use their voice effectively is a small but important first step in empowering adolescents from marginalised, and traditionally voiceless, communities.

In *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994), Freire recognised that education was only part of the process of social transformation:

A more critical understanding of the situation of oppression does not yet liberate the oppressed. But the revelation is a step in the right direction. Now the person who has this new understanding can engage in a political struggle for the transformation of the concrete conditions in which the oppression prevails (p. 24).

In his contemplation of how the pedagogy of the oppressed can be implemented devoid of political backing, Freire concludes that it is possible through drawing a distinction between *systematic education*, which can only be changed by political power, and *educational projects*, which should be carried out *with* the oppressed in the process of organizing them (2017, p.28).

Educational reform is invariably slow and rarely radical. In the meantime, schools seeking to extend their work beyond narrow mechanisms and outcomes

focused structures might look towards practices in non-formal education that offer students the opportunity to transform their own reality or at least continue to formalise partnerships with informal education providers to supplement for what they identify to be missing in the provision of formal education.

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