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Theatre as Education: Creating and Performing a Play with Elementary School Students

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**THEATRE AS EDUCATION: CREATING AND PERFORMING A PLAY WITH
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS**

by

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**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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**PROFESSOR PORTILLO
PROFESSOR LEABHART
PROFESSOR BROSTERMAN**

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The quotations and descriptions in this paper were gathered from recordings, pictures, documents, and video footage from the rehearsal process. The names of the students and the elementary school have been changed.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an exploration of the concept of theatre as education and what I learned about teaching, transformation, and failure through my thesis project. In order to explore these ideas, I reflect on my experience creating and performing a short play with a group of eight 2nd and 3rd grade students over the span of nine weeks. I pinpoint the parts of the process that worked well and discuss how these techniques and activities could be used to enhance curriculum and learning in the classroom. I also discuss which parts of the process failed and what I learned from those experiences. I hope that the paper may serve as a guide for teaching artists undertaking similar work and a resource for teachers looking to incorporate the arts into their curriculums.

GETTING STARTED

As an actress, I understand the valuable skills that theatre can teach a person. As a teacher, I understand how necessary these same skills are for children to flourish in all aspects of their lives. I have had the opportunity to teach the performing arts to children for six years and the positive transformations that I have witnessed have convinced me of the fundamental necessity for the arts in every child's education. As a future elementary school teacher, I aspire to incorporate theatre into my future classroom. To this end, my thesis project was an exploration of theatre as education. In this paper, I explore what I learned from the process and discuss the valuable lessons I learned about teaching, transformation and failure.

Over the past four years, I have had the opportunity to observe and volunteer in several California public elementary school classrooms for extended periods of time. I have witnessed the lack of creative freedom allotted to young students and the absence of joy and curiosity in classrooms. In her book, *A Teaching Artist at Work*, Barbara McKean explains that "the passage of the no Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001...require[d] schools to 'produce annual increments in test scores on statewide tests'" (3). This pressure forced schools to focus on traditional subjects and to neglect the arts. As an aspiring elementary school teacher and Theatre major, this strikes me as an enormous loss for our youth. As the most significant and cumulative project of my undergraduate career, I wanted my thesis project to help me prepare for my future teaching career by allowing me to develop ways to incorporate theatre into the classroom.

In light of this, I decided that for my project I would create and perform a play with a group of eight elementary school students. I have been working with children in the performing arts for many years, first as a choreographer and voice instructor at a singing program, then as a drama teacher at several elementary schools. Beginning in the

Fall of 2013, I first taught a musical theatre class in Maple Elementary School's After-School Enrichment Program. This class was followed by a course I called "Performing Arts Creation," in which I experimented with having students create their own work. Each student chose a project to work on and perform at the end of the session, such as writing a skit, choreographing a dance, and rewriting a song. The class allowed me to learn a lot about helping to foster creativity, but because the projects were disjointed, it was difficult to give each student enough attention and guidance to make the class a truly transformative experience.

For my thesis project, I wanted to challenge myself and my students by creating one unified piece of work to which we would all contribute. I thought that creating a large scale and integrated piece would allow us to explore and expand upon many beneficial skills required to undertake such a task, such as self-control, effective communication, and empathetic thinking. I believe that these are essential life skills, but they are not often a focus in the classroom. I wanted this project to be an opportunity for me to test out how I might teach them in my future classes through the medium of theatre. I also wanted to instill in my students everything that theatre had instilled in me: a sense of pride and confidence in myself, the ability to create freely and form deep relationships with those around me, and a sense of belonging. I wanted to create a close-knit family among my eight students, in which they would trust one other and feel free to play and explore together.

Like teaching artist Barbara McKean, it was important to me that the project not be "about training but education...not about competition but collaboration," and "about working to play with one another" (xiii). While developing skills was a major goal, I also wanted to create a magical experience for my students, in which they would be able to

reach their full potential as children. I wanted them to laugh, play, and unleash their imaginations and to experience the joy of doing this with others. My job as a director would not be to produce an impressive finished product, but to give my students a joyful and transformative experience with theatre.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Planning

On my first meeting with my thesis advisor, Rose Portillo, we laid out a plan for the project. Rose is an experienced teaching artist and helped me set a scope. I would use the Maple Elementary After-School Enrichment Program to recruit students and would organize my class according to the program calendar and schedule. I would work with a group of eight 2nd and 3rd grade students for 2 hours, once a week, for 9 weeks. We would spend three weekend rehearsals in our performance space, a theatre at Pomona College, where we would perform at the end of the session. It was a short rehearsal period, but I felt comfortable with the schedule because of my previous teaching experience, my good relationship with Maple Elementary School, and the weekly support I would be receiving from Rose.

Rose advised me to use a pre-existing work as the inspiration and grounding force for the project. I decided that I wanted to work around the theme of failure and searched for months for a story that fit this subject. I found absolutely nothing. There were many stories and legends teaching that if you persevere, you can succeed at anything. However, I wanted to get across the idea that failure is sometimes inevitable and that it is okay. I wanted to instill in my students the importance of accepting failure and moving on. In the

end, however, the project instilled this in me. Learning to deal with failure was perhaps the most valuable teaching skill that I gained from the experience.

Because of my inability to find a story about failure, we went in a different direction. Rose and I thought it would be inspirational for the students to work with a legend originating from the Tonga people, who first inhabited the land that the students now live on. In a phone conversation with a kind and supportive Tongva Elder named Julia Bogany, I learned of a legend called “The Turtle Brothers.” In the legend, Great Spirit is looking for a place to build land, because the world is only water. He comes across a giant turtle and tells him to find his six brothers and gather them together. He arranges them into a circle and puts land, trees, and mountains onto their shells. He tells them to hold still, but they cannot help but argue and stir, since they are siblings. This is what causes earthquakes to happen from time-to-time.

The legend was perfect, because it was structured enough to guide our creativity, but simple enough that there was space to add our own ideas. However, I also loved it for the many universal themes that it held. Rose and I came up with some of the major themes that could be explored: sibling relationships, responsibility, teamwork, and conflict resolution. These themes beautifully aligned with many of the skills that I wanted to foster, such as communication, collaboration, and developing relationships of trust. Although I didn’t initially realize it, the legend even dealt with failure, as the siblings are repeatedly unable to follow Great Spirit’s directions to hold still. It had everything!

In the Classroom

On the first day of class, I impressed upon my students the importance of what we were going to create. I explained that they were helping to create a thesis project and that it would be the biggest and most important piece of work that I would do in college. I

gave them background information on the Tongva and impressed upon them how lucky we were to have permission to use the legend in our play. Like the turtles holding the land, we had a great responsibility to tell this sacred story well. I showed them a large and colorful picture of our performance space, the elegant Rose Hills Theatre at Pomona College, and told them that they would be performing for friends, family, and even a few professors.

The reaction of the students to this information was indicative of their attitude throughout the process. They were giggly, nervous, and excited to perform and take on the legend, but respectful and almost reverent about the responsibility that they had to me and the Tongva people. These positive reactions were likely connected to the good relationship I already had with four of the students who had previously taken classes of mine. These students were highly loyal and took the lead in following directions and enforcing basic class rules, such as raising hands to speak, not speaking when I was talking, and respecting each others' ideas. This support made classroom management much easier than I had anticipated. I had three boys and five girls and every single one was highly creative, clever, friendly, and cooperative. It was a rare and exceptional group.

A quick word about my teaching philosophy: I believe that in order to have a successful class, each student must feel listened to and respected, and like they belong. When these feelings are in place, students are more receptive to me as their teacher, kinder to each other, and feel safer in the classroom environment. For a theatre class, in which students are constantly being asked to take risks, it is essential for these things to be in place. There must be trust among group members. Luckily, theatre is great at helping to foster this trust and respect. It is a wonderful cycle. On my part, I always tried

to listen to and understand each student as best as possible and to verbally remind each student of how special their ideas were and how important they were to the class. I feel that I was successful in this, because the students were very comfortable approaching me and speaking their minds.

We began each class with acting games to warm up their minds and bodies. Then we went over what we hoped to accomplish that day. I held up a calendar of rehearsal dates and chose a student to check off that day's date. This reminded them that each session was an important step towards our final goal of the performance, which inspired them to participate and focus. It also helped them prepare themselves for upcoming rehearsals. Next, we did an activity to exercise the skills that they would use that day. After working on the play, I would end each session by having students reflect on the day's work, asking them questions such as, "what was your favorite thing that we did today?" and "how do you feel that today went?"

The creation of the play took up the majority of our class time and my discussion of it will take up the bulk of this paper. For the purpose of organization, I have broken the process into five main categories: improvisation, character development, creating the script, coordinating movement, administrative challenges, and performing. I chose to focus on these aspects because I believe that they were most significant in teaching important lessons to the students and to me. In reflecting on them, I pinpoint the parts of the process that worked well and discuss how these techniques and activities could be used to enhance curriculum and learning in the classroom. I also discuss the parts of the process that failed and what I learned from those experiences.

IMPROVISATION

Fear of Failure

The first step in creating the play was getting the students to express their ideas freely. Exposing one's ideas to the world is difficult for most people, but it is especially hard for today's students. As Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed*, says in a podcast interview, "our entire education system's organized around the idea that testing and the kind of smarts that you can measure on a test are the most important information we can have about a student" ("474: Back to School"). Because of the extreme emphasis on testing, many students have come to believe that high test scores make a person valuable and that poor scores make a person of low-worth. The system makes children feel ashamed when they fail, whether choosing the wrong multiple choice answer or not understanding a concept in class.

This fear of failure means that expressing oneself, and risking negative judgment by others, can be an extremely anxiety-provoking experience. For this reason, improvisation, which at its core is the practice of taking risks, is often out of the comfort zone of many of today's children. For two of my students in particular, Jessica and Lucy, this was the case. In one game that we frequently played, entitled "What are you Doing?", one student thinks of an action for another student to act out. Both the thinker and the actor must express the first idea that pops into their head, no matter how ridiculous it is. The nature of improvisation is that every idea is accepted and there are no good or bad ones. While this should be liberating, students who are obsessed with being correct will find it impossible to play. Such was the case with Jessica and Lucy, who would stand motionless and silent or say "I don't know what to do" when it was their turn.

Vulnerability

In order to help students overcome their fear and be open to taking risks, it is essential to understand the reasons behind it. I believe that at the heart of their fear is vulnerability. Brené Brown, a social worker, has done research on vulnerability. She says that at the root of it is the question: “Is there something about me, that if other people know it or see it, that I won’t be worthy of connection?” (“Brené Brown at TEDxHouston”) When students are afraid of failure, they are really afraid of being perceived as unworthy of friendship and love by those around them. When taking the risk of producing an idea that does not automatically fit into a “correct” category, there is the possibility of rejection by peers.

However, as Jessica and Lucy eventually learned, in improvisation no ideas are rejected. In fact, the more crazy and irrational an idea is, the more celebrated it is. In this way, improvisation is a wonderful antidote to the experience of having one’s thoughts constantly judged as right or wrong. This part of the process created the greatest transformation for Jessica and Lucy. A couple of classes in, when it was Jessica’s turn to think of an action, she quietly said, “I’m brushing my hair.” Sally, a returning student of mine, acted out getting the brush stuck in her hair and crying and screaming for her mom in a highly comical way. The entire class laughed uproariously and I could see that the endorsement of the laughter made her feel proud of her idea. Incidents like this happened each class and by the half-way point of the session, both Lucy and Jessica were coming up with wonderfully creative ideas, such as, “I’m trying to play tennis with a piece of pizza,” and “I’m dumping spaghetti on my head while singing opera.”

If I had students in my future classroom who were afraid of expressing their ideas, I would have them do improvisation in small groups. I would gradually make the groups

bigger throughout the year, until every student was comfortable doing it with the entire class. Based on the transformation I saw in Lucy and Jessica, this would help students become more confident in their ideas and trust themselves enough to express them. This self-confidence would strengthen classroom skills, such as giving presentations, answering questions in class, and contributing in group projects.

Originality

Another reason taking risks is so highly valued in theatre is that it is necessary for generating new ideas. Sir Ken Robinson, a renowned educationalist, asserts that “if you’re not prepared to be wrong, you’ll never come up with anything original” (“Sir Ken Robinson: Do schools kill creativity?”). Improvisation is a tremendous tool for coming up with new ideas, because it forces you to do so. In a game called “freeze,” a person has to create a new scene inspired by a pose that a previous person has been “frozen” in during the last scene. When Sally had to think of a way to reuse a pose where the previous person was napping, she became a zombie that sprung to life. This ability to think outside of the box will likely strengthen her ability to come up with another approach to a problem that she can’t solve in math or to create a new system of sharing when two of her friends are fighting over a basketball at recess. These are just a few examples of how the skill of being able to come up with original ideas can help students in every aspect of their lives.

From my perspective as a teacher, every day in the classroom is full of improvisation. I once asked an experienced teacher if after all these years, she had learned how to deal with any situation that came her way. She thoughtfully replied, “I have a general way that I have learned to approach certain situations, but every child and every situation is different, so I am constantly having to rethink and reshape my

approaches.” As a new teacher, I constantly have to make split-second decisions when dealing with difficult situations. In these situations, my background in theatre gives me the confidence to think of creative solutions on the spot. It also helps me take risks when I experiment with new teaching methods and techniques. Seeing how much improvisation benefits me in my life makes me even more confident that it will help my students in theirs.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

The part of the process that I was most excited about was having the students delve deeply into developing their characters, because it gets them to use their imagination and critical thinking skills. Character work was a staple of every class, starting with an exercise I entitled “Turtle Life Cycle.” I slowly talked them through the life stages of a turtle, beginning with their emergence from their egg shells and finishing curled up in their turtle shells at the end of their lives. For the first time, we entered the mystical, watery world of the Tongva legend. To transport them out of their own minds and into the world of the turtles, I used as much sensory detail as possible: “You are in a smooth, dark eggshell. You are warm and cozy. You can hear the roar of the ocean waves. You can smell the salt in the air.”

One of my readers, Professor Brosterman, is a dance teacher and guided me in coming up with questions to get the students thinking about the behavior of their individual turtles. While I guided them through the life cycles, I stopped at each stage and asked questions that Professor Brosterman helped me generate. “How do you swim? Are you slow, medium, fast? Do you playfully swim in circles? Do you move as fast as you can, full of energy? Do you move gracefully? Do you find yourself swimming away from

the group to be alone, or do you like to be close to your sisters and brothers?” The students were not concerned with planning their characters for the play, but flowing freely where their inclinations and imaginations pulled them.

The students responded to my questions and made strong choices for their turtles. Their imaginations flowed so freely that they were acting without thinking. The girls flocked together and immediately established relationships with one another. Lucy’s turtle was young and Molly’s turtle, who was best friends with Sally’s turtle, took care of her. Jessica’s turtle preferred to hide in coves (under tables) and Lisa’s turtle enjoyed exploring the environment, still touching base with the group intermittently. Nick and Kyle’s turtles were physically separate and claimed territory. They were primarily involved in survival behavior like catching food and creating defenses. Many of the behaviors that emerged in this exercise became part of the final characters.

Perspective Shifting

At this point, I could see strong similarities among many of the personalities of the turtles and the students and I wanted to push them to imagine life from a different perspective than their own. Adele Diamond, a neuroscientist specializing in cognitive development, speaks to the merits of this skill, which she calls “cognitive flexibility” (“The Science of Attention”). She describes the skill as “being able to switch your perspective or switching the way that you’re thinking about things” (Diamond). Altering your perspective on things can strengthen critical thinking skills. In the K-12 California Common Core State Standards for education, students are trained to “question an author’s or speaker’s assumptions and premises” rather than blindly accepting the perspective that is presented (6). It is easy to see the value of inhabiting a character with different thoughts in developing this skill of perspective shifting.

Literature, film, images, and music can give one insight into another world, but theatre allows you to experience it. The Common Core standards call for students to “inhabit worlds and have experiences much different from their own” in order to “understand other perspectives and cultures” (6). They purport to accomplish this by having children “read...great classic and contemporary works of literature representative of a variety of periods, cultures, and worldviews” (6). While it is immensely valuable for children to be exposed to great literature, how enriching would it be to follow it up with an exercise in which the students embody the characters in the text? What if the children had to take the information that they knew about a character and act out what that character would do in a situation not presented in the book? Rather than analyzing from a desk, living and breathing in an imagined world can make perspective-shifting a magical experience.

Fostering cognitive flexibility in children can also help them develop empathy for others. One kindergarten teacher said to me, “I’ve noticed that kids now-a-days aren’t as empathetic as they used to be and I think it’s because they aren’t interacting with people as much as they used to because they are on the iPad every day after school.” Concern about the over-use of technology by children is widespread and the education system should help to remedy this issue. One way to do this is by focusing on empathy. I believe that if children are able to not only imagine a perspective other than their own, but to embody it with their movements, words, choices, and reactions to the environment around them, they will develop a strong ability to see the world through another person’s eyes.

Establishing Characters

By having the students consciously create the characters that they would portray in the play, I got them to experience perspective-shifting. Rose suggested that I use a “frame,” in which students would create poses with their bodies inspired by the question: “what do you contribute to the turtle family?” This question was designed to help them establish their characters with the story in mind. Once the frame had been filled in, I asked the students first what they thought their fellow students would say if they could speak, then what they would say, based on their poses. I will give one example. Lisa was posed on her back, arms and legs raised and bent, with her hands out and open.

Me: “What do you think Lisa’s turtle would say if it could speak?”

Sally: “I think she’s saying, ‘I love playing with this piece of seaweed.’”

Molly: “I think she’s saying, ‘I love floating on my back.’”

Kyle: “It looks like she’s swimming backwards, on her back.”

Me: “So what might she be saying?”

Kyle: “Maybe, ‘I like to swim backwards.’”

Me: “Lisa, what would you say if you could speak?”

Lisa: “I was saying, ‘I like playing with these bubbles.’”

Me: “So what do you contribute to the family?”

Lisa: “I’m playful.”

This example is representative of the exercise, because the students all began by describing actions that their characters liked to do and only moved on to personality characteristics when prompted. However, most of the characteristics, like Lisa’s, did not contribute to the family in a meaningful way and therefore could not be connected to the rest of the family and the story. I conferred with Rose about how I could strengthen the

traits that they had chosen by making them deeper. Once we had gotten to the core of their traits, I had the students do the exercise again, asking them to try another pose. This time, Lisa was crouched on her hands and knees with her chin touching the ground and her gaze upwards.

Me: “What are you saying, Lisa?”

Lisa: “Where are my brothers and sisters? I want to play with them!”

Me: “Why do you want to play with them?”

Lisa: “Because it’s fun!”

Me: “Why does your turtle find playing more fun than, maybe, reading a good book?”

Lisa: “My turtle doesn’t like to read, because it thinks it’s boring.”

Me: “Sounds like your turtle hates to be bored- would you say that your turtle is curious?”

Lisa: “Yes! My turtle loves to explore around the ocean, and play with stuff it finds.”

Lisa’s new trait of curiosity was very fundamental and could be applied to any situation, whereas playfulness wouldn’t “work” in certain situations (one might be curious about being given the responsibility of carrying land, but probably not playful). In this way, all of the students developed main character traits that could be used to explore the story. While similarities still remained between student and character, I felt that the students understood themselves as different from the characters.

Embodying Characters

To get them in the practice of thinking and acting like their characters, I designed an exercise that came to be known as “The Turtle Family Adventure.” In the exercise, the

family had to go on an adventure to find a magical octopus to heal their sick sister (Lisa). At pivotal moments in the story, there would be choices to make and they would have to decide what to do. The important part was that they had to communicate with each other and make these choices as their characters.

Putting themselves into the minds of their characters was an area of difficulty and immense growth for the students. It was especially hard for Nick, who had chosen a character most different from himself. Nick was a sensitive and anxious boy, who cried in my arms the day of our last rehearsal, nervous about the impending performance. But Nick's turtle was brave. Because of this discrepancy he required constant reminders to think like his character. In one scenario, the family was discussing whether they should send someone on the dangerous journey to the bottom of the ocean to find food. I prompted Nick, "what do you think the family should do?" He answered with a nervous giggle, "I think we should wait until we see food up here. I don't think it's a good idea to go down there." I replied, "Brave turtle, what do you think your family should do?" The reminder was all it took. "I will go to the bottom of the ocean, I am not afraid!" he said.

While the entire class begged to do "The Turtle Family Adventure" every day, I think it is no accident that Nick was the most fervent. On the last day of class, we concluded the adventure, and I could see how much he had grown. Nick was the first to volunteer at every juncture of the story and had become assertive in family discussions. One day, I announced that the only place to find food was on land, a dangerous place that was unknown to the family. Normally, family discussions were run by Joseph and Molly's turtles, since they were the oldest. Lately, however, their brave brother had been having a strong say in family decisions. Before anyone else could speak, his hand shot up and he boldly said, "I'll do it! You guys stay here."

While Nick is an exceptional example, I saw all of my students experiment with actions that they would not have taken in real life. I came to understand that there was a sense of security in making daring choices while in character. It allowed the students to practice taking risks in a low-stakes environment. It allowed them to explore being braver, kinder, more assertive than they normally are. For those who had weak social skills, interacting with others through a character was a safe way to practice socializing in new ways without fear of rejection. Because they were making choices as a family, it also exercised everyone's ability to communicate effectively and solve problems with others. For timid students, it allowed them to practice being assertive in a group without fear of judgment by peers.

When everyone is exploring the world in new ways, it makes it okay for students to employ parts of their personality that they usually don't. It removes the fear of being rejected by peers, because the peers are gone, lost in characters that are operating under the same lack of fear. The potential for this sort of exercise in improving social skills, communication skills, and the ability to assert oneself is huge. I could see this exercise being used as therapy for children who struggle with anxiety when interacting with peers. I would also use it in classrooms to help teach what Paul Tough calls "non-cognitive" skills, such as "social skills" and "personality traits" ("474: Back to School"). These skills are essential for children to have if they are to be cooperative adults.

CREATING THE SCRIPT

Working Memory

One of the benefits of doing a long-term and unified piece of theatre, as opposed to the smaller ones that I had done in the past, is that it requires a great deal of

remembering previous work and building on it each day. It requires the skill of working memory. Diamond explains that “working memory [is] holding information in mind and playing with it and you need working memory for anything that unfolds over time” (“The Science of Attention”). From the scaffolding that the legend provided, we created something complex and unique through a process of layering. Every time that we came back to a scene that we had worked on previously and tweaked, expanded upon, or reworked it, the students were using their working memories. Every time that we added lines, movements, and parts of our characters, these new layers had to be remembered and connected to past ones and future ones. We constantly built on existing ideas in order to create new ones. This process required the students to remember many pieces of information and to connect these pieces in their minds.

Interpreting the Story

In creating our script, we began with the words of the story and breathed life into them. On the first day of class, I read the legend and stopped at key turning points to ask the students what they thought the characters were feeling. When I asked them what the turtles might be feeling when told that they would be carrying land, I got answers like, “scared,” “stressed out,” and “surprised.” I asked them how they felt when given a big responsibility in their own lives and Sally memorably said, “I feel special, but worried.” Infusing the students’ feelings and experiences into the legend was the first layer of the process. From their answers, I could already see the quality of the story changing as it was interpreted through their eyes.

The second step was incorporating these unique interpretations into the dialogue. From past experience, I knew that having students of this age write out dialogue was tedious and ineffective. Instead, I had the students make “story frames.” I asked them to

remember major moments in the story, then told them that we would be making a story book with pictures of these moments that they would create with their bodies. I would choose a moment and one by one the students would walk into the “frame” area and strike a pose expressing what was happening in that moment. When everyone was posed, I would take a picture of the finished frame on my phone and have the students tell me what they thought each person would say if they could talk, based on the picture of their pose. Last, I had the students reveal what they would say if they could talk.

While this method worked extremely well for generating dialogue, I realize looking back that it was even more useful than I realized. Asking a young student to create dialogue based on his/her interpretation is ineffective, because he/she is not old enough to be aware that their interpretation is an interpretation at all (even adults are sometimes unaware of this). While language can be simple enough to be devoid of emotion and attitude, body shapes are full of nuances and color that can be interpreted in endless ways. Because of this, it is easy for a person to project his/her own feelings onto another person’s posed body. A person’s interpretation of a body shape can reveal his/her feelings and opinions about something. When students interpret what one of their peers is saying, they are actually capturing his/her own unique take on the story. This phenomenon is revealed in this interaction:

Me: “What would Nick be saying if he could speak?”

Molly: “Okay guys, you have to hold very still so I can put the land on top of you.”

Lucy: “What should I put on the land?”

Me: “Nick, what were you saying?”

Nick: “Take this land!”

This dialogue is from a frame of the moment that Great Spirit bestows land upon the turtles. Nick's pose was standing and pointing at the ground. In his imagined dialogue, Great Spirit is commanding, whereas Molly imagines Great Spirit instructing the turtles as a parent might for a child. Lucy envisions Great Spirit as a planner, puzzling over what to create on the land. These three different interpretations are colored by the opinions of Nick, Molly, and Lucy about how Great Spirit thinks and feels. Adele Diamond says that "the essence of creativity is holding things in mind and disassembling them and putting them together in new ways" ("The Science of Attention"). This is what my students did by using their memory of the story to create new dialogue for the existing characters.

Script Editing

One failed technique worth mentioning was pen-to-paper editing. I wanted to introduce the students to playwriting, so I had them go through the existing script that I typed up and edit parts that didn't make sense or could be improved. I thought that editing would be easier for the younger students than writing. For the 2nd graders, the task was arduous and frustrating. Because of their limited reading and writing capabilities, they found the exercise frustrating and boring. They were unable to stay focused and lost faith in the process. The 3rd graders were more successful and made some wonderful suggestions, but I would not use the exercise again with children ages seven and younger.

A more useful technique was incorporating improvisation into the process. The script was already clever and humorous, but I wanted to color the existing dialogue with the personalities of the individual characters. At the time that the first draft was completed, the students had been working on their characters for a while and had a good sense of them. The most significant scene for the turtles as individuals was when they

were being found by their brother (Kyle), because they had a chance to shine one-by-one. I had the students improvise this scene as their characters and video recorded it to capture their dialogue and blocking.

I put the script together by transcribing the students' dialogue from audio recordings I made during the story frame sessions and video recording from the one improvised scene. I deleted redundant lines and rearranged them into a cohesive order. I assigned the existing lines to whatever character I felt was most likely to say them and altered a few lines to create a better fit with characters. I felt comfortable doing this, because I knew their characters so well from "The Turtle Family Adventure" and other exercises. The final script was entertaining, funny, and charming and told the legend well. You could hear the voices of the children in it, as in this snippet of dialogue:

LISA: Hello little turtle! Could you please go find your brothers and sisters?

KYLE: Is this really an option?

ALL (except Kyle): No! You have to do this now!

Here the Great Spirit becomes a figure of authority, who bosses around the turtle like a parent or teacher. This dynamic between Great Spirit and the turtles came up in much of the dialogue from the story frames and the burden of being given responsibility by this authoritative figure was a common theme throughout the play. I love how evident the touch of the child is in this interpretation. I also love this passage:

MOLLY: I've been looking everywhere for you little brother. Have you seen that seaweed pie I made today?

KYLE: I sort of ate it all...

MOLLY: I knew it! That pie was for the whole family. You are grounded.

NICK: You're not our mom! We're not afraid of you!

I love how through this brief interaction, you can already begin to see the relationship between the siblings and grasp each of their personalities. This sequence emerged during the improvisation session when Kyle and Nick's turtles, who had previously been found, gathered Molly's turtle for Great Spirit. It is evident in this improvisation how well each of the children knew their characters and it is a testament to all of the work that we did to develop them. Once again, you can sense the child's interpretation in these characters and their delightful sense of humor.

COORDINATING MOVEMENT

Creating and working with dialogue required a lot of stillness from my students and so I was excited that adding movement was our next step in the process. Incorporating movement into the play was important for me, because I had many highly energetic students. Ken Robinson says that some "people...[have] to move to think" ("Sir Ken Robinson: Do schools kill creativity?"). In my experience, many students also need to move to focus and I was curious to see how introducing movement would affect the class.

I was surprised to discover that, more than anything else, this stage of the process helped the students develop teamwork skills. From the second class, the students identified so strongly with their turtles that no one wanted the role of Great Spirit. Our solution was that they would collectively be Great Spirit, filling a large piece of cloth with their bodies when the spirit was speaking and slipping out when they had lines as their turtle characters. My original concept for the cloth was stretchy spandex that would outline each of their body shapes. However, after searching for many fabrics, I settled on a white crinkled taffeta that had body to it and helped create large, unified shapes. During

a test session with the taffeta, Great Spirit looked beautiful. However, creating the shapes underneath the sheet turned out to be a logistical nightmare.

Moving Together

Having eight 2nd and 3rd graders jumbled together under a sheet inspired laughing, poking, arguing, and elbowing. It takes great bodily control and awareness of those around you to successfully move together in such tight quarters and these are not strong skills in children. To get the students to practice working together, I used movement exercises. Professor Brosterman taught me an exercise in which I named an image for the students to create with their bodies. Without speaking, they had to create images such as a whale, a ship in a storm, or a beach. I also used an exercise called flocking, introduced to me by Rose, in which the whole class would exactly copy the movements of the student in front of them until the direction changed and whoever the new person was who was in front became the leader to be followed.

These exercises helped immensely with getting the class to move together. I could see many skills at play. In both exercises, students had to move in close proximity and therefore had to be extremely aware of the movement of others around them, lest someone be injured. Cooperating with others to make a desired shape and containing one's movements require self-control. Lastly, matching another person's exact movements and translating them onto your body requires great focus. The students had a great deal of fun using their movements together and these exercises also helped them become focused. I would like to use these exercises before doing group work in the classroom. Having students communicate only with their bodies will lay the foundation for verbal communication during projects.

These movement exercises also helped with teamwork by switching up the usual dynamics of communication in the group. I observed that working purely with movement eliminated hierarchies among the students that ordinarily would emerge when speaking was a component. While older students would ordinarily direct others in a group situation, it was nearly impossible for them to do so without speech. There were still some attempts to gesture in commanding ways, but it is difficult to read this type of communication and students soon realized that it was more effective to focus on how their own movements and body shapes could work with those of their peers.

Therefore, group movement creates a more equal playing field, in which students must communicate through their movements. For this reason, the group exercises mentioned above might be beneficial to use with groups of students who have an unhealthy power dynamic. Often times, bullying occurs when one student is dominant and another is submissive. To put these types of students into a situation where they had to work on equal footing to create unified movement could help remedy this discrepancy.

Difficulties

Because of the success of the group movement exercises, I thought that having the students create Great Spirit's shapes would be fun and easy for them. However, their cooperative abilities and communication skills were not sophisticated enough to create shapes together without being able to see themselves. The only way for them to know what the shapes looked like was for one person to step out and direct the group. The first problem with this was that only one person's creative vision was at work. The second issue was that they did not take directions well from each other. I tried taking photos of the shapes and then having all of them look and give opinions, but the process simply wasn't effective enough.

In the end, I had to direct the shapes. I had them verbally give me ideas for shapes and then I would direct their bodies into those positions. I really wanted the students to create the shapes for themselves and I was disappointed that they couldn't. I was frustrated with myself for my miscalculation of their abilities, because it had caused me to be sharp with them and to use up the entire class time. In my head I was telling myself that I had wasted valuable time, pushed the students too hard, and detracted from all of our experiences. The students could see my frustration and it was a moment where I had to model the behavior that I asked of them. I took a deep breath, told myself that it was okay, and moved on to the next activity.

ADMINISTRATIVE CHALLENGES

Because I was working with young children in a school setting, interacting with the school administration and parents was essential. If our classroom was used for a special event, students were taken out for an After-School Program field trip, or school was canceled for a holiday, rehearsal was interrupted. If students didn't come to weekend rehearsals, work on their costumes, and practice their lines at home, we were set back. If the Rose Hills Theatre was not opened on time, the stage covered by a projector screen, or the space scattered with decorations and props for another show, we fell behind schedule. All of these things happened many times and the process was full of frustrations and difficulties.

The best way to combat this was to communicate as effectively as possible. I spoke and emailed with the After-School Enrichment Program coordinator, the school principal, and the teacher of the classroom we rehearsed in to confirm scheduled interruptions to our usual class time and to discover any last-minute changes. I spoke

with maintenance and the office in charge of the Rose Hills Theatre to try to ensure that the theatre would be open and free of screens and props during our rehearsal time. I sent parents several emails leading up to line memorization deadlines and weekend rehearsal dates. However, all this was new to me and mistakes were unavoidable.

Inevitable Failures

Three days prior to one weekend rehearsal, I emailed a reminder to the parents. I didn't have a lot of experience emailing with parents and I was worried about being too incessant with my messages so I chose not to follow up with another reminder. When one student was absent at the rehearsal, I emailed her mother and received this reply: "It slipped my mind. I guess I needed a reminder." Lesson learned. Always send a reminder the day before. I learned hundreds of these tiny lessons that were new to me at the time, but I'm sure will be everyday essentials in my teaching career. The most important lesson was that the best way to deal with these mistakes was with patience and politeness. I replied to the mother: "I completely understand. Life is busy! I will be sure to send a reminder the day before rehearsals in the future." The coping strategy that I developed was to be friendly, patient, and polite.

However, situations still arose that could not be solved with communication, planning, or politeness. Joseph had already missed almost half of our rehearsals when his mother told me that their family was going on vacation and would not be back until a week before the performance. I knew in my gut that Joseph would not be able to perform. His absence would be too disruptive and would diminish the experience for the rest of the class. The sensitive side of me couldn't bear to imagine Joseph's disappointment at not being able to perform and feared a confrontation with his mother. However, Rose

encouraged me to listen to my instincts and it was a powerful lesson in being assertive and trusting myself.

Despite my efforts to come up with a creative solution, the situation was still a failure. In lieu of performing, I offered Joseph the role of Assistant Director, but his mother wrote: “Since Joseph won’t be performing, we’re going to try again next time.” They did not even show up at the performance, despite Joseph having helped create the script. I had put so much effort into unifying the class and helping them form deep connections with each other that were now severed. The project was meant to develop skills over the course of the session, but Joseph’s transformation was cut short. I worried about the effect this would have on him and the rest of the class. Mostly, however, I was angry. Joseph’s mother had disregarded the form that she had read and signed upon registration acknowledging that Joseph would attend every rehearsal. As a result, the rest of the students would have to memorize line alterations, learn new blocking, and rework movement sequences that had been painstakingly choreographed.

Learning to Cope

This was just one of many uncontrollable situations that arose throughout the process. At first, these unexpected difficulties would throw me into a state of panic. I was used to the lack of power I had as an enrichment teacher. At previous schools where I had worked, every day was radically different. I would be given different students, different locations, and different teachers to work with each time I came. I learned to go with the flow. Flexibility was essential. Despite my experience with this chaos, the pressure of putting together an entire play and wanting to produce something meaningful for my thesis project magnified my anxiety. I got used to taking deep breaths and looking at the positives in a situation. This is how I recovered from my many failures.

Another major difficulty occurred when I ran out of time to create costumes with the children. We had planned to make turtle shells out of backpacks and decorate them with land like Great Spirit does. It was one of many parts of the process that got cut because of limited time. Over a two week school break, I asked the parents to have their students make the shells at home. I provided green backpacks with stuffing and they provided materials for the land. It was evident which parents helped their students. One student had sewed on fabric swatches representing different types of land, while another had used scotch tape to attach construction paper. I was nervous to ask for so much help from parents, but they were supportive and enthusiastic. From this experience I learned that in times of failure, it is okay to ask for help.

PERFORMING

Inhibitory Control

The final stretch to the performance was the most difficult. At this stage, we needed to run the show repeatedly, memorize lines and movements, and fix small issues. These tasks required a great deal of focus during a dull and somewhat chaotic time. Diamond says that “you need inhibitory control to stay on task when you’re bored or when you meet initial failure” (“The Science of Attention”). This skill is extremely important in the classroom, because students quickly become bored and frustrated with work that is difficult. While this skill is essential, it can be difficult to strengthen, especially if a child’s home environment does not encourage the finishing of projects or the completion of difficult assignments.

Creating such a large project, with such a big goal at the end of it, is a situation uniquely suited to improving inhibitory control. There is a direct link between the amount

of inhibitory control employed and the success of the performance. The ability to exercise this skill effectively results in a wonderful performance and reinforces this behavior for children. Because we had worked for months on the play and put so much work into it, refusing to practice inhibitory control was not an acceptable option to the group. The students would often reprimand each other for not participating, saying “we need to focus. We need to get this done!” The students had worked together to create this piece of art, and now they were working together to maintain focus during these final challenges. Their abilities in this area were greatly stretched and I believe that they made huge improvements. This speaks to the merits of incorporating long-term and goal-oriented projects into education.

It also took inhibitory control on my end to make these final rehearsals a success. There were many frustrating moments when students would forget sections that we had worked hard on and I wanted to lose my temper. I had to remember how important it was not to shame them for their shortcomings. In expecting them to perform, I was asking them to be vulnerable and if I wanted them to feel comfortable doing so, I needed them to trust that even if they failed, I would still maintain a supportive relationship with them. To demonstrate this, I would respond to failed attempts to remember lines or blocking with warm words of encouragement, such as “keep working on those lines. If you practice, you will have them memorized in no time!” I believe that because I never made my students feel ashamed, they were willing to attempt difficult feats, like the performance, with a hopeful attitude.

Performance Day

The day of the performance was a blur. The students arrived, full to the brim with pent up energy and nerves. Nick said, “I woke up today excited for this.” They arrived an

hour early and the next hour was filled with last minute difficulties. Kyle's costume fell apart and had to be fixed, Nick lost a prop for an important scene, and Sally was crying, because no one was listening to her. We could hear the audience from behind the curtain and the children scurried back and forth across the stage, peeking through the curtain and screaming with laughter, while others attempted to shush them. Everyone was excited, nervous, and on edge. I told them we would start in five minutes, then went out to the audience to greet guests.

When I came back, I saw the giant lump of Great Spirit that I knew so well. Their beginning pose was under the sheet and they were there now. I bent down and peeked under the sheet. They were playing a focusing game in which they all held hands and passed a squeeze around the circle. For the squeeze to go all the way around, every person had to focus and be a part of the team. What I believe I was witnessing was a beautiful moment of unity in the face of fear. Brown says that "in order for connection to happen, we have to let ourselves be seen" ("Brené Brown at TEDxHouston"). The students were about to enter a situation in which the work that they had lovingly created would be open for judgment by other people. Instead of coping with the stress of their impending vulnerability by internalizing the fear (crying and arguing), they reached out to each other. In their greatest moment of vulnerability, they opened themselves up to human connection. This moment will serve as a reminder to me, throughout my years of teaching, of the power of theatre to bring people together.

The performance of the play lasted about 10 minutes, but to me, it felt like 30 minutes. I imagine that for the students, it felt like 2 hours. Each movement, each line, each step of the story had hours of work behind it. Every second of the play had meaning to us. It was our story. There was only one blunder in the entire play. Lucy forgot a line at

a climactic moment and it caused the next student to falter. The students recovered nicely, however, and it did not throw them off. I like to think that this was because we had a lot of practice coping with mistakes.

Transformation

After the performance, the students were smothered with praises, gifts, and love. They were given individualized necklaces by Julia and small turtle figurines by Rose. After this immense act of vulnerability, they were rewarded with love and praise. In Brown's research, she found a unique group of people that she calls "wholehearted people," who "fully embrace...vulnerability" and "believe...that what ma[kes] them vulnerable ma[kes] them beautiful" ("Brené Brown at TEDxHouston"). I could see in the bodies and movements of the children that they felt proud and brave. They looked to me like whole-hearted people and it was one of the most beautiful sights I have ever seen.

The transformation of the students was evidenced by the conversations I had with their parents at the reception afterwards. Kyle's father told me that Kyle "says that when he goes to college, he wants to study Theatre and maybe even teach it to children, like you." Nick's mother said, "Nick woke up feeling sick this morning" and we laughed as we now saw him running around the room, launching himself off of furniture, liberated by relief. Lucy's mom said, "Lucy had such a good time. What a great group for her to be a part of." All of the parents thanked me and told me what a wonderful time their children had. I tried to check in with each of the sugar infused students to ask them how they felt. Sally said she felt "good" and Lisa felt "relieved."

LOOKING AHEAD

Outcomes

I am proud to say that I feel I accomplished all of my goals. The deep relationships that the students formed with one another and the sense of belonging that they each felt in the group was apparent in this last chapter of our journey. The title of our play was “The Turtle Family” and I feel that we did become like a family. As I hoped, I saw the students transform and blossom in self-confidence and creativity. The process also gave rise to many benefits that I could not have foreseen. In planning the project, I never would have imagined the extent of “The Turtle Family Adventure” or the Great Spirit sequence, yet these were two of the most special learning experiences in the entire project. Other unexpected outcomes were that the skills of assertiveness and bodily awareness and the practice of equality were fostered in various activities. I am thrilled to be able to add these practices to my list of usable activities.

However, the greatest unexpected outcome was the experience and knowledge I gained about failure. In the beginning, I aimed to instill in my students the idea that taking risks and failing was part of theater and life, but I learned this lesson most of all. From losing a student to completely running out of time for costumes, I frequently met failure along the way. There were many days that I felt were wasted because of my inability to focus the class’s energy or because I tried activities that didn’t work. I had to make my peace with my mistakes and forgive myself for them. I came to understand that you can’t create without taking risks and you can’t take risks without sometimes failing. While I blundered many times, I also triumphed and learned valuable lessons along the way, as I hope this paper shows.

Reflecting on my overall experience, I believe that I developed a strong set of techniques and activities that I can use in the classroom to deal with a large variety of situations. As intended, I was able to explore and test out ways to use theatre in the classroom in order to develop certain skills. More than that, I was affirmed in my belief that theatre can positively transform children and that it creates a magical space for them to express themselves and unleash their creativity. I would absolutely consider creating and staging a play every year with my future classes. I could enhance the experience by incorporating material from the curriculum to create an incredibly powerful learning experience.

Limitations

Without diminishing my experience in any way, there are a few things I would do differently in the future. I would be more assertive in asking for help from those around me. I didn't add as many weekend rehearsals as I could have, because I was afraid that it would detract students from signing up. However, based on the large amount of students who tried to join the class, I think I could have asked more of participating families. Because of the logistical difficulties of weekend rehearsals, adding a few more would leave margin for error. Another benefit of adding more rehearsals is that I could make each one shorter. For this project two hour rehearsals were necessary because of limited time, but the last hour to half-hour of class was always less effective. Lastly, I would communicate more directly with parents at the beginning of the session to avoid misunderstandings about the level of commitment necessary for their child to participate. I would ask them to list all conflicts for me and would be up front earlier than I was if I thought that the child would be missing too much rehearsal.

Becoming a Teacher

I am currently at the cusp of my next step to becoming a teacher in attending teaching school. Fortunately, the future is looking bright for the performing arts in education. The Common Core is a “state-led effort that is not part of No Child Left Behind” and gives greater freedom for constructing new curriculums less focused on standards and testing (“Myths vs. Facts”). While the Common Core dictates “a clear set of shared goals,” it does not mandate how teachers should teach and allows them to “devise lesson plans and tailor instruction to the individual needs of the students in their classrooms” (“Myths vs. Facts”). This new system will give me more of an opportunity to incorporate theatre into my curriculum than has been allowed teachers in the recent past.

I have often heard that the first few years of teaching are the most difficult, because mistakes are a certainty. After this experience, I feel confident that I will meet these errors head on. I hope that my willingness to fail will give me the confidence to make strong choices and try new things. I would like to blaze new trails in my career and develop innovative techniques for teaching in order to better our school system. This project gave me valuable experience in the art of taking risks that I believe will help me reach those goals.

When I close my eyes and imagine my future classroom, I see a place where words and symbols on pages come to life. I see a place where theatre is incorporated into everyday lessons and projects. I see students bringing historical figures to life, creating the solar system with their bodies, and incorporating new vocabulary into skits. I see a place where the skills of inhibitory control, working memory, communication, empathy, and vulnerability are exercised daily and valued just as highly as reading, writing, and arithmetic. This project gave me a precious opportunity to put my ideas about theatre as

education into action and this paper gave me the opportunity to make sense of my findings so that I now have a large set of tools that I can use in the classroom. It also emboldened me to take risks in my teaching and to accept and learn from experiences of failure. For everything that I have learned, I will be forever grateful for my Turtle Family.

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Images

OCT 8 CLASS	OCT 15 CLASS	OCT 22 CLASS	OCT 29 CLASS	NOV 5 CLASS
NOV 8 ROSE HILLS THEATRE	NOV 12 CLASS	NOV 19 CLASS	NOV 22 ROSEHILLS THEATRE	NOV 26 THANKSGIVING No class
DEC 3 CLASS	DEC 6 ROSEHILLS THEATRE	DEC 10 CLASS	DEC 13 PERFORMANCE!!!	NOV 17 WRAP-UP CLASS

The Calendar shown at the beginning of every class.



Story Frame: "Great Spirit arranges the turtles together."



Story Frame: "The turtles broke the land, because they swam away from each other."



Students practice Great Spirit shapes.



Practicing Great Spirit shape.



Turtle Family pose.



The author with advisor Rose and Tongva Elder Julia.



Students great audience members after the final performance.



A student receives flowers.