# BECOMING SOMEBODY!
# How Arts Programs Support
# Positive Identity for Middle School Girls

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**Other authors in this volume** have described how arts programming in urban American schools has been sacrificed, greatly hampering the capacity of such schools to provide instruction and activities appropriate for a wide range of students who are alienated by the basic skills emphasis prevalent in U.S. education. We, and the authors in this collection, argue that instruction in the arts provides precisely the kinds of opportunities students need to express self, to articulate frustration with an educational system that makes success difficult, and to conceive of alternatives in a society that generally finds adolescent student needs irrelevant, bothersome, and even dangerous. Perhaps most important, participation in the arts has been shown to increase academic achievement, creativity, fluency, and originality in thinking and feelings of self-worth (Burton, Horowitz, & Abeles, 1999; Catterall, Chapleau, & Iwanaga, 1999; Heath & Roach, 1999).

In this article, we argue that the arts have these effects because they make it possible for children to imagine themselves out of their current identities and to try on new ways of being. In a society where students often find their living and learning conditions to be unbearable, the arts provide the only legitimate outlet for fighting back against the negative influences in their cultural, social, and economic contexts. The costs of not providing such legitimate alternatives are high; they include resistance, bullying, dropping out, and acts of violence and murder.

We suggest that participation in the arts lets children express themselves in healthful ways, permitting them to try on a variety of alternative identities in relatively risk-free environments and to develop a sense of voice (Bakhtin, 1981) and agency (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1993). It also gives children the kinds of opportunities to interact meaningfully with adults over extended

periods of time that facilitate development of communication and critical thinking skills and that provide role models for children to emulate (Heath & Roach, 1999). In a society that is increasingly hostile to children and where parental work habits mean that children and adults spend less and less time together, such opportunities are important. As provided in arts programming, these opportunities are especially important because the arts differ significantly from other kinds of extracurricular activities, like sports and debate. The fact that the arts are not built on interpersonal competition (Holloway, 2001) is significant, given that American secondary education reflects a highly competitive academic and athletic culture that stigmatizes young men and women who lack the material resources or physical ability to compete and who thus find it difficult to earn an honored place in the social structure of adolescence.

The arts give children a chance to acquire an additional repertory of skills for self-expression and critical thought. Perhaps most important, they provide a way for the most dangerous thoughts that children have—including hate, jealousy, pain, rage, and frustration—to find safe expression. It is, for example, far more acceptable to paint pictures of fellow students whom one wishes were dead and dismembered—as several students in the school we studied did—than actually to blow them up at school with explosives. It is the legitimacy and strength of such emotions that the arts recognize and respond to—in ways that other forms of extracurricular participation, and surely of academic training, tend to ignore. The arts are, in short, a way to the heart and the soul; without them, our schools are, for many children, heartless and soulless.

## LOSING IDENTITY IN MIDDLE SCHOOL

Our focus in this article is middle school in general and girls in particular. Middle school is a critical place to intervene in the learning process because, in North American culture, the ages from 10 to 15 are those in which children still are conceived of as malleable and during which the processes of developing a sense of self as a sexual and gendered person and one's life chances as an adult are beginning to flower. Critical to these processes is the capacity to explore one's identity and to feel confident in one's capacity to *become some-body* and to achieve whatever one desires. As we describe below, the loss of identity experienced by young women as they reach puberty has been well documented. Although this article focuses on girls, our data and that of other

researchers suggest adolescent boys, too, experience the same loss of confidence and voice (Pollack, 1998), highlighted by the fact that most of the recent youthful killers in public schools have been alienated boys of approximately the same age as the girls in our study. We think that this implies that arts programming is as important for young men as we demonstrate it to be for girls.

## THE CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE FOR YOUNG WOMEN

Research has show that in early adolescence or middle school, girls face a "crisis of confidence" (American Association of University Women [AAUW], 1992; Brown, 1998; Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990; Orenstein, 1994; Pipher, 1996; Rogers, 1993). This crisis is thought to be caused by cultural messages about the status and roles appropriate for women that limit the views young girls may legitimately have about themselves and their future place in the world. Many studies have suggested that this loss of self-confidence begins just at the time when young girls also begin to individuate, seeking to distinguish their own future trajectories and identities from those of their mothers (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). We suggest that beyond the role modeling of their mothers alone, adolescent girls often find little support anywhere for their efforts to work through issues of sexuality, sexual identity, choice of career, and even self-worth. Schools in particular are silent with regard to those issues most salient to the lives of early adolescents, especially given that to raise such issues often means contesting rather rigidly defined traditional definitions of appropriate behavior and aspirations for women. Studies have suggested that the difficulty of engaging in such contesting is a key factor leading to the loss of self-confidence and of academic excellence among adolescent girls; it also coincides with the increasing numbers of young women who experience depression, attempt suicide, develop eating disorders, and become sexually active during their adolescent years (Bordo, 1989; Brumberg, 1988; Pipher, 1996).

Gilligan's (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan et al., 1990) work compellingly described the transformation of self-confident, intellectually vibrant 8- and 9-year-old girls who were ready to take on the world into self-conscious 10 to 14 year olds preoccupied with appearance and lacking the courage and sense of direction that so marked them only a few years earlier. Characterized by more than just boy-craziness, preadolescent girls in Gilligan's studies were self-effacing, lacked intellectual confidence, and had lost their sense of adventure. Gilligan and her fellow researchers have suggested that these girls did not seem to feel entitled to place, space, or voice in contemporary society.

More important, they seemed less able to act on ideals, convictions, and commitments that they once had held tenaciously. In the words of critical theorists (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1993), they lost voice and agency.

Gilligan (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan et al., 1990) found these results to be puzzling, coming as they did on the heels of a feminist "revolution" and affirmative action legislation that had radically changed the legal and economic status of many women. After at least two decades of curricular work in schools to portray women as coequal with men and despite the existence of "liberated women," mothers in most occupations, "Take Our Daughters to Work Days," and the elimination of gender role markers (such as gender differentiated curricula, dress codes, and language), girls still were enculturated to conform to a female stereotype that required women to be subservient to men, to be acquiescent in the presence of men, and to reduce their aspirations for the future so as not to compete with potential male partners, whether academically, occupationally, or athletically (Holland & Eisenhart, 1990).

Despite decades of being told that they were as good and capable as boys and being shown female role models in every kind of occupation, insufficient time had elapsed—and insufficient social structural change had occurred—to overcome patterns of socialization favoring the traditionally rigid and subordinate roles that have marked the status of women for millennia. Even the more affluent and privileged girls Gilligan (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan et al., 1990) studied—girls who would have had more opportunities to depart from gender norms—were not immune to this kind of socialization.

Ten years later and with a population more varied than Gilligan's (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan et al., 1990), we are trying to explore some of these issues. To do so, we have employed a conceptual framework that embeds findings such as Gilligan's in a complex matrix of cultural, political, and gender dynamics and explores them in the context of an intervention program that goes beyond insufficient approaches to "showing and telling" girls about changes in the status and potential for women. This intervention gave girls the opportunity to embody and practice new ways of being and becoming. Embodiment and practice allows children to imagine themselves in new roles—whether such roles are considered positive or negative by adults—and to learn how it feels to act out alternative roles in the world.

The program we studied, Arts Focus (AF) at Center Line Middle School, provides such experiences in ways that we feel contest and even interrupt the hegemony of traditional socialization patterns. We believe that in its emphasis on disciplined practice, collaboration, and critique, it permitted its female participants to challenge the cultural dominion that mandates they be

helpmeets, able assistants, and second-class citizens. We begin our discussion with an examination of the theoretical framework that informed our study of this program.


## HABITUS AND SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

In all class strata, but especially in the middle and upper classes, what is the correct way for women to be or the habitus of women has been to maintain traditional gender roles—as sexual objects, helpmates to men, caretakers of children and home, and decorations for family and community. Habitus is a kind of embedded history that operates at the level of individuals but is constituted within cultural groups. It is constructed via the accumulation of an individual's experiences in the world. It is enacted in the primary socialization of families and then reenacted as habitual practice and belief in the wider social world (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Habitus, then, serves a regulatory function with regard to gender roles; it has the potential to render individual community members powerless to challenge social dictates unless and until alternatives are provided.


### SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE, SYMBOLIC ACTION

Key to our understanding of habitus are the concepts of *symbolic violence* and *symbolic action*. Symbolic violence is not physical violence. Rather, it consists in the subtle dictates of socialization patterns that act to constrain and even blight aspirations, behavior, and beliefs thought to be inappropriate for the anticipated roles of given actors within a specific culture. Bourdieu (1993) has suggested that being socialized (or forced) to enact traditional roles, expectations, and patterns of future aspirations does symbolic violence to the desires and capabilities of individuals who wish to alter them. With respect to this study, symbolic violence is inflicted on girls in contemporary society because they are in subtle ways restricted to traditional female roles in their community, as well as in families and the occupational structure. Bourdieu posed the taking of symbolic action or acting independently to create one's own meanings for and about oneself as an antidote to symbolic violence.

Symbolic action creates alternatives to an existing habitus, but it also requires a sense of efficacy or agency on the part of the actor. In addition, it requires that the actor be able to speak out or give voice to his or her desires. Unfortunately, symbolic action is not widely encouraged. Neither formal

socialization in schools, voluntary organizations, churches, and other institu-
tions nor informal socialization in the family and among members of peer
groups commonly provides many opportunities for the taking of symbolic
action. To the contrary, such institutions often actively discourage such
actions in the interest of preserving the status quo. The consequence often is a
pattern of personal denial of desire, coupled with what Freire (1970) called a
"culture of silence," in which individuals who struggle against the constraints
of historically and culturally constructed patterns of behavior and belief find
themselves powerless to protest the conditioning to which they are subjected
and without any community support for their efforts. Such a culture of silence
is embodied—for girls such as those we studied—in what the AAUW (1992)
has called the "evasive" curricula and instructional practices of public
schooling.

## THE ASEXUALITY OF SCHOOLING AND PEDAGOGY

Research by the AAUW (1992) and others (Brown, 1998; Orenstein,
1994) has shown that the developmental concerns most central to the lives of
teenage girls are evaded by—or absent from—school curricula (AAUW, 1992,
p. 121). At a time when the physical transformation to womanhood is perhaps
the most salient preoccupation of adolescent girls, school curricula usually
are devoid of frank and realistic discussions of human development or how
bodies function. In the interest of inculcating "mature" behavior, schools
often discourage or squelch expressions of feelings and emotions or avoid the
dynamics of power based on differentiated gender roles—even when those
dynamics result in physical and verbal harassment of girls by boys (see
Orenstein, 1994). We believe that there is a connection between the evasive
curricula of schools and the crisis of confidence experienced by young ado-
lescent girls. Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) have suggested that curricula and
instruction in schools are congruent with the practices and habitus—or the
unconscious beliefs about what is correct—of privileged groups. Thus,
schools hegemonically reinforce what is and is not deemed culturally legiti-
mate in society by reflecting—and rewarding—middle- and upper-class
ways of thinking, acting, feeling, and using time and space, including those
having to do with "proper" ways of being men and women.

For middle school girls, whose bodies are beginning to mark them as
women—and whose culture marks as sexual objects—the curricular eva-
sions of and silences about the body, feelings, and sexual politics reinforce
traditional gender roles and rarely provide support to help girls make

decisions about complex personal and moral dilemmas in their lives (Delpit, 1995; Lesko, 1988; Orenstein, 1994; Weis & Fine, 1993). In this way, instruction and curricula in schools impose a narrow set of possible selves (Bruner, 1986; Markus & Nurius, 1986) on young women in ways that do symbolic violence to their ability to fully actualize their social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and creative potential. Only if young women find ways to take symbolic action will they be able to overcome the effects of such symbolically violent socialization, especially if such acts are engaged in over a period of time and with prolonged opportunities for practice.

Under these conditions, symbolic action has the potential to disrupt habitus and may, over time, lead to its transformation. When habitus is disrupted it may be altered, permitting individuals to contemplate, try on, and embody changes in social roles and relationships they believe possible for them. In so doing, self and identity begin to transform. We argue in this article that participation in the arts provides an excellent source of such disruptions as well as opportunities to contemplate and practice alternatives to traditional habitus. We suggest that the principal and most effective strategy for taking symbolic action is participation in the arts.

## CREATING ALTERNATIVES

Following the work of Lev Vygotsky and more recent Vygotskian researchers, we suggest that the arts provide ways for redefining oneself historically and culturally as well as for trying on alternative possibilities and identities. Vygotsky (1925/1971) viewed the arts as cultural tools that humans use to organize their experience and construct the meanings with which they organize their world (Lima, 1995). Through the arts, humans use movement, vocalization, visualization, imagination, verbalization, and auditory and sensory stimulation in a wide range of strategies to exercise their imaginations and to transform how they think and how they express their thoughts and emotions. The arts permit human beings to manipulate and even transform symbols and their meanings rather than simply to accept as given the meanings or uses they seem to have. Subsequently, objects, such as flags, photographs, designs, and even colors, can come to have special meanings different from those originally intended. Individuals can redefine and manipulate their meanings through the arts. In so doing, the arts provide ways for individuals to give voice to or depict their experiences, to try on new identities or perspectives, and even to visualize, articulate, or act out the impossible. Insofar as the arts permit people to try on and practice ways of being that

differ from their original habitus, the arts counter symbolic violence with symbolic action and facilitate transformation of roles and identity.

According to Vygotsky (1925/1971), the arts are sociohistorically determined and provide the means to "incite, excite, and irritate" people, events, and activities (p. 252). In accord with his deeply rooted Marxist orientation (Leonitev, 1978), Vygotsky also viewed the arts as a stimulus to the cognitive development of individual human beings. He suggested that the act of creating a work of art, or the act of responding or reacting to a work of art, initiates a "reply" that is achieved as the artist or viewer goes through the process of creating or recreating a work of art. This reply is a creative transformation of the initial thought, feeling, or action generated by the art work. Such a reply has the potential to move its (re)creator into a new or free space in relation to how she conceives of herself and her future. For example, as a young girl draws a picture of a dancer or a woman flying an airplane, she also envisions herself in that picture, dancing or flying the airplane even though she may never have engaged in either activity. The act of envisioning opens up new possibilities—a reply—for further envisioning. As the artist/young girl later contemplates her piece of artwork, it can further incite and excite her; it becomes a symbol or "sign" (Vygotsky, 1925/1971) reminding her of and representing a new future and helping her to reorganize earlier aspirations into more unconventional or hitherto unimagined directions. Our focus in this article, on what middle school girls learn in an intensive arts program, permits us to examine just how a particularly rich environment for identity transformation and exploration of gender identification operates through the arts.

## THE STUDY SITE AND POPULATION

AF is an arts enrichment program in a public middle school. The program serves a relatively affluent university community near a large metropolitan area; it has a moderately diverse population, as it serves a number of students of color, children from families of international students from the university, and a significant proportion of students from Latin American and Central American immigrant families. Most of these students are language minority students. The program currently is in its 5th year of operation. Data for this study come from the program's first 2 years and focus on five girls whom we followed during this period.

AF was created without any additional district funding but with district approval. The program initially provided intensive instruction in four arts

strands—literary, theatre and dance, music, and visual arts—to sixth-, seventh-, and eighth-grade students who took the 90-minute daily block as an elective academic course offered during the regular school program. For a number of reasons, the literary arts strand was dropped after the 1st year and not reinstated. Recruitment for AF was democratic; students did not have to audition for participation or demonstrate any particular talent for admission, and admission was on a first-come, first-serve basis to all students who enroll at Center Line. However, the program became so popular that by its 5th year of operation, the school had to institute a lottery system to avoid overcrowding the building. Approximately one third of the student body participated in AF for its first 2 years; that percentage has risen steadily each year.

## DATA COLLECTION

We began our study of AF in fall 1996, with regular participant observation during classes, field trips, guest artists' visits, and administrative meetings for the program, including parent group meetings. During these observations, we conducted informal conversations with participants and wrote detailed field notes. Often, we would provide feedback to teachers and staff about what we had observed and heard during classes, meetings, and so forth. By March 1997, we had received permission from 50 AF students and their parents to participate in structured student interviews about their experiences in the program. We also conducted interviews at the end of the school year with school administrators and all AF teachers on (a) their educational and professional background, (b) their educational philosophy and assessment strategies, and (c) their reflections about AF. For 1997-1998 and 1998-1999, we continued to follow this data collection schedule. In addition, we conducted a survey of parents of children participating in the program.

For this article, we draw on our participant observations in the theatre arts (TA) classes and our interviews with girls who participated in during the first 2 years of the program. At the end of the 1st year, we interviewed 15 girls; we interviewed 24 at the end of the 2nd year. We have chosen to focus this article on the experiences of 5 girls who participated in TA during their seventh- and eighth-grade years at Center Line during this time. We chose TA as our focus because it is one of the two most coherent of the four AF strands; the other is visual arts. In addition, as we began our research, we noticed through our observations in classes and conversations with teachers and students that the program—and especially the TA strand—seemed to speak to issues of gender and identity. The TA teacher also had noted that her program was three

quarters girls and wondered why girls were overwhelmingly more attracted to theatre than were boys. TA, then, seemed a good place to begin. We reasoned that if theatre activities included the dynamics of the arts we have described, we might observe transformations in the way that girls in the theatre program viewed themselves.

In selecting the theatre program and its students as the targets for this article, we chose a program with two important characteristics. First, it was marked by good innovative teaching. Second, it systematically presented ways for girls to think about and be different from traditional gender role norms. That is, it facilitated ways for girls to try to disrupt conventional mandates about possible selves and futures that are, in their own lives, all too pressing and present and all too difficult to resist (see Holland & Eisenhart, 1990). Thus, our study focuses not only on what was taught but also on how it was taught, and what, if anything, the girls in the program learned. In the next section, we present a description of typical activities in the TA class.

## A DAY IN THE THEATRE ARTS CLASS

TA meets in the auditorium, which is a real theatre and its regular classroom even though the class sometimes has to move to the library to allow other classes, especially vocal music, rehearsal time on the stage. On this day in October, the students are planning for their annual Halloween night theatrical production, Ray Bradbury's *The Halloween Tree* (1972), a fantasy thriller. Meave Douglas, the teacher, said that she liked the play but also chose it because there were lots of parts in it in which she could cast girls. She says that girls can play male roles in some plays, which is a good thing because most plays do not have very many roles for girls.

Meave sits at her desk in the stage left corner below the stage. The buzzer sounds. Two girls leap through the double doors into the still auditorium, announcing in loud theatrical voices: "I'm here!" Four boys enter next, race down the aisle, and jump on stage, talking in loud voices and making large theatrical gestures. They have been reading Romeo and Juliet, their next production and one of three Shakespearean plays TA students acted in during their 1st year. As the class begins, the boys begin working on scenes from the play on stage. Just below the stage, at stage center, Meave takes a seat on a tall stool on the floor. More students, mostly girls, enter and sit down in a tight semicircle around Meave.

Most of the TA students are girls; there are 25 in this class and only 5 boys. There is a deaf girl with a sign language interpreter in the class; the interpreter

sits just behind the teacher, signing what Meave says. Meave begins to list the decisions they have to make in class today to get ready for their performance. She says,

> This is a production day: We aren't going to do much stage work today. And remember this is a democracy; we can all help and take part. It isn't a dictatorship, but we have to get organized. I'm going to need someone to take notes.

Some days, her students are not what Meave calls focused or ready to work when they come to class. On these days, Meave will begin class with a centering exercise. She tells her students to lie on the floor and close their eyes. "Let your body melt into the floor," she'll instruct. "Imagine your legs, picture them, and then erase them." She tells them to do the same for each part of their bodies until each is separated from the stresses of the rest of the day. "Now that you have brought yourself in and have control of your energy, slowly open your eyes and we will begin our work."

However, this day, students are ready to work. The boys on stage come down to join the group. "We need to take notes, so we can keep track of our decisions," Meave says. Many of the students raise their hands to volunteer to take notes. "No," Meave says, "I'm going to use my assistant director [AD]; that's what we use ADs for." The AD is Diane. She jumps up to the stage, where a blackboard is located, and starts writing down the main points of the discussion. They first discuss just how many performances they should have. The AD does ballet moves on the stage behind Meave, whose back is to Diane. Most of the students want to have only two performances so that they can get bigger audiences; they fear that if they have more than two, the audience on each evening will be smaller. Meave argues for more so that more people will have a chance to participate and a longer performance experience. They hold a vote. It is 8 to 13 in favor of having four performances. After discussing individual conflicts on possible performance and rehearsal dates, the class votes on which days they will practice and perform. Meave then changes the topic.

"Now we have to talk about the stage combat. Two expert instructors are coming to tomorrow's class." Meave has arranged for stage combat instructors from the university theatre department to work with her students. She regularly exposes her classes to expert theatre people who work with her students over a series of visits. Because they serve as mentors, guest artists help students learn about the real world of theatre.

"You are going to practice falls, drops, and body slams," Meave says in an attempt to focus her students.

You'll need something to use for a quarter staff [a medieval weapon]. You can use an old broom handle, so bring one in, but remember to sand it with sandpaper so that there won't be any splinters in them—or you'll have splinters in your hands. Bring water. You'll get hot. And go to the bathroom before class. The two instructors aren't going to want people wandering out to go to the bathroom.

Meave then changes the topic again.

"OK now. We have to break into groups to talk about sound effects. You are going to have to create the sound effects that will make this play *live*. Get out your scripts and move into your production groups." The students are divided into groups that are responsible for various aspects of the production, including sound effects, lighting, costumes, and so forth. Somewhat slowly, the students move to five places in the room—two groups in the back corners, one on stage, and two on the floor in front of the stage. Meave tells them to read each page of the first act and think about all the sounds that might go with what is happening in the play. The students are expected to generate ideas and solutions for the sound effect group.

"It's fall, it's sort of cold," Meave instructs.

> The wind is blowing and the leaves are falling. It's almost night. When you go up to the old house, what does it smell like? Imagine what you might hear. You're walking down the street with your friends. Just brainstorm together.

The students begin to brainstorm, and it gets loud. They demonstrate ideas to one another and give feedback and suggestions for each idea. This activity continues for about 30 minutes.

At this point, Meave interrupts the groups. "I need your attention now. I have an article I want you to use for reference. It's all about how to make sound effects." Meave passes out the article and continues,

> It's from a professional magazine, but you are old enough to read and understand it. It'll tell you how to make the sound of rain, thunder, horses walking down the street, squeaky doors—all kinds of things—and then tape-record them so you can have a sound track for the play.

Students collect the article and read through it together, pulling ideas from it and integrating them into their own ideas of what noises are important and how to make them. At the end of the 90-minute period, the bell rings, and the students bolt out of the auditorium, many of them engaging in the kinds of drops, falls, and dance steps they anticipate learning the next day.

## THEATRE ARTS AND GOOD, SOLID INSTRUCTION

The preceding description highlights crucial aspects of the instruction in TA. First, students must make important decisions. Second, they are responsible for using their imagination to create critical aspects of the performance, including the sound track. Third, they must engage in activities that contain an element of risk—even physical risk. Meave Douglas makes it quite clear to students that the work of TA is a collaborative effort, involving learning the skills, techniques, and practices of the stage. Such work requires centering as well as regular critique of collaborative and individual efforts.

Centering or focus is required to listen, learn, and get into the character in a play. It is also required to avoid endangering oneself and others in more energetic aspects of performance. Although students focus during the warm-ups that begin the class, they also have to learn to retain their center throughout the class period and all performances.

Critique also is crucial. It is a disciplined, almost choreographed process for providing feedback and suggestions to individuals and groups developing scenes for presentation, improvising scenes, and dealing with technical theatre problems. Critique ensures that all of the students know just how important the efforts of each are to the overall success of their project and suffuses every aspect of the TA program.

Critique is a process of reciprocal learning and assessment of performances and selves to improve their outcome (Heath & Roach, 1999; Holloway, 2001; Soep, 1996). Critique begins with a performance (or statement of problem) in front of an audience of peers, like the demonstration of ideas for making the sound of crunching leaves underfoot or of ways to enact the role of Romeo. Following the performance, audience members offer "two gloats and a bloat." First, students give at least two positive comments in feedback about the performance. Then they provide a bloat, discussing what did not work and offering suggestions for improving the performance. Critiques go beyond what an audience member likes or dislikes; they are responses made in relation to the goals of the production and of the performer as well as the criteria for good theatre established by Meave and her students at the beginning of the year.

Critiques can be and often are a whole-class collaborative activity, structured by Meave, as well as an informal activity done by students within production groups and before and after class between friends. Like the discussions about sound effects for *The Halloween Tree*, critique sessions evoke opinion, reflection, and collaborative decision making on the part of

performers and student audience members. These practices often transfer to other contexts of students' lives.

Centering, critique, and collaborative decision making are examples of particular strategies or cultural tools that help students use their imagination and express thoughts and emotions. They permit students to make meaning for and about themselves, give voice to their experience, and engage in symbolic action that changes how they view themselves. As students acquire this artist's tool kit of skills and practices for the theatre, they learn many other kinds of skills crucial to high levels of performance, including accountability, collegiality, responsibility, risk taking, self-direction, independence, decision making, and discipline.

Students also begin to learn how to integrate their art and learning in the arts with content areas such as math, English, and science, and begin to understand how real artists in the community live and do their work. As they continue in the program, they are pushed constantly to increase the intellectual rigor with which they approach their theatrical tasks. In fact, one of the common refrains we heard from students was that theatre class was unexpectedly difficult. "We thought we'd just play around and have a good time, but . . . it isn't that way at all!" Throughout the program, we observed students exhibiting increasing levels of what we called intensity or commitment to the program, coupled with increased self-confidence.

This list is not exhaustive, but it gives a sense of the depth and breadth of learning outcomes observed in our data. These outcomes contributed to the development of a community of learners (Rogoff, 1994) in TA and directly influenced how girls viewed their present and possible selves.


## GIRLS RESPOND

As the five TA girls who spoke with us at the end of seventh and eighth grade talked about what and how they learned in TA, they confirmed that acquiring an artist's tool kit enabled them to transform how they thought about themselves and their futures. This tool kit consisted of three primary practices learned in TA: centering, open-mindedness, and self-expression. By engaging in these practices, the girls in this study gained knowledge and skills that facilitated their creation of new images of self and the future. These practices functioned, in Vygotskian terms, as internalized systems for controlling, directing, and regulating internal behavior (Vygotsky, 1978). These systems were used for thinking, feeling, planning, and guiding their own activity and images of possible selves.

## CENTERING

Amelia, Sarah, Chiquita, Erica, and Rizzo—all pseudonyms chosen by the girls themselves—each spoke about the importance of learning how to center their energy and focus as they developed discipline, took risks, and directed themselves for performance pieces. Centering also facilitated their learning in other classes.

According to Sarah,

> TA really helps you focus. You learn how to center yourself, like when you are not in the mood to do your homework or to study, it makes you learn how to get down to doing what you have to do. And we also know how to relax and how to kind of bring ourselves in; that's the term we use a lot in class.

As a result of learning how to bring themselves in, these girls viewed themselves as better students and wanted to try harder in other classes. Sarah suggested, "TA widens your way of learning and offers more ways of learning, so you can have some sort of assignment and look at if differently and say, 'I know how to do this.'" Sarah went on to say, "We are doing persuasion speeches in history. . . . TA helps me figure out ways I could approach this without sounding stupid."

When asked if what they had learned in TA had changed how they felt about school, all but one of the girls said that it had. "It's become easier," Chiquita said about school. "The effort is not as much, and I still get good grades. I think I understand more. It's just the way your mind works; it changes once you become an artist."

## OPEN-MINDEDNESS

One change the girls talked about was how they learned to reflect on experience and view it from multiple perspectives. "I'm not as closed-minded as I used to be," Chiquita admitted. "I can understand how other people feel, even if I don't agree with them," Rizzo said. "TA teaches us to look at things from different points of view to get your point across."

This open-mindedness (Pagano, 1990) was cultivated by having the time and space to reflect and the opportunity to engage in critique and collaboration as well as the fact that performances were for real audiences. In *Exiles and Communities*, Jo Anne Pagano (1990) suggests that

> to have an open mind is to confront, willingly and authentically, the other's story, to enter the story as a dialogue. Open-minded persons claim their own

knowledge and tell their own stories, but they are always mindful of the fact that they may change their minds. Open-minded persons do not merely tolerate other voices; they listen and respond. (p. 85)

In AF, open-mindedness contributed to the girls' development of voice and gave them the courage to express it.

Enacting roles for performance and critique were integral aspects of the dramatic process and helped cultivate open-mindedness. "It's your job as an actor to convey not only the physical appearance of your character but also the personality," Amelia explained. "In acting, we do a thing called character-ization. We have to look at ourselves as well as characterize someone and say how they feel, say how you think your character feels in different situations."

Embodying roles for performance also involved critique from peer audi-ences. When asked how important critique was to enacting roles for perfor-mance, Amelia reiterated what the other girls said:

It's really important because I redo monologues a lot and I'll go in front of my friends and say, "You guys, can I recite my monologue and have you tell me what will make it more believable or make it better?" That always helps me.

Amelia continued, "I could be saying a word or a phrase in a certain expres-sion and think I'm saying it wonderfully and think it sounds really good, but when I get an outside opinion I know where I need to improve." All five girls said that friendships based on trust and honesty, the ability to offer and accept critique, and their capacity to enact different roles were critical to developing open-mindedness.

## SELF-EXPRESSION

For these five girls, art was, as Rizzo said, "expressing yourself." It influ-enced how they viewed themselves and their future. Although they did not all identify themselves as artists at the end of their 1st year in the program, by the end of their 2nd year they all five did. Rizzo explained, "Not everybody has to recognize what you're doing as art for it to be art." When asked if art gave anything back to the artist, Rizzo answered,

Yes, pride. I get pride from going up on stage and singing . . . playing piano, or giving the greatest monologue I've ever given. It helps me respect myself and respect others. It's like, if I see you go up on stage and give something your all, but [even if] it doesn't work too well, I'm still going to respect you because you went up on stage and gave something your all.

All of the girls in this study said their participation in TA influenced how they viewed themselves. Erica said, "I'm more outgoing and less self-conscious than I used to be. I don't worry so much what other people think anymore." Sarah suggested, "I can do more courageous things." And Erica admitted, "You feel like you've accomplished a lot."

### ARTIST'S TOOL KIT

The girls also suggested that they see themselves using the tool kit of centering, open-mindedness, and self-expression learned in TA to become what they want to be in the future, whether their futures included theatre or not. Three of the five said they would like to become an actress or study acting in the future; however, all drew connections between their learning in TA and what they imagined they would need to know to accomplish their life goals. As Amelia stated, "I've learned determination, hard work, just seeing your goal, knowing you want it, and getting there."

By comparing the interviews with the girls in seventh grade to their responses in eighth grade, we found that the degree to which TA facilitated improved visions of learning and school, open-mindedness, and identity construction increased during the 2 years these girls were involved in the program. Their experiences confirmed O'Fallon's (1995) assertion that "the arts become a body of knowledge and a set of tools and practices that help us build individual identity and construct common purposes with others" (p. 26). However, as these girls move on to high schools where arts and drama programs reflect more traditional approaches than does AF, the impact of theater arts may be challenged without some kind of regular participation in an innovative arts program.

## WHAT MADE THE TA PROGRAM SPECIAL?

We believe that there are some characteristics of the instruction in TA that are not unique to the arts but were required for it to be successful. To understand what these characteristics might be, we use a continuum identified by Singley and Anderson (1989) contrasting teaching that represents a "traditional basic-skills, direct instruction approach" (p. 312) to teaching that is informed by reform-based approaches to teaching for understanding. The latter approach has characterized reform efforts in math, language arts, and science but is not as visible in the arts and humanities, despite the recent development of more holistic and systematic sets of standards in these areas

(Wilson, 1997). Nonetheless, we feel that they were exhibited in ample mea-
sure in the TA classroom. Singley and Anderson suggested that reform-based
classrooms differ from traditional classrooms along five dimensions:

1.  Goals should focus on the development of expertise as students use knowl-
    edge in strategic and flexible ways.
2.  Teachers should act as mediators of learning constructed by students.
3.  Students should be "active constructors of meaningful cognitive networks that
    are used in problem solving" (p. 312).
4.  Tasks should require students to define and represent problems and transform
    existing knowledge into many possible solutions.
5.  Students should learn to be self-regulating and view other students as
    resources for learning.

AF instruction embodies the characteristics listed above, and we believe
that instruction such as Singley and Anderson (1989) described has relevance
for identity formation even though most studies of such reform-based
constructivist instruction have focused on more effective methods for learn-
ing in the content areas rather than on personal development. In this study,
however, we were interested in the effect on gender—specifically, on how
girls shape their own identities. In particular, we were curious to see whether
such forms of inquiry and such decentering of the locus of authority in teach-
ing and learning served to contest and even interrupt traditional patterns of
socialization that do symbolic—if not actual—violence to girls, with conse-
quences for their development such as those documented by Gilligan (Brown
& Gilligan, 1992; Gilligan et al., 1990). We will now discuss the way TA pro-
vided opportunities to engage in symbolic actions that disrupted the tradi-
tional gender role socialization to which girls are subjected, even girls as rela-
tively advantaged as AF girls were.

## THINKING AND BEING DIFFERENT

All of Singley and Anderson's (1989) dimensions of reform-based teach-
ing are relevant to nontraditional gender construction because they can facili-
tate learning how to think and be different from traditional norms—even
norms about gender-appropriate behavior. Movement away from memory
and recall of basic skills toward flexible demonstration of expertise dethrones
the canonical authoritarianism of received knowledge. In so doing, it pro-
vides openings for students to define their own rules, criteria, and even reali-
ties. Similarly, although we recognize that good teachers are a primary source

of information for students, viewing the teacher more as a mediator than a purveyor of knowledge permits students to seek and find legitimate alternative sources of knowledge. TA provided this role with its teacher as well as introduced a variety of other adult role models—and hence, alternative sources of information—into the classroom.

Decentering knowledge and the sources of knowledge in this way focuses on the development of expertise among children, facilitating their transition from novice or peripheral participants in the learning process to more capable participants (Lave & Wenger, 1991). When children are viewed as resources for each other, they can demonstrate and enhance their own expertise by assisting less able peers (see Rogoff, 1994, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). Furthermore, to the extent that children work together with a teacher/mediator and each other, communities of learners are created in which learning becomes synergistic rather than static and bounded (see Rogoff, 1994, 1995). Such learning is based on problem solving, flexible and decontextualized uses of information, and the active construction of knowledge linked to the higher-order thinking skills needed to seek a variety of solutions to personal and developmental issues as well as academic assignments. Communities of learning also foster new roles for teaching and learning and, in so doing, alter traditional teacher-pupil relationships and patterns of authority. Finally, when failure is defined as simply another way of learning, then risk taking is legitimated and encouraged.

These characteristics were very much present in TA. They served to interrupt not only traditional formal instruction but also traditional forms of learning and socialization, such as those found in the artist's tool kit. Knowledge and skills acquired through the practices of the artist's tool kit—centering, open-mindedness, and self-expression—transformed girls' practice in TA, other classes, and other aspects of their lives. This tool kit enabled them to engage in the kinds of symbolic action—playing the role of a young swordsman, for example—that disrupted roles that they had taken for granted as their place in life, as their habitus. Subsequently, these practices shifted these young women's ideas about themselves and their futures. The consequence, we suggest, can be a more liberating experience for young women, especially if the focus of instruction is, directly or indirectly, on helping them define who they are and what they want to be (Holloway, 2001). This approach has the potential to thwart the effects that everyday symbolic and actual violence have on shaping girls' habitus.

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