NYU | STEINHARDT

# ARTSPRAXIS

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# *ARTSPRAXIS*

*Emphasizing critical analysis of the arts in society.*

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*ArtsPraxis* Volume 10, Issue 2 looked to engage members of the global Educational Theatre community in dialogue around current research and practice. We welcomed traditional academic research as well as narratives of practice. The call for papers was released in concert with the publication of *ArtsPraxis* Volume 10, Issue 1. The submission deadline for Volume 10, Issue 2 was **October 1, 2023.**

Submissions fell under the following category: Collective Visioning: New Areas of Inquiry and Discovery in Educational Theatre

Key questions submissions addressed included:

- What role do drama and theatre play in community spaces?
- What strategies have you found to be useful in catalyzing connection and change?
- What communities have been overlooked in educational theatre practices, and what can teaching artists do to fill those gaps?

- What patterns and trends in equity, diversity, inclusion, access, and justice research are you noticing and how might these strengthen your teaching practice?
- What does the new generation of audiences look like, and how can we continuously adapt our practice with updated research and findings?
- How do we nurture young artists? How do we nurture early career teaching artists?
- How does the discipline of educational theatre hold space for collective visioning and radical imagining?
- Where do you see educational theater serving as a tool for change, advocacy, and praxis?

We encouraged article submissions from interdisciplinary artists, educators, and scholars engaged in work associated with these topics. Our goal was to motivate a dialogue among a wide variety of practitioners and researchers that would enrich the development of educational theatre in the coming years.

Call for Papers
Papers were to be no longer than 4,000 words, had to be accompanied by a 200 word abstract and 100 word biographies for the author(s), and conformed to APA style manual. For this issue, articles could include traditional academic scholarship and narratives of practice.

Reviewing Procedures
Each article was sent to two peer reviewers. They provided advice on the following:

- Whether the article should be published with no revisions/with revisions.
- The contribution the article makes to the arts community.
- Specific recommendations to the author about improving the article.
- Other publishing outlets if the article is considered unacceptable.

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Cover image from NYU's Program in Educational Theatre production of *Everything You Wanted*, a new play by Jess Honovich, directed by Ashley Thaxton-Stevenson in 2023. Photo by Steven Pisano.

***ARTSPRAXIS***

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# Editorial: Collective Visioning

**JONATHAN P. JONES**
NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

2023 marks the twentieth anniversary of the NYU Steinhardt Program in Educational Theatre's Forum series. The forum was initially envisioned by then-Program Director Philip Taylor as a stand-alone international conference following on from the 4th International Drama in Education Research Institute (IDIERI) in Northampton, UK in July 2003. As I recall, the thinking went: *why not keep the conversation going in New York?* Whereas the scope of drama research presented at IDIERI was broad, Taylor wanted to invite colleagues from across the creative arts education and therapy disciplines to dialogue about assessment in arts education:

> *The Forum on Assessment in Arts Education* will interrogate the pressing issues which educators across all levels experience as they determine human progress and achievement. With the current emphasis on standards in arts education it is timely to revisit the question of whether standards liberate or stifle

> excellence in creative arts praxis. The Forum is not meant to deify standards or attainment levels but rather to critique them, explore how useful they can be applied in diverse settings, and equally how problematic they might be. (Taylor, 2003)

The Freirean notion of praxis as action and reflection (1970, p. 87) was instrumental at that first Forum—that participants would engage in practical drama explorations (as participants, facilitators, presenters, and/or audience) and reflective dialogue. The positive response to that first event inspired the faculty in Educational Theatre to convene another Forum two years later, and nearly every year thereafter (but for the pandemic):

2005 NYU Forum on the Teaching Artist
2006 NYU Forum on Ethnotheatre/Theatre for Social Justice
2007 NYU Forum on Drama across the Curriculum and Beyond
2008 NYU Forum on Shakespeare: Page, Stage, Engage
2009 NYU Forum on Theatre Pedagogy: Teaching the ArtForm
2010 NYU Forum on Citizenship and Applied Theatre
2011 NYU Forum on Theatre for Public Health
2012 NYU Forum on Which Way TYA? New Directions for Theatre for Young Audiences
2013 NYU Forum on Developing New Work for the Theatre
2014 NYU Forum on The Teaching Artist: Navigation, Innovation, and Sustainability
2015 NYU Forum on Site-Specific Performance
2016 NYU Forum on Educational Theatre
2017 NYU Forum on Ethnodrama
2018 NYU Forum on Performance as Activism
2019 NYU Forum on Theatre and Health
2022 NYU Educational Theatre Forum: Radical Imagining

That first Forum and the events surrounding it proved transformational in my journey from graduate student initially exploring the field to a professional arts educator sharing my experiences and discoveries with the field at large. As a research assistant back in 2003, I conducted the literature review of existing arts education journals—most of which were found to be limited in scope to one particular arts discipline (Jones, 2003). In light of that, this journal

(*ArtsPraxis*) was initially conceived as a space to extend the cross-disciplinary dialogue that started at the Forum on Assessment in the Arts. And in many ways, this journal was meant to be a peer-reviewed repository of 'best papers' from the Forum events. However, as you see from the list above, the scope of the Forums quickly shifted to topics within drama education and the scope of *ArtsPraxis* adjusted accordingly—but always maintaining that central ethos of praxis as the convergence of action and reflection.

In spring 2023, the 18th iteration of the Forum series was convened by three NYU Steinhardt graduate students: Allison Brobst, Saya Jenks, and Christine V. Skorupa. They envisioned this gathering as an opportunity for educational theatre practitioners (mostly graduate students or alumni from the various New York City-based educational theatre programs at NYU Steinhardt, CUNY City College, and CUNY Graduate Center) to connect and share insights from their practice and research through workshops and presentations. Topics included teaching stage combat, interview-based theatre, teaching theatre to elementary school students in China during COVID-19, centering justice in Black theatre, developing new plays for young audiences, and care and community in student theatre in the Philippines. They christened this outing, 'Collective Visioning'—a space where we, gathered together in community, could engage in liberation as a praxis—what Freire described as, "the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (1970, p. 79).

After so many Forums and nearly as many issues of *ArtsPraxis* (this being the 17th issue); two decades of teaching, learning, reflecting, and transforming; upon the publication of my book *Assessment in the Drama Classroom: A Culturally Responsive and Student-Centered Approach* (Jones, 2024); and with Collective Visioning on my mind, I wonder: Habari gani? *What's the news?*

## "Habari gani?"

"Habari gani?" is the Swahili greeting shared among celebrants of Kwanzaa, "an African American and Pan-African holiday that celebrates history, values, family, community and culture" (National Museum of African American History & Culture, 2003) which lasts from December 26—January 1. In response to this greeting, you are meant to give a Swahili response which corresponds to the principle for

reflection and celebration assigned to that day as follows:

Day one: Umoja (unity)
Day two: Kujichagulia (self-determination)
Day three: Ujima (collective work and responsibility)
Day four: Ujamaa (cooperative economics)
Day five: Nia (purpose)
Day six: Kuumba (creativity)
Day seven: Imani (faith)

Maulana Karenga established this holiday in 1966, “in the midst of the Black Freedom Movement and thus reflects its concern for cultural groundedness in thought and practice, and the unity and self-determination associated with this” (2008, p. 28). As I write this editorial in the midst of the Kwanzaa celebration and contemplate what Collective Visioning means in Educational Theatre at the end of 2023 and the start 2024, I am thinking about Umoja and Nia, and what I experience as a tension between Kujichagulia and Ujima.

**“Habari gani?”: Umoja**

The news is unity: “to strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race” (African American Cultural Center, 2023d). At the closing of the IDEIRI conference in 2003, David Booth was the guest speaker and, as I recall, he spoke about the Educational Theatre community as an international family with roots in indigenous performance and classical theatre traditions, manifest today through the contributions of drama practitioners in many nations. In many ways, the Forum series has provided an opportunity for the Educational Theatre community to reunite on a regular basis—as occurs at the various conferences throughout the field, albeit each with their own unique character. In 2023, whether at Collective Visioning here at NYU, Illumination: the American Alliance for Theatre & Education’s (AATE) National Conference in Seattle, Dorothy Heathcote: NOW at the University of Aberdeen, or InterPLAY: the AATE Symposium on Engaging Youth Audiences in Theatres, Classrooms and Communities in Northwest Arkansas, I was mindful about how lucky I am to connect with so many incredible artists and educators, students and teachers. We so often feel that we are

isolated in this work—connected to institutions who don't understand what we do or why we do it—explaining and validating our work—the omnipresent struggle for recognition, funding, and sustenance. And yet, we have these spaces to gather, to commune, to connect—and to feel seen and understood. We ask: how are you? What's the news? And collectively, we envision what comes next in our artistic partnerships as we go forth.

**"Habari gani?": Nia**

The news is purpose: "to make our collective vocation the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness" (African American Cultural Center, 2023b). And what of the purpose of Educational Theatre? I've been thinking about this question a lot this year—particularly in light of invitations I received to engage in the IDEA World Congress in Beijing—starting as a member of the conference committee when it was initially planned for 2020 and in subsequent discussions since that time. My sense has been that the goal of this gathering is to both acknowledge and promote the growth of the field in China—and somehow, that has left me uneasy. *Why?*

To me, the purpose of Educational Theatre is to promote critical consciousness—what Freire describes as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (1970, p. 35). And in Augusto Boal's praxis, "the theatre is not revolutionary in itself, but it is surely a rehearsal for the revolution" (1985, p. 122). In a whisper: *I don't think that's encouraged in China*. Talk about contradictions. And so, to unpack this idea—is that *the* purpose of Educational Theatre, or is that *my* purpose of Educational Theatre? And if the latter, in the US, we've spent the better part of four years examining how we might decolonize curriculum, pedagogy—our own thinking. With that in mind, why would I want to go to another country to colonize their curriculum, pedagogy—thinking? And if the news is indeed Nia, and building and developing our community encompasses not only our local or national community—but the *world* community, how do we reconcile the potentially damaging impacts of intellectual and artistic colonization?

### “Habari gani?”: Kujichagulia

The news is self-determination: “to define ourselves, name ourselves, create for ourselves and speak for ourselves” (African American Cultural Center, 2023a). When I think about the unity that I felt at the conferences this year, it has been grounded in the partnership—that we have come together of our own volition to critically engage with one another—to share and problematize our work in service of doing better. I am reminded of that foundational invitation to the NYU Forum in 2003—that we would ‘keep the conversation going’ in New York. That is a different ask then deciding that we need to export this work to others. I don’t know enough about the genesis of the World Congress in Beijing to suggest that this is their intention—but that is how *I* felt and why I was uneasy about it. And I’m not alone in raising these concerns when thinking about taking Educational Theatre work to another culture. In charting the purpose of her work, theorist and practitioner Selena Busby (editorial board member of this publication) notes that she defines her practice as a “demand for social justice and equity” (2021, p. 2) but is mindful that, “Applied Theatre can also be disempowering, exploitative, manipulating and artist-serving rather than beneficial to the community if that community is not considered an equal partner from a project’s inception” (2021, p. 17). In 2017, I was invited to give a keynote presentation to educators at large in Shanghai and rather than investigate what *they* would like to hear, I went on impulse (and was so encouraged by the folks who invited me) and spoke about the wonders of drama integration. In hindsight, the presentation was fine—but it in no way centered the experience of the conference participants. And with that in mind, I wonder: what is happening in Educational Theatre in China? *Habari gani?* That is far more interesting to me than any perceived notion of what I might *bring* to China—what I might *teach* in China.

### “Habari gani?”: Ujima

The news is collective work and responsibility: “to build and maintain our community together and make our brother’s and sister’s problems our problems and to solve them together” (African American Cultural Center, 2023c). And with this principle in mind, I am also uneasy that promoting critical consciousness and rehearsing for the revolution are

not permitted everywhere in this world—and that problem is my problem too. We must be in this together—across borders; no separation. I'm reminded of Oprah Winfrey's response when she faced criticism for opening the Leadership Academy for Girls in South Africa in 2007—she was asked why she was opening a school in South Africa when there are so many children living in poverty in the US who need access to better schools, and Winfrey responded:

> "If you ask the kids [in the US] what they want or need, they will say an iPod or some sneakers. In South Africa, they don't ask for money or toys. They ask for uniforms so they can go to school" (Samuels, 2007).

What we want in the US is a wonder in and of itself. And as we enter 2024—a presidential election year—while many are confounded by the candidates and what they say and do—for me, I want to grapple with 30% of this country who see and hear all manner of discriminatory language, xenophobia, homophobia, misogyny, racism, insurrection, and say, "Please, sir. I want some more." That a politics of grievance is prioritized. That fascism is fine provided that the leader will deride the people I deride. That seemingly unlimited arms support will be given in furtherance of a humanitarian disaster. We have some critical consciousness to raise right here. So while I welcome news of Educational Theatre in China, my own garden needs tending.

"Habari gani?" As I've concluded before, let's get to work.

## IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue, our contributors were invited to respond to the guiding questions from 2023 Educational Theatre Forum: Collective Visioning. Forum co-chair **Saya Jenks** reflects on the development and implementation of her workshop entitled "Advocating for Your Work through Creative Play," an interactive, collaborative experience that used techniques grounded in improvisational theatre and personal storytelling to help participants practice articulating why they are uniquely qualified to do what it is they do. Inspired by a keynote speech at the 2023 AATE National Conference by Valerie Curtis-Newton, **Sofia Lindgren Galloway** explores the necessity of creating failure-friendly drama classrooms. **Anne Norland** investigates the

compatibility of dyslexia with theatre training and makes a compelling case for theatre as an effective intervention in helping students with dyslexia and related learning differences to overcome their challenges. **David L. Logghe** sheds light on the challenges of teaching theatre to students with anxiety, including specific situations educators have faced, patterns of gaps in training or knowledge, and methods with which educators have handled these situations. Finally, **Elise Connolly** presents a policy paper detailing the New York City schools chancellor's desire to change the reading curriculum, highlighting the latest state test scores as justification for a more transformative education reform: the National A+ Schools Program model.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Our next issue (Volume 11, Issue 1) looks to engage members of the global Educational Theatre community in dialogue around current research and practice. We invite members of the Educational Theatre field to submit works that will share ideas, vocabularies, strategies, and techniques, centering on varying definitions and practices. That issue will publish in mid-2024. Thereafter, look to the Verbatim Performance Lab for outreach and innovation from the NYU Steinhardt Program in Educational Theatre as well as Amplify & Ignite: A Symposium on Research and Scholarship (our 19th iteration of the NYU Forum series) to be presented in collaboration with the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) in April, 2024.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Jonathan P. Jones, PhD is a graduate from the Program in Educational Theatre at New York University, where he earned both an M.A. and a Ph.D. He conducted his doctoral field research in fall 2013 and in spring of 2014 he completed his dissertation, *Drama Integration: Training Teachers to Use Process Drama in English Language Arts, Social Studies, and World Languages*. He received an additional M.A. in English at National University and his B.A. in Liberal Arts from NYU's Gallatin School of Individualized Study. Jonathan is certified to teach English 6-12 in the state of California, where he taught Theatre and English for five years at North Hollywood High School and was honored with The Inspirational Educator Award by Universal Studios in 2006. Currently, Jonathan is an administrator, faculty member,

coordinator of doctoral studies, and student-teaching supervisor at NYU Steinhardt. He serves on the editorial board for *Applied Theatre Research* and *Youth Theatre Journal,* and on the board of directors as well as chair of Research and Scholarship for the American Alliance for Theatre and Education (AATE) where he has recently been elected Chair-Elect and will serve as Chair from 2025-2027.

Jonathan has conducted drama workshops in and around New York City, London, and Los Angeles in schools and prisons. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Jonathan's directing credits include *Hamlet, Twelfth Night, Julius Caesar, Elsewhere in Elsinore, Dorothy Rides the Rainbow, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Bye Bye Birdie, The Laramie Project, Grease, Little Shop of Horrors*, and *West Side Story*. Assistant directing includes *Woyzeck* and *The Crucible*. As a performer, he has appeared at Carnegie Hall, the Metropolitan Opera, Town Hall, The Green Space, St. Patrick's Cathedral, The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, The Southbank Centre in London UK, Bord Gáis Energy Theatre in Dublin, and the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C. Production credits include co-producing a staged-reading of a new musical, *The Throwbacks*, at the New York Musical Theatre Festival and serving as assistant production manager and occasionally as stage director for the New York City Gay Men's Chorus, most recently directing *Quiet No More: A Celebration of Stonewall* at Carnegie Hall for World Pride, 2019.

At NYU, his courses have included Acting: Scene Study, American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Assessment of Student Work in Drama, Development of Theatre and Drama I, Devising Educational Drama Programs and Curricula, Directing Youth Theatre, Drama across the Curriculum and Beyond, Drama in Education I, Drama in Education II, Dramatic Activities in the Secondary Drama Classroom, Methods of Conducting Creative Drama, Theory of Creative Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Elementary Drama, Seminar and Field Experience in Teaching Secondary Drama, Shakespeare's Theatre, and World Drama. Early in his placement at NYU, Jonathan served as teaching assistant for American Musical Theatre: Background and Analysis, Seminar in Elementary Student Teaching, Theatre of Brecht and Beckett, and

Theatre of Eugene O'Neill and worked as a course tutor and administrator for the study abroad program in London for three summers. He has supervised over 50 students in their student teaching placements in elementary and secondary schools in the New York City Area. Prior to becoming a teacher, Jonathan was an applicant services representative at NYU in the Graduate School of Arts and Science Enrollment Services Office for five years.

Recent publications include "And So We Write": Reflective Practice in Ethnotheatre and Devised Theatre Projects in *LEARNing Landscapes, 14* (2), Let Them Speak: Devised Theatre as a Culturally Responsive Methodology for Secondary Students in *Routledge Companion to Theatre and Young People* (edited by Selina Busby, Charlene Rajendran, and Kelly Freebody; forthcoming), *Paradigms and Possibilities: A Festschrift in Honor of Philip Taylor* (2019), and Education at Roundabout: It's about Turning Classrooms into Theatres and the Theatre into a Classroom (with Jennifer DiBella and Mitch Mattson) in *Education and Theatres: Beyond the Four Walls* (edited by Michael Finneran and Michael Anderson; 2019). His book *Assessment in the Drama Classroom: A Culturally Responsive and Student-Centered Approach* was published by Routledge in winter 2023/24.

Recent speaking engagements include featured guest spots on Fluency with Dr. Durell Cooper Podcast, speaking about Origins, Inspirations, and Aspirations, and Conversations in Social Justice Podcast, York St. John University, speaking about Activism and Race within University Teaching and Research (2021); panel moderation for AATE Leaders of Color Institute (Cultivating Spaces for LOC in Educational and 'Professional' Theatre Settings - Opening Keynote with Daphnie Sicre and José Casas), invited workshops for AATE Theatre in Our Schools (Reimagining Drama Curriculum: The Gradual Release of Responsibility Framework, Locating Order in the Chaos: Revisiting Assessment in the Drama Classroom and Stage to Page: Reimagining the Teacher/Practitioner Role in Scholarship) and the AATE National Conference (Classroom Justice: Culturally Responsive, Student-Centered Assessment in the Drama Classroom and Pandemic Positives: What Do We Keep? Looking Backwards to Move Forward); invited workshops for the 2023 Dorothy Heathcote NOW conference in Aberdeen, Scotland (Assessment in the Drama Classroom; and co-facilitation with David Montgomery: *The Bear That Wasn't*: A Process Drama Investigating Identity and *The Last Book in the Universe*: A

Process Drama Unpacking the Consequences of Book-Banning); an invited lecture on Performance as Activism at the Research-Based Theater Seminar, Washington, D.C. Citizen Diplomacy Fund Rapid Response COVID-19 Research-Based Theater Project, The COVID Monologues, part of the Citizen Diplomacy Action Fund for US Alumni Rapid Response made possible by the US Department of State and Partners of the Americas (2020); a keynote lecture on Drama and Education: Why and How for the Drama and Education Conference, Shanghai, China (2020); and an invited lecture, On Creativity, for the University of Anbar, Iraq (2020). Upcoming engagements include an invited workshop on Assessment in the Drama Classroom for London Drama and at the 2024 NYC Arts-in-Education Roundtable Conference.

In addition to his responsibilities at NYU, Jonathan teaches Fundamentals of Public Speaking, History of Theatre, and Introduction to Theatre at CUNY: Borough of Manhattan Community College.

**ArtsPraxis**
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# Rehearsing Self-Advocacy: An Experiential Workshop for Theatre Educators

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## ABSTRACT

*In the spring of 2023, I was one of three graduate student co-organizers of the 2023 NYU Educational Theatre Forum: Collective Visioning. As I read through the enriching and diverse slate of workshops and presentations being offered, I found myself wanting to offer an opportunity for Forum attendees, who were largely early career theatre educators, to both engage with one another in a playful and community-building manner, and to have space to practice advocating for the unique skills they bring to the table. Therefore, I created a workshop entitled "Advocating for Your Work through Creative Play," an interactive, collaborative experience that used techniques grounded in improvisational theatre and personal storytelling to help participants practice articulating why they are uniquely qualified to do what it is they do. The workshop culminated in participants giving creative elevator pitches about their work and experiences.*

## BACKGROUND

In the nearly eight years that I have been teaching in the performing arts, I have found that articulating what it is that I do and why often feels like a stressful task. Conversations about that topic—why performing arts education is important and why I chose to do it—often arise in high stakes situations, when we are asking for funding, defending an arts program against budget cuts, or trying to justify the choice to major in theatre to skeptical family members. I think most people who work in the arts (let alone read a journal called *ArtsPraxis*) understand the mix of gravity, panic, and fatigue that often accompanies both advocating for our work and looking for work opportunities.

I created the workshop "Advocating for Your Work through Creative Play" to answer this question: *how could I use the tenets of improvisation, which fosters experimentation and playfulness, to help theatre teachers become stronger advocates for their work?* I facilitated this workshop at the 2023 NYU Educational Theatre Forum, a free professional development opportunity for New York-based theatre educators that I organized with two of my fellow graduate students at NYU. I wanted to give Forum attendees an opportunity to playfully practice advocating for their work and experimenting with their elevator pitches in a low-stakes environment. The professional development opportunities I have attended in the field of educational theatre have often lacked a sense of play. Perhaps that is because I was entering the field as the COVID-19 pandemic was hitting and as our industry was finally seeking to uproot historical, systemic inequalities. For this workshop, though, rather than approaching the concept of an elevator pitch with elevated cortisol levels, I hoped to foster an environment of curiosity, experimentation, and playful vulnerability that would allow attendees to discover new ways to advocate for themselves.

I offer this reflection on my workshop in order to consider the benefits of equipping arts educators with an improv mindset and to offer my fellow practitioners ideas about scaffolding vulnerability and psychological safety into applied improvisation experiences. This article does not present a case study; rather, I chronicle my intentions, design, and implementation of a workshop I created in hopes of equipping arts educators with concrete strategies to advocate for their practice. I seek

to illuminate how I practically implement theories behind the "improv mindset" in real time.

## WHY IMPROV WITH TEACHERS?

Improvisation experts often identify the following aspects as key to successful improv: trust of self, trust of collaborators, building on others' ideas, spontaneity, and an embrace of failure. Combining those elements allows improv to quickly nurture vulnerability, collegiality, and trust. Furthermore, all of those aspects of an improv mindset can help educators become more agile and effective in the classroom. These are all elements I wanted to infuse into my workshop in order to foster a climate of risk-taking and creativity among the participants.

### *Participants*

The people who attended my workshop were all theatre educators. They were largely early in their careers and were enrolled in educational theatre graduate programs at New York University or City College of New York. A few participants were also full-time K-12 drama teachers in New York City public schools. One participant was a faculty member in the Program in Educational Theatre at NYU with many decades of teaching experience and is a professor and mentor of mine. Fourteen participants used she/her pronouns and one participant used they/them pronouns.

Despite all the participants in my workshop being theatre educators, some of them were hesitant about improvisation. I have encountered many theatre practitioners who find comfort in order and in knowing what to do. They therefore balk when the word "improv" comes up (I was one of those people—I was a musical theatre devotee who loved the precision of the form and was too afraid to try improvisation until after college). But I have come to find comfort in improv because it helps me try on ideas or experiment with ways of being, and then quickly shed them if they don't work.

Making mistakes and learning on our feet—learning experientially—have long been at the heart of improvisational theatre practice. Improv pioneer Keith Johnstone wrote in 1999 that "real learning means getting it wrong'… You could memorize the instructions for how to walk on stilts, but you'd still have to learn by falling off" (p. 61).

**Image 1:** In this image, participants in the "Advocating for Your Work through Creative Play" workshop engage in a circle activity.

I felt that improv provided an excellent framework for theatre educators to experiment with their elevator pitches because the improv mindset can counteract the feelings of having to advocate for yourself and your work feeling high stakes.

### *The Improv Mindset*

I mentioned that improvisation experts emphasize trusting oneself, trusting one's collaborators, building on each other's ideas, being spontaneous, and embracing failure as key to successful improvisation. Internalizing all of these elements allows one to adopt an *improv mindset*.

1. *Self trust:* Improvisational pioneer Keith Johnstone emphasized the central importance of trusting oneself in his seminal work *Impro* (1987) when he argued that, "an artist has to accept what his imagination gives him, or screw up his talent" (p. 307). Improvisation expert (and my professional mentor) Jessia Hoffman says that "what seems obvious to you could look like creative brilliance to others" (Hoffman, 2022). Hoffman's stance on people's innate creative brilliance is in line with Johnstone's belief that being imaginative occurs "'effortlessly,' and

'choicelessly… [an improviser] doesn't have to *do* anything in order to imagine, any more than he needs to *do* anything in order to relax or perceive" (1987, p. 342). Trusting oneself involves putting the inner critic on hold, as corporate improvisation coach Karen Hough puts it (Hough, 2011, p. 11). Self trust in improv means believing that what you bring to the table is enough.

2. *Trust of collaborators:* Hough writes that an inherent part of improv is being able to rely on others. According to Hough, improv is "a group of people collaborating for a unified outcome. Someone always has your back, and there's always another set of brains on the job" (Hough, 2011, p. 82). Johnstone also underlines the value of teamwork in improv, positing that, "combining the imagination of two people which would be additive, rather than subtractive" (Johnstone, 1987, p. 64). Hoffman encourages her improv students to explicitly adopt this mindset of trust by telling them that, "your partner is the most brilliant improviser in the world" (Hoffman, 2022). Hoffman often says this in introductory improvisation workshops where the vast majority of participants are inexperienced in improv. This directive often elicits giggles from participants because of the discrepancy in their partner's improv experience and Hoffman's claim that everyone in the room is one of the world's best improvisers. But this humorous instruction allows participants to view each other with generosity and trust one another's offers.

3. *Building on each other's ideas:* Kelly Leonard, a longtime producer at The Second City, has said that "through collective creative acts we discover all kinds of truths… that you wouldn't create on your own" (PodWiz). Collective creation in improv is best summed up in the refrain "yes, and. " Saying "yes, and" accepting an offer and then building upon it. For example, say your scene partner enters the stage miming that they are holding something small and delicate in their hand and says, "Look at this tiny hedgehog I'm holding!" If you wanted to *yes, and* their offer, you might say, "How wonderful! You've wanted a hedgehog since you were a kid!" If you were to *block* their offer (an improv term for denying the reality that was just offered to you), you might say, "How could you be so dumb? That's not a

hedgehog, it's a diamond bracelet. " Dudeck and McClure (2021) expand the concept "yes, and" as an "attitude to life—an openness to seeing everything as an offer (including setbacks and mistakes) and committing to build on those offers; a willingness to engage in responsive listening and to be altered by what you hear" (Dudeck & McClure, eds., 2021, p. 4).

4. *Being spontaneous:* Spontaneity is a habit of mind that arts educators often have to embrace. Dudeck & McClure posit that "accepting stability as an illusion, transformation as inevitable, and uncertainty as an opportunity to learn, interact, create, and take action" is a key tenet of improvisation (Dudeck & McClure, eds., 2021, p. 4). McDermott and Simpson (2018) articulate some of the benefits of engaging in improv practice, including "an ability to be comfortable with uncertainty" and "a belief that everything happening around you is a valuable part of the process" (p. xiv). Adopting an improv mindset lets us playfully practice curiosity, listening, and presence.

5. *Embracing failure:* Combining the previous four elements within an ensemble fosters an environment in which people feel safer about taking risks and making mistakes than they usually do in the real world. When participants trust themselves and know that their collaborators will accept and build on the ideas they spontaneously offer, they feel more confident to brush off mistakes and learn from the information they gleaned from those mistakes.

Adopting an improv mindset requires practice. I wanted my workshop to be a space where participants could practice putting these theoretical tenets of improv into practice. Melissa Carter, the Senior Director for Global Spiritual Life at NYU, has articulated the importance of providing space for "embodied practice and inviting a sense of curiosity that's playful" and for students to "practice being who they are" (Fields, 2023). To practice being who we are implies that we have not figured it out yet, that we can invite mistakes as part of the process of becoming ourselves. Though Carter was speaking about guiding undergraduate students through listening exercises and not about improv, I believe that improv is the ultimate "embodied practice" that is curious, playful, and

can rewire our brains to embrace mistakes as inevitable and necessary parts of the learning process, rather than something shameful.

## SCAFFOLDING VULNERABILITY

In order to make participants feel at ease yet energized and ready to share what could be the emotional stories of what motivates them as arts educators, I wanted to establish psychological safety in the room and scaffold vulnerability. My workshop design was majorly influenced by my mentor, Jessia Hoffman, as well as the work of applied theatre practitioner Christine Poulter.

### *Establishing Psychological Safety*

The first exercise I facilitated in my workshop was focused on establishing a playful environment and getting participants to trust their innate creative brilliance. This activity is called Three Things, which I learned from Hoffman. Participants stand in a circle, and one person passes a category that has at least three things in it to the person to their left. The person receiving the category then energetically says the first three things that come to mind when they hear that category, but those things do not have to be factually correct. For example, if I receive the category “things that are orange,” I could respond, “pumpkins, Garfield the cat, and oranges!” Those answers are correct in the traditional sense. But I could also say, “zucchinis, Snoopy the dog, and oranges!” Even though only one of those responses is technically correct, what matters in this game is trusting the first thing that comes out of your mouth. As the categories get passed around the circle, the other participants chant the numbers 1, 2, and 3 as well as the title of the game with an energizing hand gesture so that everyone stays engaged.

As with any applied theatre exercise, Three Things is not just about the structure of the exercise: whether it successfully gets participants to feel relaxed and trust themselves has a lot to do with the way one facilitates this exercise. I pepper transparent lessons about what the exercise is teaching us throughout my facilitation. I learned this technique of embedding takeaways as participants’ walls come down from Hoffman. Hoffman is an exceptional improv performer and facilitator: I have watched her facilitate a room of hundreds of ambitious attorneys through exercises that had law firm partners and early career

associates alike laughing and telling stories together. I have also seen Hoffman give colleagues who joined companies remotely during the darkest days of the COVID-19 pandemic concrete strategies to build genuine relationships. She does this by cultivating psychological safety, a concept that has its roots in the organizational change research of the 1960s (Schein & Bennis, 1965). Amy Edmondson, a leading researcher of psychological safety at Harvard Business School, defines psychological safety as “a climate in which people feel free to express relevant thoughts and feelings without fear of being penalized” (Edmondson, 2012). I want to be clear that I am intentionally referring to the concept of *psychological safety* and not *safe spaces*, a concept I am not sure actually exists (but that is a topic for another article). In Three Things, players are welcome to offer answers to the category they are given that are not “relevant” in a traditional sense—wrong answers are welcome. But these “wrong answers” are actually fully relevant to the task at hand, which is establishing sharing ideas and not filtering ourselves as a celebrated norm. When one person offers Snoopy as an answer to “three things that are orange,” everyone laughs, and then we move on. We establish psychological safety by normalizing making mistakes.

### *Playing Big*

Establishing psychological safety is a key step in getting participants to be comfortable with making bold choices with their improvisations: what Hoffman calls “playing big. ” Arts teachers often have to adapt to scenarios that are less than ideal, whether that be not knowing whether you will have a budget for the high school play or having to rehearse in the gym where basketball practice is going on simultaneously (that has happened to me). Additionally, if the participants in the workshop hold marginalized identities—for example, none of the participants were cisgender men. As people who hold those identities, we have learned to be responsive, flexible, and creative. In other words, the teachers in this room were already experts at adapting to unexpected scenarios, a strength that is key to success in improvisation.

However, needing to constantly adapt can also cause fatigue. In my experience having to constantly be on high alert and ready to change plans at a moment’s notice have made me want to take up less space, be less ambitious—to play small. I learned from Hoffman that Three Things is an excellent exercise to give participants permission to play

big because players are encouraged to not filter themselves and to tap into self trust. Whatever answers a player gives in response to the category they receive is accepted and then affirmed by the group's chanting.

### *Low, Medium, and High Focus*

When I design interactive workshops like this, I build the group, to borrow a phrase from Christine Poulter, by moving from what she calls low focus to high focus exercises (Poulter, 2018, p. 8). That might look like moving from partnered exercises where each participant is only "playing to an audience of one" (p. 10), and then gradually building up to a few participants sharing the focus of a large audience. My participants were all theatre people and educators, two groups that tend to be comfortable holding the gaze of an audience. Because I had that prior information about my workshop participants, I felt comfortable introducing Three Things, a relatively high-focus game in which everyone in the circle is watching two people at once, early in the session.


**Image 2:** In this image, workshop participants are working in small groups, an example of how to modify group size to reduce the focus on individual participants as they share ideas.

For the actual rehearsal of improvised elevator pitches, though, I transitioned to low- and medium-focus activities. While the beginning of the workshop was designed to energize participants and build psychological safety, the rest of the workshop was intended to give participants time to generate material that they could use to advocate for themselves and their work. The rest of the exercises involved telling personal stories, so I used low- and medium-focus exercises both so that participants only had to be vulnerable with a few other participants, and for the pragmatic issue of giving everyone enough time to tell their stories.

## REHEARSING SELF-ADVOCACY

### *Identifying Personal Strengths*

I transitioned into the self-advocacy part of the workshop with another exercise I learned from Hoffman called "What Do You Like About Yourself?" It is a simple, partnered exercise: Partner A asks Partner B, "What do you like about yourself?" Partner B responds with something they truly like about themself, related to the arts or not (e. g. "I like that I'm great at cooking pasta Bolognese," "I like that I can sing all the parts from *Phantom of the Opera* from memory"). Partner A then affirms that statement, e. g. "Yeah, you make an amazing Bolognese sauce!" Partner A asks, "What else do you like about yourself?" and the cycle goes on until I cue the partners to switch. At the end of the exercise, I asked participants to write down something they had said they liked about themselves that surprised them; I wanted them to have tangible takeaways to refer back to in their next job interview or grant application.

I assumed that teachers who took time out of their weekends to attend a voluntary professional development experience like the NYU Forum are all reflective practitioners who want to become better educators and better artists. That quest for self-improvement is necessary for being a good teacher, but it can involve lots of self-criticism without taking time to recognize one's strengths. In our debrief after this exercise, I encouraged participants to practice sharing their strengths with colleagues and collaborators so that they would have a community who knows what unique capacities they bring to the table.

Delivery and body language are also important in this exercise. I encouraged participants to speak with confidence as they stated the

things they liked about themselves. I modeled standing up straight, making eye contact, and not using an apologetic or questioning tone when stating something like, “I like that I am good at showing up for my friends. ” Encouraging participants to own their strengths was particularly important to me considering that most of the participants were women. Despite findings that self-promotion has been found to be important professionally for people of all genders (Rudman, 1998), women tend to underestimate their abilities and performance due to a variety of sociological factors (Kay & Shipman, 2014). To call back to Carter (Fields, 2023), it is therefore important for people of marginalized gender identities to have space to practice.

### *Infusing Laughter into Self-Advocacy*

The final series of exercises in my workshop involved giving participants the chance to improvise elevator pitches for projects they were currently working on or wanted to work on, or more traditional elevator pitches à la a job interview. Participants were given two minutes to describe in detail how they got to where they are in their careers, and then advocate for why they are perfect for the particular job/project they wanted to practice pitching for. This was a medium-focus exercise in which each participant had one or two partners. After everyone had done that, they had to advocate for themselves again, but with entirely new content: if they had told stories or highlighted particular strengths, they had to throw those out and use new ones. We often get stuck in one narrative version of who we are, so this exercise forced participants to frame themselves in new ways.

The next exercise was inspired by Random Word Generator, an exercise I have watched Hoffman facilitate via Zoom. For the in-person version of this game, I had participants write down random words on index cards (one word per card). Then, as the participants gave their elevator pitches a third time, their partners had two choices. They could either flash the index cards with words at the speaker, and the speaker would have to incorporate that word into their pitch somehow. (Using metaphors and similes quickly became a useful tool. ) Or, because everyone in the room was a theatre person, the partner who was not speaking could make a bold physical choice à la Image Theatre (Boal, 1995) that the speaker would have to incorporate. All of this required a *yes, and* attitude on behalf of the speaker.

Laughter is what I remember most from this pitch exercise. In my

experience, elevator pitch coaching usually does not elicit so many giggles or a sense of playfulness. But by throwing these unexpected and often goofy curveballs at the speaker, participants were able to disrupt the usual narratives they tell about themselves and discover creative ways to advocate for themselves.

At the end of the workshop, I encouraged participants to follow up with the people they had been paired with throughout the workshop and share what stood out to them about each other's stories. Canning, Lee, and Warner (2019) emphasize the importance of "collaboration and knowledge sharing" (p. 110) between graduate school students and instructors. This workshops offered space for the participants, who have varying levels of professional experience, to help each other communicate the importance of their work by providing fresh perspectives.

## AN AREA FOR GROWTH: ASSESSMENT

I did not capture feedback from participants, primarily because I was busy coordinating the larger Educational Theatre Forum where I presented this workshop, and building in assessment grounded in data frankly slipped my mind. Snyder-Young's excellent 2018 article about assessment wryly articulates that applied theatre practitioners often "on the fumes of caffeine and adrenaline" (p. 85) during a project; as a volunteer student organizer of this Forum as well as a facilitator, Snyder-Young's description captures the state I was in during the weekend that I held this workshop. In the future, I might give participants an exit ticket that asks a question like "What is one thing you'll take away from this workshop?" or "What is the most significant change that has occurred?" as Snyder-Young suggests (p. 85). I was assessing participants' comfort and growth during the workshop by observing their body language and facial expressions, and asking debrief questions. If I could go back in time, I would have liked to record what some participants shared during those debriefs or sent out a survey after the workshop to see whether participants used any of the tactics we explored in order to advocate for their work in new ways.

## CONCLUSION

This workshop harnessed the power of improvisational theatre to establish a nurturing and experimental environment for participants to practice advocating for their artistic and educational theatre work. I established an environment of psychological safety by making silliness and risk taking expected norms. This approach encouraged the participants to identify and celebrate their unique strengths, fostering the kind of self-confidence needed in a field where self-promotion is essential yet often challenging. It is vital to provide opportunities for early career educators and graduate students studying theatre education to reflect on why it is that they do what they do, what motivates them, and then practice articulating what they bring to the table. Canning, Lee, and Warner (2019) note that, “Anecdotes of underrepresented students being asked to ‘volunteer’ their time for teaching and service are abundant in our field, and their labor is often taken for granted. And, many end up presenting their work prematurely to the detriment of their long-term success” (p. 107). The same could be said of artists, and of early career artist-educators. Too often, arts educators get thrown in the deep end without adequate space for reflection.

Bringing an improv mindset to these reflections and collaboratively practicing our advocacy with other arts educators has multiple benefits. Infusing humor and unpredictability into the process of crafting elevator pitches showed participants that advocating for one's work can be a joyous and transformative experience. Ultimately, it underlined the importance of incorporating playfulness and curiosity into professional development, empowering educators to confidently champion the value of arts education and their roles within it. I hope that my reflection on this workshop will encourage arts educators to build professional support networks encourage each other to infuse their teaching practice with an improviser’s mindset.

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# Embracing Failure in the Drama Classroom

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## ABSTRACT

*Inspired by Valerie Curtis-Newton's keynote address at the 2023 AATE conference, this piece explores the necessity of creating failure-friendly drama classrooms. In a time when students are experiencing unprecedented rates of anxiety and other mental health challenges, I argue that explicit instruction about and opportunities for failure are necessary for the social, emotional, and academic success of students. Furthermore, I address why drama educators and theatre classrooms are uniquely positioned to facilitate healthy relationships with failure. I end the piece with suggestions for ways to incorporate more failure-learning opportunities into drama and theatre education spaces.*

"Prepare for the best and be secure in your ability to survive the worst," I scrawled fervently in my notebook as I watched Valerie Curtis Newton's keynote address at the 2023 AATE conference in Seattle (Curtis-Newton, 2023). Curtis Newton's career as a director, educator, and champion of African-American performance in the U.S. is prolific. While she gave us, her captive audience of educators and artists, some insight into her illustrious career, she chose to focus her talk on the anxiety epidemic with which many of our students struggle and theatre's ability to teach our students (and ourselves) to be brave. She urged us to model courage and curiosity for students. She spoke of the creative process as a balm to the wounds of self-doubt and paralyzing pessimism. She reminded us that risk and resilience are essential to the creative process.

While she never explicitly said the word "failure," I found myself coming back to that word again, and again, scribbling it in my notebook, circling it, and tracing the letters to create deep grooves in the paper. Teaching young people to take risks and navigate the outcomes of those risks is one of the most important skills educators can offer, especially in a time of extreme anxiety. In this essay, I present the anxious context young people face, review the literature on how drama and theatre can support resilience, share some examples of successful and unsuccessful failure stories from a decade of teaching artistry, and offer some tools for drama and theatre educators that want to recenter failure in their classrooms.

## STUDENTS' ANXIOUS CONTEXT

Over the last 20 years, changes in education, access to new technologies, growing wealth disparity, and a global pandemic have created a crisis of anxiety in children and teens that is impacting the way students show up in our classrooms. In 2002, No Child Left Behind transformed kindergarten classrooms from a place of play and socialization to a place of rigorous academic pressure and preparation for years of standardized testing (Bassok, 2016). In 2010, teen depression and suicide began to spike, and research linked this decline

in mental health to screen time and social media (Twenge, 2018). Part of this spike may be due to new ways of reporting mental health crises (Corredor-Waldron & Currie, 2023), but the U.S. Surgeon General nevertheless issued an advisory about Youth Mental Health, elevating it as one of the top public health priorities in our country (*Protecting Youth Mental Health*, 2021). In October 2022, a panel of health experts recommended that all children in the U.S. over the age of 8 be screened for anxiety, regardless of whether they showed any symptoms (Pearson, 2022; U.S. Preventive Services Task Force, 2022). Research about the pandemic's effects on adolescent mental health found young people from under-resourced communities, young people of color, and young people with learning disabilities were more likely to develop anxiety disorders related to the effects of the pandemic and that intersectional approaches to their well-being will be necessary to recovery (Fortuna, 2023). This is not to say that youth do not also experience profound hope in challenging times (Gallagher, Rodericks, & Jacobson, 2020), but that the past several years have introduced significant events that can exacerbate anxious thinking.

Anxiety, at its root, is a response to the possibility of danger that does not exist. The amygdala, the part of the brain responsible for responding to basic threats, responds to anxiety in similar ways it would respond to danger known as fight, flight, or freeze. When the amygdala is activated, it 'takes over' other brain functions like critical thinking and memory (*Understanding the Stress Response*, 2011). In *The Meaning of Anxiety* (1950/2015), Rollo May describes anxiety patients "constricting" their personality and presence in the world as a way to decrease their interactions with anxiety triggers or possible conflicts. In these cases, anxiety gets in the way of the patient's productivity and ability to relate to others. May also reviews decades of research that argues for most people, a small and healthy amount of stress is essential to creativity and what Maslow called "self-actualization" (May, 1950/2015; Maslow, 1950) This means that people experiencing anxiety use excessive brain power to prevent themselves from facing any possible trigger to their anxiety.

To overcome the anxious brain's disproportionate fear of risk, people need to have prior experiences where they experienced a similar risk and learned it was not life-threatening (Explore SEL, n.d.). Additionally, people who are anxious about a specific domain of thinking, like creativity, are going to exhibit less risk-taking behavior in that

domain (Daker, 2023). This has important implications for the way we teach drama and theatre. Students who are fearful of creative tasks will exhibit avoidant behavior toward drama and theatre-related activities and will not automatically take the risks that the drama classroom requires of them. If our students are overwhelmed by getting things 'right' in creative spaces and are un-practiced risk-takers, they will not be able to take the kinds of risks art-making requires unless they can see that their risks will pay off, or at least provide a soft landing.

Readers may not be trained and licensed social workers, therapists, doctors, or school counselors; the people tasked with facilitating mental health management. Instead, I write to the educators who did not sign up to be on the front lines of an anxiety epidemic. It should not be an educator's job to reverse the negative impacts of a mental health crisis in our students. But now, more than ever, educators have a responsibility to use our position to guide students toward a healthier relationship with work and failure, and drama and theatre classrooms are uniquely positioned to do this work.

## THEATRE CLASSROOMS, FAILURE, AND RESILIENCE

Drama and theatre classrooms are a perfect place to embrace what Sara Jane Bailes calls "the poetics of failure" (Bailes, 2011). Bailes argues that failure is an inclusive approach to art-making because it "operates through a principle of difference, rather than sameness" (p.2). Failure is a unifying feature of contemporary performance art and experimental theatre where performers reveal aspects of the process to the audience, thereby illuminating the new avenues it creates in artistic work. Helen Nicholson (2013b) supports' Bailes' critique that theatre always has to be 'fun' and instead celebrates the opportunities presented by failure, boredom, and broken expectations in performance work, as these moments of uncertainty and doubt are precisely when new knowledge is created, making failure inherently pedagogical. Not only can failure provide opportunities for learning, but it can also strengthen the skills students need to participate in learning to begin with.

Learning to embrace failure is a necessary Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) skill for students (Snyder, 2019). Practicing risk-taking is an essential component of quieting the anxious brain. Making mistakes sets off necessary brain activity (Edutopia, 2021). Learning from

mistakes can be so productive, that experiencing failure can help students recall information later on (Kapur, 2008). Failure is also essential for developing neural plasticity, our brain's ability to flex and grow with new information (Hammond, p. 42, 2015). As we craft space for failure, we must remember students' Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). When we push students to achieve things they are not ready for, or we coddle them in the safety of familiarity, we are inhibiting their ability to learn. To make language about challenges more accessible to young people, we can talk about 'Just Right Challenges' with our students (Ayres, 2005), which give learners tools for breaking down a task into pieces that are easy, challenging, and impossible so they can regulate their own engagement. Students are more engaged in their learning when they feel challenged (Fisher et al., 2018). Teachers should make this information available to students when introducing opportunities to fail in their classrooms. Once students understand their personal relationship to failure, educators can work to make failure a community norm.

Doug Lemov (2015) devotes an entire chapter to failure in his guide for teachers. He argues for establishing a "culture of error" in which students recognize mistakes as critical steps on the path of learning (p. 64). Embracing mistakes, or as Brian Edmiston (2014) calls them, "mis-takes," is an important part of building a safe classroom community. Edmiston argues that "mis-takes" are simply actions that don't fit a particular social context and offers students a chance to "re-take," their actions while prompting the classroom community to celebrate the opportunity for second chances (p. 80). He goes on to quote Bob Fecho saying classrooms should not be "*free* from risk but… *safe* to take risks" (Edmiston, 2014, p. 94 quoting *Teaching for the Students*, Fecho, 2011, p. 114). Calling classrooms "safe-spaces," while a noble goal, has been a point of contention (Hunt, 2019). Many educators and facilitators are instead moving toward a language of "brave spaces," acknowledging that "safety" can never be guaranteed (Brown, 2022). Even the term "brave space," however, is falling out of favor for erasing the daily bravery of marginalized people in privileged spaces. New terms like "accountable space," "IDEAL space" "spaces of acceptable risk," and "negotiated space" have been offered as replacements (Ahenkorah, 2023; Humiston, 2022; Macpherson, 2021; Rikard & Villarreal, 2023). In each new term and definition, however, a culture of risk-taking and potential mis-takes is implied. With each language update and cultural

norm, space is created for more people of different backgrounds to feel supported in risk-taking and failure.

Building a community that encourages risk-taking in students must encourage risk-taking in **all** students. This means an inclusive and culturally responsive approach is essential for creating a true failure-friendly classroom. According to Zaretta Hammond (2015), students who feel unsafe or unable to approach challenges in the classroom will be flooded with an overproduction of stress hormones and an underproduction of oxytocin which induces anxiety, making learning impossible. Teachers must spend time reflecting on the ways their classroom may be hostile to learners who may feel 'othered' due to their race, class, language, sexuality, gender, ability, or other status markers, and they must adjust their teaching practices to create a space of safe risk-taking for the most vulnerable students in the room. Hammond warns, however, that a 'watered-down' approach to curricula and challenges does more to harm historically marginalized students than it helps them (p. 49). Healthy challenge is necessary for building the physical elements and processing power of the brain to achieve higher-order thinking. Moreover, educators should be mindful of the educational history of 'teaching less' to students of color and work to dismantle assumptions about what students are capable of in a school context (Delpit, 1995/2006). Teachers interested in creating culturally responsive opportunities for failure must simultaneously encourage risk in all students while recognizing the additional burdens some students carry into the classroom.

Additionally, it is easy for artists and arts educators to fall into a 'positivist' trap with our work, assuming that everything we do will be successful and good (Nicholson, 2013a). This is understandable — as any opportunity to tell a positive story about arts programs feels like armor against slashed budgets. Drama and theatre educators should remember that sometimes creative work will fail and find ways to articulate how failure is productive and an essential element of the work.

I have spent a lot of time hemming and hawing about the word "failure" over the last several years. I worried about the word "failure." Should I say "mistakes," "risk-taking," or something more palatable and positive? What happens if educators start accepting mistakes as opportunities for growth and essential learning? What happens when failure is a necessary part of "the process?" How might anxious students react to opportunities where they can feel free to fail? Embracing the

word failure, and all of the weight it implies, is exactly what I need to do if I want to practice carrying it. I'm trying to be reverent toward failure and to find ways of highlighting it in my teaching artist practice. Allowing failure into my classrooms, however, took intentional practice and patience.

## PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR TEACHING FAILURE

Drama and theatre classrooms of all kinds (high school, university, after-school programs, or one-off workshops) can become the perfect place to help students start making mistakes because the experiences are authentic. Improvising a scene, drafting a scenic design, and rehearsing a play are all opportunities for students to authentically apply skills, which is essential for building resilience in learners (Cefai, 2008). To build authentic spaces for failure, educators can consider whether their classroom or program is concerned with presenting a final product to an audience, or if it is process-based and uses performance as a tool to explore ideas and content. If a program is tied to a final product, facilitators can consider ways to build opportunities for risk-taking, maybe by reducing the importance of the final product during certain activities and encouraging playfulness. Praising effort, versus achievement, is essential for building resilience in young people (Dwyer, et al., 2015). This requires teachers to find ways to reveal students' efforts during the process of creation in product-oriented projects.

My first "real" theatre teaching job was a parks and recreation class I started in my hometown during a summer break in college. Young and inexperienced, I planned to devise plays with the young people and urged families to take class attendance very seriously. Because the program was new and families were not used to a rigid structure in the community summer programs, attendance was spotty. There probably wasn't a single week where all of the students were present. Frustrated, I pressed on, determined to present polished productions that would "wow" my supervisors and the young participant's families. As the final sharing approached, I was nervous because some students still needed scripts or to have lines fed to them and nothing had been rehearsed as much as I hoped.

In retrospect, I don't remember anything about the performance, but I remember how much fun I had writing and improvising silly plays with the students, getting to know their quirky sense of humor, and watching

their aesthetic lenses deepen and grow in the weeks leading up to the performance. What I initially saw as a "failed" project was really just the pressure to produce a "product" to other people clouding my vision and preventing me from seeing the great work that was already happening. After my first "failed" teaching artist attempt, I began to question the necessity of a final product or performance. My favorite memories from participating in youth theatre are rehearsals and classes, not performances. In fact, the thing I value most from my early theatre days is the community of friends, artists, and teachers who helped me grow as an artist and as a person.

One of the keys to a failure-friendly classroom includes building a community where students feel supported. I teach students to encounter failure with the improv game *Clams Are Great!* The rules are simple, one person stands in the center of the circle and says "*Clams are great because*…" and then finishes the sentence with anything, and I mean anything (as long as it's kind and the language is appropriate for the context). For example: "*Clams are great because they live in the water. Clams are great because the sky is purple. Clams are great because YEET!*" After each statement, the rest of the group says "Yes" as loud as possible and claps together. This game is regularly requested in a therapeutic context I work in, where anxiety levels are high and the participants often worry about getting things "right." However, the game has become a fun way to meet the social learning goals of the participants because it encourages risk and puts each student in a performance position supported by everyone in the room, no matter how silly or boring the statement is.

Content choice can also help students understand mistakes as an inherent part of life while providing a safe way for students to consider the perspectives of others. Jo Beth Gonzalez (2013), urges educators to put students in the driver's seat by having them research and write their own content. She acknowledges the tension of wanting to give her students agency while worrying about "inappropriate" or offensive content making its way into the space. She recommends teachers embrace a "state of unknowing" which "keeps me both on edge and at bay, teaching from an altered position of power that centralizes students' voices" (p. 157).

Asking students to create their own work, however, is time-consuming and not feasible for every context. As educator Joan Lazarus states in *Signs of Change* (2012), drama teachers should use texts in

their classrooms that include “realistic consequences for characters’ actions and raise questions about characters’ choices” (p. 170). By learning through someone else’s problems, students will experience failures and consequences from the aesthetic distance of drama.

Teachers looking for strategies to deepen student learning around an established text or character can consider using activities from *Drama Based Pedagogy* in their classrooms (Dawson & Lee, 2018). Drama-based pedagogy prioritizes process over product and emphasizes “affective” learning, or social, emotional, and cultural learning (p.21). For example, students can practice outcomes of potential failures through *Real and Ideal Images, Conscience Alley, Paired/Group Improvisation,* and *Voices in the Head* (Dawson and Lee, 2018). These strategies allow students to embody someone else’s journey, explore multiple perspectives, and practice success and failure in the safety of the classroom. These improvisational activities that ask students to dig into content are examples of what the Project Zero team behind the *Eight Studio Habits of Mind* (Hetland et al., 2013) would call *Stretch and Explore* moments (p. 91). Stanislavski’s magic question, “What if…” is at the core of *Stretch and Explore* thinking.

Drama classrooms can also explore content through metaphor. While facilitating a community-building workshop for incoming first-years to an academic program, I introduced an energy-passing warm-up called *Lions, Tigers, Bears*. Students were asked to pass the energy in various directions and whenever someone made a mistake, instead of getting “out”, the whole group shouts *"oh my"* and runs to find a new place in the circle. I was able to scaffold the reflection to reveal that when people in a community mess up, the rest of the community can hold them accountable for those mistakes without ostracizing them. The game provided both an aesthetic distance from failure, as well as a way into the conversation about how to support another.

In addition to *Stretch and Explore* thinking, the *Eight Studio Habits of Mind* asks educators to encourage a habit of *Engage and Persist* with learners, implying that a level of risk and failure is intrinsic to the artistic process (Project Zero, 2003). When I am teaching, these skills are in the back of my mind and I am always looking for opportunities to point out the moments students are using the habits of mind in their theatrical work. For example, when I see a moment for students to *Engage and Persist*, I tell students:

> Creative work is like training in a weight room. It is something that requires consistent and intentional practice as well as patience. Even when the weights are heavy, lifting them is the work, and with practice, it becomes easier.

This mindset encourages students to develop a habit of working that is separate from artistic inspiration or productivity and they continue working in the face of great challenges (Hetland et al, 2013, p. 52).

Drama classrooms use games to teach rigorous content because many arts educators know that young people learn best through play (Ahmad, et al., 2016). By teaching with play at the forefront, educators can introduce a safe space for risk-taking and failure. To establish a risk-safe community, educators can try strategies from *Drama-Based Pedagogy* like *Circle Dash* or *Crumbling* to model support in their classroom (Dawson & Lee, 2018). To practice persistence and problem-solving, *Group Counting* and *Stop and Go and Jump* almost guarantee the opportunity for failure (Dawson & Lee, 2018). At a therapeutic summer camp for neurodivergent young people, I taught *Stop and Go and Jump* to several groups. While many of the young people played gleefully, some removed themselves from the game as it got harder. I asked the participants to reflect on how they were feeling and then told them, "When we make mistakes and try again, it helps our brains grow, which in turn lets us do even harder things." Then I let them play again. When reflecting, several participants expressed the same discomfort they felt at the beginning of the game, but were more willing to engage and persist because they knew the challenge had a purpose.

Additionally, drama educators should consider how exercises and games from *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (1992/2002) by Augusto Boal, can bolster conversations and opportunities for productive failure in the classroom. (1992/2002). Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed aims to reveal examples of injustice to oppressed people and give them space to rehearse interventions that liberate their communities, workplaces, and relationships with others (Babbage, 2018). The first step in his system is a process of "de-mechanization," where we must de-mechanize, or de-program our daily routines and habits so we can wake up to the oppression around us (FAQ, n.d.). In theatre classrooms, his techniques are often used as warm-ups; an attempt to shed the outside world before diving into the rigorous work of creativity and imagination. Boal's exercises, lovingly stolen from childhood playground games, also

introduce a joyful amount of risk-taking and failure. When teaching his strategies to students, I explicitly introduce confusion and the possibility of mistakes. Below is what I share with elementary and middle school students about de-mechanization:

> When we play these games, we might feel a little confused or make some mistakes. That is on purpose. It's okay to feel uncomfortable but do your best to keep going. The guy who gets credit for getting theatre teachers to use these games wanted you to feel a little confused. He believed it makes your brain feel awake and more ready to learn new things or see things in a new way.

Adapting Boal's language of de-mechanization for young people gives failure purpose and reframes confusion and mistakes as intentional and necessary to learning.

## EMBRACING FAILURE

Near the end of her 2023 AATE keynote, Curtis Newton shared her manifesto, *Fear and the Creative Process: A Manifesto for Creative Survival* (Curtis-Newton, 2015). Inspired by her words, and an attempt to embrace my own failures as steps toward success, I wrote my own ode to embracing failure on the plane ride home from the conference.

> **Failure is…** A part of life. Essential. Sometimes, it is fun or even funny! // **Failure is not…** An excuse to be an asshole. A reason to give up. The end. // Sometimes, failure is your own responsibility, sometimes it is someone else's. **Give grace**, no matter who is responsible. // Sometimes, failure doesn't feel good, but **we were not built to feel good all the time**. Find what feels productive about feeling bad and go from there. // When it feels heavy, lift with your knees. **You will get stronger over time**. // Success is not the opposite of failure and you should probably just stop putting success and failure in the same thought. // Tension, struggle, and conflict are not synonymous with failure. Running away from them are. // Failure is the chance to say: So now… I can… What if… That surprised me, which means… Now I know… // **Celebrate the opportunity to revise**. Revise often, it gets easier. // **Sometimes, the detour IS the destination**, but you don't know that when you

> get on the road. // Failure is the risk you take when you are curious, innovative, courageous, hard-working, and critical. // Failure is normal. Embrace it.

Drama and theatre teachers are not going to 'solve' the anxiety crisis students are in, and certainly not with a handful of theatre games. However, creating failure-friendly classrooms and centering the process of risk-taking strengthens the social-emotional skills students need to manage the stressful world they live in. While other educators and practitioners have offered ways to embrace risks, resilience, and mistakes, I argue that tip-toeing around scary words like "failure" only increases the fear of them. Sometimes things fail, which is not necessarily a bad thing but an opportunity for reflection, growth, and a new path forward. By explicitly using the language of failure, educators can validate the experiences of their students and normalize a culture of persistence. To create a failure-friendly space, drama and theatre teachers can use the tools already at our disposal: process-based work, building trusting communities of learners, selecting rigorous content, using games that practice SEL skills, and ample reflection time, so students can fail more, fail better, and feel great about failing.

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# Dyslexia and Dramatic Growth: Exploring Theatre's Impact on Cognitive Skills

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## ABSTRACT

*In the demanding world of theatre, where actors must navigate a myriad of language-based skills, the question arises: can individuals with dyslexia, a neurobiological disorder that impairs language processing, and associated learning challenges, thrive in such a setting? While some patterns in education suggest that students with dyslexia[1] lack the*

[1] While prestigious school districts like Northern Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools recommend the person-first term "students with dyslexia" as a reminder of their broader identities, the Charles Armstrong School in California, whose raison d'être is dyslexia, encourages students to embrace the term "dyslexic" as empowering. Armstrong School asserts that all facets of their program are designed and staffed to cater to the unique needs and strengths of dyslexic learners: "At Armstrong, our students are the 5 in 5, not the 1 in 5." Armstrong students acknowledge their dyslexia as the "superpower" that gives them extraordinary creativity and resourcefulness. Hence, the terms "students with dyslexia" and "dyslexic students" will be used interchangeably in this paper without diminishing the student's primary identity.

*cognitive skills necessary for theatrical participation, this article seeks to challenge that assumption. Its purpose is to explore the compatibility of dyslexia with theatre training and make a compelling case for theatre as an effective intervention in helping students with dyslexia and related learning differences overcome their challenges. By reviewing literature and sharing empirical evidence from real-life anecdotes, I seek to demonstrate the transformative impact of theatre on cognitive skills, confidence, and personal growth for dyslexic learners. The transformative power of theatre as a success-oriented and purpose-driven activity cannot be underestimated, and through a deeper understanding of theatre's potential, educators and practitioners can create inclusive learning environments where dyslexic students not only succeed but also thrive in their academic pursuits and beyond.*

## INTRODUCTION

This article investigates how theatre can support students with dyslexia, a group often sidelined in traditional educational settings. My observations in the educational field reveal a concerning pattern: students with dyslexia are frequently removed from enriching theatre classes for remedial instruction, reflecting a doubt about the value of theatre education for these learners. Parents of dyslexic students often express apprehensions about their child's ability to cope with the demands of theatre, and even instructors in schools for dyslexia sometimes underestimate their students' potential in text-heavy activities. This skepticism underscores a prevalent assumption that dyslexic students might struggle more than benefit in a theatre environment.

Challenging this notion, this article explores the intersection of theatre education and dyslexia, aiming to demonstrate how theatre, despite being perceived as reliant on strong reading and verbal skills, can indeed offer a nurturing and beneficial educational experience for students with dyslexia.

(Sources: FCPS Handbook, Charles Armstrong School, National Center on Disability and Journalism Style Guide, all retrieved 7/15/23)

## METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH APPROACH

The methodology and research approach employed in challenging the assumption that students with dyslexia will struggle in theatre settings involves a systematic examination. To commence, a thorough analysis of the nature of dyslexia will be undertaken, exploring the challenges it poses in various learning environments, with a particular focus on its interaction with cognitive skills and executive functions, terms that will be defined in context. This scrutiny will extend to investigate how drama and theatre activities can not only accommodate but actively contribute to the learning and development of students with dyslexia. The research combines an extensive literature review interwoven with reflective analyses of two specific anecdotal experiences, aiming to present a nuanced perspective on the potential of theatre education as a transformative tool for dyslexic learners.[2]

## UNDERSTANDING DYSLEXIA

### *Defining Dyslexia*

Dyslexia, experienced by one of five people in the United States according to the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, is a learning difference that especially impacts the ability to read and spell. When describing it to a child one might say it is like having a hiccup in the brain's language processing. The International Dyslexia Association debunks the common misconception that individuals with dyslexia read backwards, clarifying that spelling can be mixed up, however, because students have trouble “remembering letter symbols for sounds and forming memories for words” (International Dyslexia Association, 2020). To be more specific, dyslexia directly impairs:

- Reading, writing, spelling and comprehension (Nicolson & Fawcett, 2008, p. 221)
    - Importantly, reading is a multi-faceted, blended activity: “good reading requires the fluent interplay of several cognitive skills, all at high speeds.” (Nicolson & Fawcett,

[2] Names of students described in the anecdotal experiences have been changed for anonymity.

2008, p. 13)

- Associating speech sounds with letters, (Griffiths & Frith, 2002)
  - The extensive research compiled in a thesis by Clayton (2016) revealed a pattern in children with dyslexia "characterized by the absence of early integration of letters and speech sounds." (p. 66)

### *Cognitive & Executive Functioning Challenges in Dyslexia*

Dyslexia affects more than just the ability to process language. Research shows strong correlations between dyslexia symptoms and deficits in short-term memory and executive functioning. It is well-established in studies that children with specific reading disabilities have deficits in phonological processing and storage, and there is evidence to suggest that they also experience deficits in central executive functioning (Varvara et al., 2014).

### *Defining Executive Functioning*

Executive functioning skills include planning, organization, task initiation, attention, metacognition, working memory, mental flexibility, self-control, time management, and resilience. Individuals with dyslexia have been noted to exhibit weaker working memory functions when contrasted with those with typical reading skills (Fischbach et al., 2014). Many studies suggest that dyslexia impacts speed of processing and verbal working memory, which as Nicolson & Fawcett (2008) note, "are normally considered as fundamental cognitive attributes rather than derivatives of phonology" (p. 27). Additional results underscore significant differences in executive functioning between children with dyslexia and those with typical reading abilities, with dyslexic children demonstrating more challenges in tasks involving attention, cognitive flexibility, and error monitoring (Helland & Asbjørnsen, 2000).

### *Executive Functioning Implications*

Research by Samuels, Blackman, & Zilinski (2014) shows that executive functioning predicts academic achievement. Findings indicate that "EF (executive functioning) scores during early middle grades can well predict academic performance in subsequent secondary-school grades" (p. 2).

For students with dyslexia, trailing behind with EF doubles their

obstacles to academic success. It is easy to see how the academic difficulties listed above lead to emotional and behavioral challenges and to the feeling that they are “just not smart.” In my experience, children with dyslexia often struggle to attribute their challenges to a specific neurological disability, especially when comparing themselves to neurotypical peers. Along with their dyslexia come not only associated challenges, but also a sense of learned helplessness (Whitfield, 2019, p. 160). When students feel they have little control over their academic performance, that sense of helplessness can stifle great potential within even the most determined and creative students.

### *Effective Interventions for Dyslexia*

Effective and specific interventions for dyslexic learners, such as the Wilson Reading System used at the school where I teach, are critical, especially considering the intrinsic link between academic success and overall well-being (Bücker et al., 2018). At the same time, research underscores the importance of integrating students’ personal experiences into educational practices (Egbert & Roe, 2014). While structured programs for dyslexia are effective and indeed crucial, their rigid commitment to a predetermined curriculum constrains the opportunities to tailor content to match the interests of students in the classroom. The emphasis on adhering to curricular standards often sidelines remediation of cognitive and executive functioning skills, as well as content individualization, consequently presenting challenges in fully addressing the specific needs of students with dyslexia and in sustaining their engagement and passion for learning.

Drama and theatre-based strategies offer a compelling companion. Numerous books and articles have highlighted the academic applications of drama, underscoring its ability to transform the traditional learning experience. Theatre's role in education extends beyond mere artistic expression; it fosters an environment conducive to the development of transferable academic skills, critical thinking, and cognitive growth (Barr, 2019).

Sally Bailey's work (2021) provides a practical guide on integrating drama into diverse classrooms to enhance confidence, social-emotional learning, and engagement across various subjects. Her methods focus on building key skills such as communication, conflict resolution, and behavior regulation to create what she calls an “inclusive classroom.” Statistically, this classroom would include one dyslexic learner in every

five students, but they are not singled out for special treatment in Bailey's work. By contrast, at the school where I work, the dyslexic learners make up the entire classroom, which makes for a distinct testing ground for integrating drama into educational practices to create an effective learning environment for a homogeneously "differently-abled" student body.

By utilizing the unique attributes of theatre, educators can engage students in a manner that resonates with their individual learning styles, encouraging them to overcome challenges and harness their potential. Theatre in the classroom is not a gimmick; the essence of drama for deep learning lies not in its occasional use but in its potential to become a staple in academic settings, with proper administrative support.

## ACTOR TRAINING AND DYSLEXIC COGNITIVE GROWTH

Actor training is rigorous. Prior (2012, p. 68) likens it to the training of an elite athlete. In addition to the use of the body for expression and conveying meaning, considerable cognitive demands are necessary. Hansen et al. (2020) claim that "theatre, dance, and music place high demands on performers' executive functions." Performers are required to continuously "*shift attention* and remain responsive in the present," "*inhibit* impulses," and address "multitasking challenges with *fluidity* and *flexibility*" (Hansen et al., 2020, p. 71). While such cognitive tasks make up an exhaustive list, Whitfield (2019) also adds "comprehension and fluent communication of multifarious texts," "the study of language and sounds of speech," and "articulating ideas with clarity" to skills performers use (p. 12). On top of those, Whitfield names the additional demand of observation and criticism that place an individual in a vulnerable position, "provoking high levels of anxiety."

### *Linking Training to Cognitive Development*

In my experience as a music and drama teacher at a school for students with dyslexia and other language-based learning differences, I have observed a significant overlap between these cognitive demands in the performing arts and the very cognitive growth areas for students with dyslexia. The skills required for actor training—such as attention shifting, adaptive response, multitasking, and complex communication—align closely with the developmental needs of these students. This synergy

between performing arts training and dyslexia education creates a unique opportunity to foster both artistic talent and cognitive development, enhancing the educational experience for students with dyslexia. Rather than seeing these overlaps as obstacles that might be "too much" for dyslexic learners, there is much research and story to submit that theatre provides a meaningful way for students with dyslexia to learn and develop cognitive skills for success in life.

Over the past century, resourceful educators have remarked on the values of creative drama and theatre for supporting all kinds of students with academic growth, as well as life skills and many have even delved deeply into the benefits of theatre and creative dramatics for students with learning differences. Marrying the research on the use of theatre as an academic approach for all learners, and specifically the use of theatre for students with disabilities, with my anecdotal experience with students in a school dedicated exclusively to dyslexic learners, I seek to review how different practitioners have thought about theatre for divergent learners over the decades and to provide a meaningful guide for how theatre and creative dramatics can support dyslexic learners.

## THEATRE AS A CATALYST FOR EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING

*The father of one of my 12-year-old students, Chloe, described her like this: "She's severely dyslexic, dysgraphic, dyscalculic…. She also has ADHD, and processing speed and memory challenges…She can't read a clock, navigate a calendar, or count dollars and cents—yet." Without any prior musical theatre experience, she took on a role as Patsy in* Monty Python's Spamalot: The Musical, *the school's spring production. Despite challenges with reading, she memorized lines to perfection and delivered them with comedic timing, stage presence, and expressiveness of voice and body. Patsy is a role that requires a ton of prop coordination, as the character carries a backpack full of surprises for the audience. For a student who struggles so intensely with executive functioning skills such as memory, focus, planning, flexibility, and stress tolerance, she made enormous strides in planning—with my interactive modeling of how to load the backpack so that the props she needed would be most accessible at the right times—and cognitive flexibility for how to make the scene work when the prop did not work or didn't make its way into the backpack.*

### *Synergy Between Drama and Executive Skills*

Academic researchers have not yet rigorously documented theatre's benefits for executive functioning skills specifically, but many practitioners echo the benefits I saw in the production with Chloe. Ewing (2013) outlines a creative dramatics sequence she uses in the classroom that encourages "collaboration, problem-solving, and the development of empathy and reflection" (p. 4). Rosler (2008) saw student organizational thinking improve through the use of scene work, and Way (1967) stressed that creative drama contributes to an improved self-concept by providing opportunities to gain confidence. Over a century ago, Patton (1918) argued for the value of dramatics to "organize the child's thinking" and "strengthen the memory" (pp. 14-16).

### *Enhancing Memory and Organizational Skills Through Theatre*

"Drama as an aid to memory," Patton writes, "is of inestimable value" because what we remember best is that "which we learn dramatically" and "the sharpest memories are of facts associated with deeds" (p. 16). Bailey (2021) reiterates this emphasis on action and backs it up with additional research by Diamond & Ling (2016) saying that "training in theatre", along with Tae-Kwon-Do, yoga, and mindfulness, improve executive functions. "One reason for this is that these methods require dedicated practice of difficult tasks that are constantly being varied and which use equal parts of physical and cognitive challenge" (Bailey, 2021, p. 30).

*Toward Civilization: A Report on the State of Arts Education* (1988) from the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, DC acknowledged that:

> Learning in the arts can not only develop the discipline and craft necessary to constructive creation, it can also help students to develop reasoning and problem-solving skills essential to a productive work force and to the learning of other subjects. (p. 15)

Evidently, decades of literature agree that drama and theatre-based pedagogy can significantly contribute to an individual's personal, cognitive, and social development.

### *Cognitive Advancements Through Theatre*

What is it about dramatic activities and participation in theatre that supports the development of such crucial skills? Certainly, the disruption of academic routine with a healthy dose of fun plays a role. As Hough & Hough (2012) assert, “drama enhances student brains in a manner that simply sitting in a classroom for six hours cannot provide” (p. 456). Indeed, drama fosters an environment conducive to learning, a fact readily observable in Chloe's desire to succeed onstage.

### *The Role of Emotional Engagement in Theatre*

Yet, there's more to the story. Active participation in drama awakens more senses compared to passive absorption of information, and students are able to directly perceive how their individual participation influences the collective performance. For instance, when Chloe was slow to produce her prop, the actor next to her playing King Arthur had to improvise, engaging with her in character, feigning impatience and snapping her fingers. This scenario is a perfect example of the novel, highly interactive, and excitingly unpredictable nature of drama. And as Pinker (1997) points out, when the brain is "shocked, refreshed, or just learning something,” neurons grow new “dendritic branches” (p. 62). These unique neurological processes catalyzed by drama, in turn, shape personality and character.

The changing of the brain is known as neuroplasticity and it is a key component to the impact of theatre on the brain because each of the small actions taken repeatedly train the brain to do it with more ease and regularity (Doidge, 2007, p. 80). Just as it becomes easier to ride a bike or tie a shoe with practice, the more a process is repeated–the more the neurons fire together–the easier it becomes for the brain to perform the activity—the more the neurons wire together. For Chloe, each performance exercised the executive functions of planning, organizing, and remembering; she repeatedly had to organize her props and remember what she had to do between scenes to prepare for the next one. Accordingly, the novelty and elevation of emotions that drama offers prime the brain for change and growth in executive functioning.

While providing elevated emotional experiences, either through the theatrical content or the stress of exhibition, drama also affords students many opportunities to practice. Dryer and Brown (1908) remarked on this aspect of drama: “students were drilled until they felt sure of what

they were to do and say. Instead of making them seem studied, this certainty gave them self-confidence and promoted spontaneity of action. They experienced a joy in their feeling of power which grew out of their mastery of difficulties" (p. 425). Harmon Bro (1930) echoes this sentiment about mastery, emphasizing that "every individual deserves the sense of achievement," which educational theatre affords because the "teacher-director" is able to make casting and production choices that stretch the unique abilities of student actors and technicians (p. 831). Harmon Bro seems to suggest that teacher-directors are in the unique position for "situation-crafting," described by Cohen in his book *Belonging* (2022) as molding situations in order to support the individuals involved to feel a sense of belonging, and thus to help bring out students' individual and collective best.

With supportive, nonjudgmental encouragement, I modeled challenging transitions for Chloe, instructing her to perform the motions that I described from her perspective, for example: "When I see the curtain is closed after the song, I turn to my right and put the umbrella in the basket and pick up the coconuts." I required Chloe to practice repeatedly until she felt confident. Through explicit practice and the chance "to live in other times, places, and circumstances," as a very confident and capable character, she was able to transcend her own limitations and "realize that she has possibilities she hadn't known were in her" (Ward, 1942, p. 447).

### *Empowered By Theatre Experiences*

In a world where dyslexic students often come up against their limitations and have been perceived for decades as Humphrey (1927) described, as "hitherto dull and backward," drama offers situations crafted for and explicit instruction in developing the "latent powers of a child" which leads to "marked improvement all along the line of scholastic achievement, as well as in an actual spiritual re-birth" (p. 34). In the case of Chloe and others, describing their transformation as a "spiritual re-birth" feels apt because the students were permitted to set aside their self- and society-imposed conceptions of their disabilities and renew their identities as capable and successful individuals.

## REHEARSALS: BUILDING CONFIDENCE AND SKILLS

*Archer (age 13) was a conscientious and cautiously eager seventh-grade performer who struggled with confidence, which his mother chalked up to his dyslexia; she expressed the belief that "he would have a hard time remembering lines." He compensated for his anxieties by scrupulously preparing, memorizing ahead of time, and he was apologetic when he didn't get things on the first try. In rehearsals, students were asked to read lines "cold," without much preparation, not to embarrass or traumatize them, but to allow them an opportunity to try, as someone other than themselves for a few minutes, within a safe space and community. Students stumbled over words and struggled with syllable emphasis, but the exercise normalized that experience. Archer's eyes lit up as he read this line for the first time, discovering the meaning as he went: "When the Zebra's in the zone, leave him alone." Even with the stammered, cautious delivery, he and the other students hooted with laughter at discovering the rhyme scheme at the sentence's completion.*

### *Normalizing Mistakes in Reading Aloud*

Archer's reading ability mirrors that of the learners in Paul Ebbitt's class, who fell below the 30th percentile in standardized reading tests. Ebbitt (1963) found his greatest success with these students by reading plays in class. For dyslexic students like Archer, reading aloud can be a painful and embarrassing experience. Ebbitt maintains, however, that: "halting and stumbling often, [the students could] still experience the excitement of acting" and they found that "reading, brought to life by the theater's borrowed magic, can be a delight" (p. 626). Similarly, Keyes (1965), who taught the lowest-level seventh-grade reading class, implemented creative dramatics to great success. He noted that "growth of vocabulary was manifest," and that students used new words in proper context extemporaneously (p. 84). Ebbitt and Keyes both allude to the importance of creating a safe and respectful learning environment that allowed for mistakes and overcoming challenges. Keyes writes, "Day by day, they faced problems, overcame them, and went on to new problems," which gradually "restored their self-respect and badly-damaged egos" (p. 84). For students to read aloud comfortably, the teacher needs to foster an environment where problems and mistakes are normal, casual, and not cause for ridicule. As I often do with my

dyslexic students, Ebbitt "correct[s] their errors casually [and] interpret[s] difficult lines."

As Flynn (2004) affirms, "rehearsals and performance of scripts increase students' ability to read text fluently" (p. 361). By reading and speaking their scripted lines with others, students simultaneously see and hear words, allowing them to practice correct pronunciation, intonation, and expression (p. 363). In the rehearsal setting, "teamwork also implicitly motivates attentive reading" because everyone needs to stay focused to create an effective performance (p. 361). Everyone's participation supports a safe space where mistakes are normalized and overcoming challenges is celebrated. This participation fosters an environment where dyslexic students can read aloud comfortably, gradually generating or building their confidence.

### *Rehearsals as Modeling Grounds*

Importantly, when an exercise is modeled for students, they tend to understand it in more concrete terms. Effective teachers "show" rather than "tell." Even more meaningful, however, is when another student models for their classmates; learning occurs vicariously as students observe others (Slade, 1955). In the rehearsal setting, any student with a line is in a position to model for the entire cast. This modeling extends beyond fluency of reading and expressive communication; it also encompasses the freedom to make mistakes and the courage to continue trying.

It bears repeating that actor training is rigorous. The grit necessary to persevere in the face of adversity and practice consistency of interest has been shown to predict educational and career outcomes across a variety of domains (Dumas et al., 2020, p. 5). While the educational theatre may not present the level of financial insecurity and relentless rejection faced by professional actors, students, especially those with negative feelings about their abilities, may find reading aloud or expressing themselves equally taxing. As Shaw and Hertz effused in 1913, "The marvelous discipline of life is taught by the stage, the demands of time and the responsibility of one to another. The stage must necessarily influence children in their relations with the real world" (p. 9). This process by which children conquer self-doubt and hone their expressive capabilities can lead to profound personal growth, enriching their understanding of the human experience and contributing to their development as empathetic and resilient individuals.

### *Rehearsal = Repetition*

Reading aloud with fluency is especially hard for dyslexic students because they struggle to decode letters and words and connect sound to each symbol. While reading aloud, they are often so focused on decoding, that they do not have “space” in their brain for understanding what the words that they are reading mean; therefore they have very low comprehension of the sentence. If the student also struggles with working memory, they may not even be able to piece their memory of the sounded-out words together using their echoic memory. Somewhat unique to reading in the theatre rehearsal setting, however: repetition is the norm. In fact, the Old French root of *rehearsal* is “rehercier,” meaning “go over again, repeat.” The process of practicing lines over and over again allows dyslexic students to improve their reading fluency and gain confidence. As Flynn (2004) points out, repeated reading leads to significant gains in accuracy, comprehension, and reading speed (p. 361). Through the repetition inherent in rehearsals, dyslexic students gradually experience more ease and fluidity in their reading, which is an emphasis of reading educators.

### *"Opt-in Opportunity" for Personal Achievement*

Before concluding the discussion of the rehearsal process, it is worth clarifying the context of my drama rehearsals as largely outside of “academic” time, and as opt-in opportunities for participants. In *Champions of Change: The Impact of Arts on Education* (1999), Fiske finds fault with many after-school activities open to students that provide “recreation but no sense of creation. They provide recess, but no sense of success” (p. XII). Theatre rehearsals, however, stand apart by offering participants a compelling and unmovable deadline that necessitates collaboration, hard work, and excellence. Each individual recognizes the significance of their contribution towards the shared goal, and “an outcome exactly relevant to his input,” fostering an environment where growth, collaboration, and personal achievement thrive (Heathcote, 1970, p. 1080).

## CONCLUSION

This article has explored the powerful impact of theatre and drama as educational tools for dyslexic learners, particularly in relation to cognitive

skills development. Through an examination of the immersive and interactive nature of theatre, it is evident that for over one hundred years, advocates have posited that the theatrical environment provides a unique platform for students to acquire and strengthen crucial cognitive abilities. Despite limited research specifically focused on the dyslexic population, my experiences demonstrate that the benefits extend to all students, including those with dyslexia. Moreover, theatre fosters a safe and supportive space where mistakes are normalized, self-respect is nurtured, and the belief in one's capabilities is fortified. By implementing theatre techniques and incorporating drama into academic settings, educators and practitioners have the opportunity to create inclusive and engaging learning environments where dyslexic students can thrive. The transformative potential of theatre lies in its ability to empower students, unlock their potential, and offer them a meaningful path to academic success, personal growth, and self-expression.

While this article has shed light on the benefits of theatre for dyslexic learners, further research is warranted to fully understand and maximize these benefits. Future studies could delve deeper into specific theatrical interventions and their impact on cognitive skills development, explore the long-term effects of theatre participation for dyslexic students, and investigate ways to integrate theatre into the broader educational curriculum.

As educators and practitioners, we have the responsibility to embrace the potential of theatre as an educational approach and transform the lives of dyslexic students. Far from mere "recreation," theatre distinguishes itself as an opportunity to create. Far from mere "recess," the theater experience provides opportunities for profound success. It is highly academic in nature. With exposure to literature, history, mathematical patterns, and sequencing, theatre involvement promotes transferable academic skills (Deasy, 2002, p. 72). By immersing students in storytelling, exploring complex themes, and integrating mathematical concepts, performing arts cultivate critical thinking and foster the development of skills that extend far beyond the stage. Recognizing theatre's academic prowess allows us to harness its immense potential to inspire, educate, and empower students in both extracurricular and standard classroom settings, revolutionizing the way we approach education. By harnessing the unique qualities of theatre to foster cognitive growth, confidence, and reading abilities, we can create a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape. Let us seize this

opportunity and empower dyslexic learners to thrive and realize their full potential through the transformative power of theatre.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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# Teaching the Anxious Actor

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**ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this article is to shed light on the challenges of teaching theatre to students with anxiety. It includes specific situations educators have faced, patterns of gaps in training or knowledge, and methods with which educators have handled these situations. The data for this article came from an extensive literature review as well as a qualitative research study wherein 11 educators of differing grade range and location were asked about their personal experiences as professional theatre educators. Subjects were given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. School, city, and state names were omitted when possible. The data was coded and analyzed, with special note given to patterns in educator experience. The research revealed an almost unanimous gap in training, a wide variety of issues, and some repeated failures in communication between administration and educator. It also revealed a growing pool of practical advice from outside the typical education system. While the challenges explored are told from the educator's perspective, they all originate with student needs and issues. In helping*

*educators prepare for these challenges, one also helps the students who are suffering.*

It is not an exaggeration to say that student anxiety is worse than it's ever been. In fact, a 2017 study found that "five to eight times as many young people today have scores above the cutoff for a likely diagnosis of a clinically significant anxiety [disorder]… than was the case half a century ago" (Parasole, 2017). This statistic was pre-COVID, the problem has only worsened since then (Conceicao et al., 2021). Children as young as three are experiencing anxiety issues, and the prevalence increases with each progressive age group (Perou et al., 2013; American College Health Association, 2015; Merikangas et al., 2010); its presence in the classroom is almost unavoidable. Recognizing that it had been a gap in my own training, I spoke with other theatre educators about their training experiences for teaching students with anxiety and mental illness. Shockingly, 10 of the 11 educators interviewed had received *no* training whatsoever on these topics. One subject who completed a "traditional" education degree received *some* mental health training (though not enough in their opinion), the other 10 theatre-specific educators received none, across the board. Why is this such a glaring oversight? Student anxiety has become more widespread, so why hasn't educator training been updated to fit this "new normal?" Are theatre educators dealing with these issues regularly? How are they handling situations that arise? What resources do they utilize? What problems or challenges are being faced by more than one? Answering these questions could improve my own ability to teach anxious actors, and even help other theatre educators to do the same. This was the focus for this research.

## REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

This literature review is in two parts: problems and solutions. The "problems" section identifies anxiety, theatre-specific stressors, and challenges related to teaching students with anxiety disorders. The "solutions" section includes a handful of resources that in some way address the problems covered in section one.

In order to have a conversation about anxiety, it's important to first establish a working definition as to what anxiety really is. The clinical definition of anxiety is found in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (*DSM*) put out by the American Psychiatric Association (APA). This book provides the basis for mental health practices, insurance reimbursement, drug prescription, public health statistics, government policy, and legal liability for anxiety in the U.S. (Horwitz, 2013). The simple definition for the term 'anxiety' (as listed in the *DSM*) is "anticipation of future threat" (APA, 2015). The *DSM* characterizes Generalized Anxiety Disorder as "a pattern of frequent, persistent excessive anxiety and worry that is out of proportion to the impact of the event or circumstance that is the focus of the worry" and to be considered a disorder, the pattern of worry occurs "more days than not for at least six months." This is just one of the defined anxiety disorders, the others being separation anxiety disorder, social anxiety disorder, panic disorder, and substance/medication-induced anxiety disorder (APA, 2015).

Panic attacks occur when anxiety is heightened to the point of having physiological responses (panic attacks being separate from panic disorder, which is a pattern of panic attacks unrelated to outside stimulus). The panic attack itself is identified by the occurrence of at least four of the following symptoms: palpitations, pounding heart, or accelerated heart rate; sweating; trembling or shaking; shortness of breath; feelings of choking; chest pain or discomfort; nausea or abdominal distress; feeling dizzy, unsteady, light-headed or faint; chills or heat sensations; numbing or tingling sensations; feelings of unreality or feeling detached from oneself; fear of losing control; fear of dying (APA, 2015). To illustrate how this feels, here is a description of an anxiety attack as experienced by a New York law student:

> The first time I was asked to give a presentation in class, I thought I was having a heart attack. I felt as if an iron band had been fastened around my chest and was slowly squeezing the breath out of me. As the band tightened, I became progressively dizzier and found focusing a struggle. My heart rate increased, and as panic and fear set in, my hands began to perspire and my face became flushed. I tried to calm myself, but as my heart refused to slow down, I began to feel even more out of control and self-conscious. Possibly the worst of it though was that when I opened my mouth I found my

> vocal cords had been strangled by the iron chest band, and only a shaky whisper emerged. The more I felt like my peers were aware of my anxiety, the more I felt unable to cope. (Brown, 2012)

For a younger perspective, here is the testimonial of a 16 year old's first panic attack:

> I was standing in my parent's bedroom, talking to my mother. Suddenly, I felt one of my occasional heart palpitations come on; nothing major, just a sudden awareness of a mildly uncomfortable "flutter." Yet, somehow, this one had caught me off guard. This heart palpitation had startled me enough to get my "fight or flight" response firing on all cylinders. For whatever reason, today my brain decided to tell me, "*something bad is happening to your heart."* Suddenly, my heart and mind were racing beyond any semblance of control. My breathing soon followed—I felt like a fish out of water, desperately gasping for oxygen yet feeling like somehow there wasn't enough in the room. My nervous system having betrayed me, I quickly walked out of my parents' room and into the living room; perhaps I just needed to move around a bit? Within a few minutes I was lying on the couch, fully convinced that I was going to die. My anxiety had only gotten worse, and at this point *I still had no idea what a panic attack even was*. I was sure that some essential organ in my body must be shutting down for me to be feeling such agony. I begged my parents to call an ambulance for me, because I was *that* sure that I was going to need it. (Ellis, 2021)

There is also currently a "gray area" in anxiety and panic attacks that set in after the COVID-19 pandemic. Anxiety is stated above as worry that is not proportional to the impact of possible outcomes. Because of this, anxiety about COVID-19 is tricky; if looking at the worst that can happen, loss of life can be seen as proportionate to the worst of anxiety experienced. In 2021, a group from the University of California led by Seth Norrholm noted that the symptoms and criteria of this anxiety most closely matched post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but found that there was a problem in "labeling a significant percentage of the population with PTSD when it is better accounted for as another diagnosis or, even, healthy, appropriately vigilant anxiety or chronic stress." Until the APA identifies specifically what category COVID-19

anxiety falls under, it remains another general source of anxiety of which one must be aware.

One of the issues with handling student anxiety is the diagnosis, or lack thereof. According to a study published in the *International Journal of Psychiatry in Clinical Practice*, "anxiety disorders are under-diagnosed, misdiagnosed and inappropriately treated: less than one-in-five patients receive appropriate medications" (Kasper, 2006). This problem is corroborated by Kenneth Merrell (2001) and Rosemarie Parasole (2017). There are quite a few existing resources on handling student anxiety in a core class setting. Unfortunately, core class methods of handling anxiety aren't all effective in theatre, because of various stressors specific to performing arts. "Stage fright," while not necessarily a product of (though certainly exacerbated by) anxiety disorders, is an issue incredibly common to theatre spaces with which most educators will have to deal. The first known usage of the term was all the way back in 1876, the current definition being: "nervousness felt at appearing before an audience" (Merriam-Webster, 2023). Nicholas Ridout describes the experience as "a bruising physical and psychological encounter with the audience that leads to the actor's complete failure" (2006).

There are certain situations that can intensify one's stage fright. One of the most common is simply having lines, which can lead to a fear of forgetting those lines. Carmichael Phillips illustrates this type of experience in an *Acting Magazine* post: "in the heat of the moment, panic can set in, leading to a rush of anxiety and self-doubt. The actor may feel as though they have let down their colleagues and the audience, intensifying their fear and anxiety" (2023). Another situation which can lead to increased stage fright is staged intimacy. In her book *Staging Sex*, Chelsea Pace illustrates why intimacy isn't like other moments of acting: "actors kiss. Actually kiss. The contact is real. They physically put their bodies on other people's bodies and share contact that has no obvious separation from reality" (Pace, 2020).

Another common anxiety in performing arts (including music) is audition anxiety. In a post on Arizona University's *Arizona Arts,* Taylor Maresca describes what it is about the audition process that can stir up a lot of anxiety:

> Actors do it every day. They bare their souls at odd hours of the morning and wait to be judged. Judged on the way they talk, the way they sing, the way they look, and nothing more. No one bats an

> eye. This is standard. This is how the theatre industry works. It's daunting and nerve-wracking to say the least. (2022)

An offshoot of audition anxiety also exists around the posting of the cast list. After the high stakes of a one or two minute audition, the actor doesn't get to hear the result right away. With nowhere to focus that energy, oftentimes they will hyperfocus on every minute detail of their audition, as they remember it: "I could have said this better, I should have made bigger choices, what if they hated my dress, did I forget to slate, did I say thank you?" (Forman, 2016). After all that waiting comes the moment of truth, which many times will mean disappointment. "The sad reality is that for every happy child, there are probably at least five or six unhappy children when any cast list goes out. This is simply logistics: no version of *The Little Mermaid* is going to cast eight Ariels" (Naftz, 2021). As actors get older they tend to handle disappointment better, but the more aware they are of possible disappointment, the more likely they are to worry while waiting.

Kenneth Merrell's book *Helping Students Overcome Depression and Anxiety* is a robust resource on handling student anxiety in a core class setting. Some of the methods Merrell covers include systematic desensitization, abbreviated relaxation, modeling, self-control training, and self-reflection (2001). While this resource is helpful, it's also over twenty years old. A new edition came out in 2008, but even then, that's still a fifteen year difference.

The long-time consideration of stage fright means many different approaches have been taken to the issue. Lindsay Price—a 25-year theatre education veteran—provided a useful method in her posting, *Helping Students Deal with Stage Fright* (n.d.), but one can wade through a lot of material on the general subject. One must be careful to avoid the studies done between the 1910s and the 1950s as these decades saw the most psychological research into the topic. After outlining issues related to staging intimacy, Chelsea Pace's book *Staging Sex* covers the "old ways" intimacy was directed, why those methods didn't work, and outlines important concepts for creating safe, consensual staged intimacy. In a perfect world, programs would hire a professional Intimacy Director to come in and stage these scenes. Unfortunately, with school budgets being what they are, this is likely not a realistic solution.

Dr. Sharon Davis Gratto conducted a workshop specifically

addressing audition anxiety and gave participants several methods they reportedly found useful in addressing it (Gratto, 1998). One can find many different approaches to posting the cast list after an audition. With over ten years of theatre and English teaching experience, Janine Buesgen related her own method of notifying students in an attempt to minimize emotional reactions and give the students some privacy to celebrate or grieve (2018).

When handling student anxiety in a K-12 setting, the first resources to look at are Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and 504 plans. IEPs are a product of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2020). Through this process, children with possible learning disabilities are evaluated for eligibility to be qualified as a "child with disability" as defined by IDEA (U.S. Dept of Education, 2020). Within thirty days of the child being found eligible, school staff are required to set up a meeting with the plan participants (educators, parents, student if appropriate) where all the details of the IEP are set. At this point, the school is responsible to ensure that "each of the child's teachers and service providers has access to the IEP and knows his or her specific responsibilities for carrying out the IEP" (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

"504s" refer to a section of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which guarantees certain rights to people with disabilities. Under section 504, students with a recorded physical or mental disability attending any school that receives federal funding are guaranteed certain accommodations based on their mental or physical limitations and/or needs (Office for Civil Rights, 2008). Most of the time these accommodations include such things as extended test times, extra breaks, etc. An evaluation similar to the one used for IEPs decides eligibility of students for these accommodations. In both cases, the education institution is responsible for making sure that the IEP or 504 plans/accommodations are being communicated and carried out. Once a student moves into higher education (college) these accommodations are decided and carried out by the institution's disability services.

Late in this process, Christine Breihan's work at Loyola Marymount was suggested to me. Breihan's thesis outlines her experience running an undergraduate production with the intention of creating a "trauma-informed and consent-based approach to directing" (Breihan, 2022). Breihan utilized a number of different workshops and seminars while developing her methods, illustrating the importance of self-education

and training. Two educators from Arizona State University created their own unique strategy by establishing what they referred to as a “Theatre of Radical Compassion (TRC)” which was intended to counteract “hierarchical structures in theatre” and colonized “pedagogical, rehearsal, and performance spaces” (Buttry & Friedgen, 2022). Both of these methods have achieved levels of success, however, it seems unlikely that these kinds of approaches will be included in traditional theatre educator training programs anytime soon (considering most if not all educators report receiving no training on mental illness whatsoever) so the educator must decide for themself to pursue this extra training, if time and cost allow. This idea of “self-education” is vital to make sure students don’t suffer as a result of insufficient training.

## METHODOLOGY

For this study, interviews were conducted with 11 theatre educators who were asked questions about training, challenges, and personal experiences related to student anxiety. The subjects ranged in age from 22 to 45 years old. Six of the subjects were male-identifying, four of the subjects were female-identifying and one subject identified as non-binary. Seven subjects self-identified as having anxiety while four subjects self-identified as not having anxiety. Five subjects taught in Massachusetts, two taught in Washington State, one taught in Minnesota, one in Texas, one in Montana, and one in New Jersey. The collective years of teaching experience for the whole group was 108 years. The breakdown of experience in teaching different grade ranges (most subjects having experience in more than one of the defined ranges) was:

K-5: 4 educators
6-8: 6 educators
9-12: 5 educators
Undergraduate: 4 educators
Graduate: 2 educators

Each interview subject was assigned a pseudonym and institutional details were omitted (when possible) to protect subject anonymity. The pseudonyms used are: Allan, Andrew, Anna, Beth, Ethan, Hank, Jeremy, Jillian, Ramona, Rick, Selma.

## FINDINGS

The most prevalent challenge for handling student anxiety among all the subjects was simply a lack of training: “I haven’t been trained at all” (Jillian), “I’ve actually not really had any training…trial by fire” (Hank), “no specific training” (Anna), “I’ve never—like none of my accommodations classes have ever—that’s never been on a list of things you look at…neither anxiety nor depression” (Ethan), “nothing has been specific, like, ‘here’s what you do with…children with anxiety” (Allan). Of the eleven subjects, only one had received any training on teaching students with anxiety and even then, they felt it was insufficient. There was not a single interview subject who felt adequately prepared for teaching students with anxiety. Even educators with more than 15 years of experience expressed not feeling “particularly equipped” (Selma).

The next big challenge had to do with information sharing. The way in which subjects had been notified about students with diagnosed anxiety disorders fell under two categories; official documentation of which they were notified, or a complete lack of information and notification. Educators in the K-12 grade range mostly were notified of the existence of IEPs and/or 504s, so they knew of learning challenges and in some cases, the strategies being utilized to meet them. However, this was not always the case, as an unfortunate pattern arose. The first instance in which this lack of notification appeared was during Beth’s interview: “I’m not notified as a teaching artist in public schools. That’s information I have to seek out…I don’t have access to anybody’s IEP.” This didn’t seem like it should happen based on information from the U.S. Department of Education, but it’s a situation that arose more than once. “I got… under-the-table information, but I could not…view, like, an IEP” was Allan’s reply when the topic was brought up. It came up again in Ramona’s interview later on: “I am…not allowed to see IEPs…so they say, I don’t know…I am not notified by anyone other than the student, usually.” These three cases all occurred at different elementary schools in Massachusetts. Upon researching laws and regulations regarding IEPs and 504s for that state, the problem seemed to come down to the wording of the regulations. Visiting teaching artists would “have access only to the student record information that is required for them to perform their duties” (Mass. Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018, 2022). There is no information given on *what* is considered need-to-know, or by whom the distinction is made. The challenge this presents

was made clear when Beth illustrated a situation she'd faced where it was revealed to her that a student she'd been struggling to get to participate in scenes or activities was, in fact, selectively mute. This information was in the student's IEP and 504. Imagine putting in the time and effort to set up a learning plan for a student to help them succeed, and then not making it available to visiting teachers. Not only does this hinder the educator's attempt to include and educate everyone, but it puts the student in a position where their needs may not be met or even considered.

There was another issue that covered a wide array of circumstances: triggers, stressors, and unpredictable panic events. None of these specific situations were experienced by more than one educator. The unfortunate nature of triggers is that oftentimes educators don't become aware of them until the triggering event occurs. One instance of this occurred when the cartoon character Peppa Pig was used to encourage a student to participate (Peppa being their favorite cartoon character). Unbeknownst to the educator, Peppa Pig was a trigger for another student in their class.

In another situation, a community college educator had students who came from a high school where they experienced an act of mass violence. This necessitated a level of care surrounding any scenes with violence, especially involving firearms. They also made sure to stay on top of active shooter drills and made sure the affected students were aware ahead of time and given the option to not be present. That same educator was teaching chokes in a stage combat class with a different group when a student had a psychotic break and unlocked repressed memories of past trauma. Another educator talked about an actor informing them at the beginning of rehearsal that they had someone who needed to be allowed into the rehearsal because the actor was currently on suicide watch. Fortunately none of the students mentioned above suffered permanent harm during these situations.

The subjects also had many great pieces of practical advice. "Classroom culture" was mentioned multiple times, Ethan going so far as to say "classroom culture is one of the single greatest things that we can think about." Subjects spoke of creating a supportive environment where there was no stigma around anxiety, and giving students an easy way to remove themselves if they were experiencing panic events. This supportive environment was also utilized in acting exercises to minimize performance anxiety (or stage fright). Jeremy expressed a movement

away from “judging” the acting of students and putting more value on their experiences in the moment:

> I've gotten away from constructive feedback. It's mostly “that was wonderful. What are your thoughts?” So, we're not building a culture of me knowing more than anybody; we're not building a culture of being—having correct answers. We're building a culture of “what were your experiences, what data did you get about yourself?”

This is easier done in a college setting than a K-12 environment where technical instruction is vital.

The subjects were split on the best way to handle the posting of the cast list. In the K-8 grade ranges, it was consistent that everyone would be cast in some capacity. From high school and up, it varied. Two subjects preferred personal communication through either email or phone call. Two subjects posted cast lists on Friday afternoon to give people time to process it over the weekend. Selma considered posting to the theatre Facebook page but said that “the stuff that lives on social media seems like it can spiral. It can actually get bigger if other people comment …and it also never goes away.” Ethan also had a negative experience posting to Facebook, saying his group had “some issues with…toxicity around posting a cast list online and then people like…like texting their friends, texting other people or posting wrong things, it was weird and gross.” This particular piece of theatre culture seems to be gradually transforming, so there’s no real iron-set perfect way to do it at this time. Each of the educators interviewed voiced a desire for training in this subject.

## CONCLUSION

Selma put it best when she said that a lot of the job had become “attending to the mental health needs of students, and…having to weed through some of that before we're even able to get to the work.” This is not an isolated situation; all theatre educators are being left in charge of student mental health, to some extent. Through this study, the overarching theme was that educators have not been sufficiently trained for issues around student anxiety. The educators who handle it best have had to self-educate at their own cost (of both money and time), or draw on personal experience. This study is the beginning of a larger

conversation that will necessitate further research. Factors that should be addressed in the future include cultural norms related to ethnicity, financial standing of student population, curriculum of master's programs, state and district regulations, and the input of mental health professionals outside of the education sphere. Anxiety disorders are not going to disappear from the classroom, in fact, the evidence suggests their presence will continue to increase (Osorio, 2022). If mental health issues are going to continue to be entrusted to theatre educators, it's time for formal training to be provided.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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David Logghe earned his MA and MFA in Theatre Education and Applied Theatre from Emerson College. He earned his BA in theatre with

a minor in English Literature and Composition from Eastern Washington University. In between his times attending college, he lived as a working actor in the Spokane/Coeur D'Alene areas of Washington and Idaho. Through his research, he hopes to make theatre more accessible to students with mental illness (students suffering from anxiety being his main focus).

**ArtsPraxis**
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# Arts Integration: A Proposal for Transformative Education Reform and Critical Pedagogy in New York City Public Schools

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92NY

## ABSTRACT

*In a post-pandemic world, what can education look like? What can arts integration offer as a transformative education reform in New York City? As a former NYC middle school dance teacher, current Director of Education in Musical Theater, and daughter of arts educators, I've seen the benefits of arts integration first hand where student engagement increases, and students achieve better academic results. The following article details New York City schools chancellor's desire to change the reading curriculum and start a "massive turnaround" in New York City schools. It highlights the latest state test scores and reading curriculum overhaul, and instead calls for a more transformative education reform by using the National A+ Schools Program model, offering not just a new curriculum model but an arts-based pedagogy as well. The National A+ Schools Program is research-based with proven results for nearly 30 years, and while it will not be easy, it is certainly possible.*

## INTRODUCTION

My eighth grade drama teacher used to tease that my family was the VonTrapp family 2.0. Perhaps it is because everyone in my family has some musical ability, or maybe it is because my family sings “Happy Birthday” and Christmas carols in six-part harmony. Either way, I had a very artistic childhood filled with music, dance and theatre. My family is filled with arts educators: my grandparents were music teachers, my dad was a band director, and my mom was a math and music teacher. The arts and education were viewed with equal importance in our family; my mom used to assign my brother and I summer homework in addition to whatever the school assigned. My brother and I both went into artistic fields. He plays French horn and trumpet, and is a budding composer in Nashville. I became a full time arts educator, teaching middle school dance at a charter school in the South Bronx and recently transitioned into a new position as the Associate Director of Education in Musical Theater at 92NY.

During my tenure teaching middle school, I had boots firmly on the school ground, working closely with the non-arts content teachers and serving as an advisor to many students. I was passionate about finding ways to bring content the students were learning in their core classes into my dance lessons. As a form of assessment, I created “Dance Composition Fridays” centered around what we had been learning over the course of the week. I gave my students requirements on specific dance steps that needed to be included, a particular choreographic device or element of dance to use, and how many counts of eight their composition needed to be. As this was a group assignment, I informed my students that the group's work ethic and teamwork would also be considered in this assessment. My students loved it because within the guidelines of the assessment, they had an outlet for a free, creative form of expression. As long as they hit all of the requirements, they could include their current favorite TikTok dance. My classroom was filled with noise in the best possible way: productive, engaged chatter, music and a lot of “5, 6, 7, 8.”

Considering my goal of bringing core content into my dance classes, I expanded the concept of “Dance Composition Fridays” into a week of dance composition related to a curricular novel the students

were reading in English Language Arts (ELA). For example, the 7th grade was reading *The Outsiders*, so concurrently in dance class I created groups and assigned each a different chapter from the book. As a group they had to identify major plot points in the chapter to highlight in their composition, decide which characters each member would be portraying, interpret the chapter through movement, apply a choreographic device, have empathy towards each other's ideas while working together, and complete a self-assessment after the presentation. On presentation day, I invited their core content teachers and the school administrators into the dance classroom to enjoy. I did not realize it then, but I was already implementing part of Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) six facets of understanding. According to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), students have a true sense of understanding if they are able to explain the material, interpret it, apply it, have perspective, empathize, and have self-knowledge. Here, I was not only assessing my students' knowledge and understanding of dance skills and techniques, but also their social-emotional development and interpretation of *The Outsiders*. That particular composition assignment stands out for me not only for the performative and academic outcomes, but also the joy exuding from my students and their teachers.

Fast forward to spring of 2022. With the New York State Math test fast approaching, the school administration was concerned that many of our students would fail the test. My school turned into an "all-math" school for two weeks. Every teacher taught math, except the electives teachers (dance, art, theater, and chess). The electives teachers were responsible for the "Fun Rooms": if the students passed their morning math quiz they could go to a "Fun Room" in the afternoon while the remaining students received more targeted teaching. Leading a "Fun Room" was glorified babysitting and the students could choose to play board games, watch a movie, play chess, or draw. For those two weeks, I witnessed students coming into school tired, lethargic, and mentally spent—not to mention I disliked leading a "Fun Room" because it was unproductive and unengaging for me as a teacher.

Educational theorists including Jean Piaget (cognitive development), Leo Vygotsky (social constructivism), and Jerome Bruner (social-cognitive constructivism) emphasize that "learning is an active rather than passive process" wherein the learner's role is to construct their "own understandings of the world" and "the teacher's role is to facilitate this construction of knowledge in a variety of ways" (Fox, 2016,

p. 27). John Dewey (1959) emphasized the point of learning by doing. Dr. Lynn H. Fox (2016) writes on the theory of motivation indicating that students learn best when intrinsically motivated and feel they can successfully achieve the task or objective assigned. That said, students are not intrinsically motivated to learn a new math skill, let alone even come to school. Teachers have to create what my former assistant principal used to call “buy-in” in order to engage students thereby motivating them to learn.

My mom was a Florida public high school math teacher and, at one point in her career, was teaching students at the lowest academic level. My mom, being the creative person she is, taught the most engaging and active math classes. I was in elementary school at the time—so not in her high school math classroom—But hearing about her lessons has had such an impact on me that I am able to recall it in detail today. My mom had the students count their steps as they walked the perimeter of the school to identify perimeter and learn how to calculate area. Since she also had many athletes in her classes, she took them to the basketball court to learn fractions. The students took ten shots, counted the number of hoops made out of ten, simplified the fraction, and converted it into decimal and percentage. The most memorable was when she taught the metric system by rewriting the lyrics to DJ Casper’s “Cha Cha Slide” with her students. The students worked together in small groups, writing lyrics describing complex metric conversions, and the hops and stomps became the number of times you moved the decimal point. By the end, she had the whole class dancing the “Metric Slide”—the school principal even joined in! In this way, teaching and learning math can be what Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, and others refer to as an “active process.” My mom gained her students undivided attention with productive buy-in by incorporating their interests into the lessons thereby intrinsically motivating them to learn by doing, construct their own sense of understanding, retain the material, and feel successful in the process.

Teaching and learning can be joyous and innovative; it can be infused with arts-based learning tools so that students can gain multidimensional levels of knowledge, demonstrate their understanding of a particular topic using various artistic strategies, while teachers can grow in their own professional development and meet the needs of diverse learners in their classrooms. What I am referring to is arts integration.

## DEFINING ARTS INTEGRATION

The Arts Education Partnership (2018) defines arts integration as "a holistic approach to educating students that involves incorporating arts competencies into other core school curricula." Additionally, The Kennedy Center in the U.S. (n.d.) views arts integration as "an approach to teaching in which students construct and demonstrate understanding through an art form. Students engage in a creative process which connects an art form and another subject area and meets evolving objectives in both." For clarity, core curriculum, as defined by the International Bureau of Education, is as follows:

> The body of knowledge, skills and attitudes expected to be learned by all students, generally related to a set of subjects and learning areas that are common to all students, such as languages, mathematics, arts, physical education, science and social studies (n.d.).

For the purpose of this article, I use "core curriculum"/"core content subjects" to mean: math, science, English language arts, and social studies.

## ACADEMICALLY SPEAKING

When I was teaching at the middle school level, the teachers and administrators were very determined to catch students up from the learning loss that had taken place over the course of the pandemic. If it was not "catch up time," then the energy in the school was very much centered around test-prep. Even as the dance teacher, I would think to myself, "to what end is my purpose as an educator to 'catch my students up' and prepare them for tests?"

*The New York Times* (2022) published the 2022 reading and math state test scores across the nation which showed very few states reaching 42% proficiency in either subject. The scores dipped between 4th and 8th graders with higher scores among the 4th graders. In New York State, 28% of 4th graders and 28% of 8th graders are proficient in math; 30% of 4th graders and 32% of 8th graders are proficient in

reading.[1] The New York City Department of Education (2022) reports 37.9% of students in grades 3-8 are proficient in math and 49% of students in grades 3-8 are proficient in English language arts (ELA). Based on these results, I am more astounded that 62.1% of New York City students in grades 3-8 are NON-proficient in math and 51% of New York City students in grades 3-8 are NON-proficient in English Language Arts (ELA).

In May of 2023, the New York City schools' Chancellor, David C. Banks, stated that he intends to change the reading curriculum for New York City schools for the coming year. Banks realized that half of the city's children are not proficient in reading and apologized, saying, "It's not your fault. It's not your child's fault. It was our fault. This is the beginning of a massive turnaround" (as cited in Closson, 2023).

The "massive turnaround" Banks refers to means that over the next two years, New York City schools will adopt one of the following three curricula as selected by their district superintendents: Wit & Wisdom, Expeditionary Learning, and Into Reading (Closson, 2023). A recent study from the New York University Metro Center (2022) found that the Into Reading curriculum was culturally destructive in representation, social justice, and teacher's materials. For a segregated school system[2] like New York City, that does not sound like the best option or choice, and it is concerning that it was listed as one. Frankly, the Into Reading curriculum sounds more like a turn*back* than a turn*around.*

If Banks wants to make a "massive turnaround," he should consider the research from the Center for Education Policy Research (CEPR) at Harvard University (2019) that shows curriculum usage alone does not improve student achievement. As the CEPR faculty director and study lead Tom Kane (2019) points out:

> Some leaders may see the adoption of a new curriculum as an 'easy, inexpensive and quick' alternative to more controversial, expensive, or time-consuming policies such as teacher evaluation or classroom coaching. It may be a mistake to think of curriculum choice and teaching reforms as alternative ways of improving student outcomes. Rather, to gain the benefits of either, districts

[1] The testing data for New York City is open and available to the public on the New York City Public Schools website.

[2] An in-depth data report on New York State's segregated school system, written by John Kucsera, can be accessed on the Civil Rights Project website.

> may need to do both (para. 8).

Curriculum is only as good as its user. How the curriculum is being taught for any given subject is just as important as the curriculum itself. Consider this: if there are four classrooms all learning the exact same curriculum, but one classroom has higher data results than the other three, it may be that the data is related to how the curriculum is being taught. What New York City needs is a new pedagogy in order to see any "massive turnaround." Educators need a new pedagogical language in order to properly prepare students for careers in the 21st century and beyond; careers that require creative and innovative thinking. Author Daniel Pink stresses skills needed in a future job market include "empathy, knowledge of design, ability to think outside the box, independent/creative thinking" (as cited in Mardirosian & Lewis, 2016, p.4). Pink asserts that arts are fundamental rather than ornamental; affirming "the arts are essential to building the cognitive skills our kids will need to flourish in the 21st century" (as cited in Mardirosian & Lewis, 2016, p.4). In this post-pandemic world we have the opportunity to do something radical (dare I say "woke?"). Instead of simply introducing a new reading curriculum, Banks should mandate the use of arts integration to create a more holistic educational experience in every New York City public school. It is a huge undertaking, and as the former Producing Director of StageOne Louisville Children's Theatre, Moses Goldberg (2006) points out:

> In order to implement arts in the schools, educators need a clear understanding of *how* the arts can be implemented…there is still little understanding of *what* precisely needs to be done. If a school district made the decision to fully integrate arts as a core area in the curriculum, how exactly would they do it? Who would be responsible? How much would it—should it—cost? (p. 25).

Goldberg (2006) proposes a "three-legged stool" approach, based on an earlier publication from the Arts, Education and Americans Panel, *Coming to our Senses: the Significance of the Arts for American Education.* The three prongs of the three-legged stool are: arts instruction, arts processes incorporated into the classroom, and arts experiences. The first leg, arts instruction, is simply instruction in any of the major art forms, with advancement opportunities as students age

from middle to high school level. For many, this takes form as an elective. The second leg, arts processes (or arts integration) would involve classroom teachers utilizing "the mental processes integral to the arts as part of all of their classroom management and instruction" (Goldberg, 2006, p. 27). The third leg, arts experiences, consists of taking students to artistic experiences outside of the classroom, such as museums, performances, concerts, etc. I propose using a proven model that already uses this three-legged stool approach, and has been tested for nearly 30 years: The National A+ Schools Program.

## A+ SCHOOLS

The National A+ Schools Program is a research-based reform strategy for whole school transformation that began in North Carolina in 1995 and has grown to reach schools in other states as well as South Africa and Switzerland. The A+ Schools program believes that the arts are fundamental to teaching and learning. The curriculum is collaborative and taught through multi-disciplinary integration; it functions both as arts integrated into core content and core content integrated into arts content classes.[3]

The transformation model is designed as a three-year implementation process and requires the commitment of the entire school, including administration and operations. The model involves summer intensive training, professional development throughout the year, and bi-annual A+ Leadership Meetings for administrators and coordinators. As an A+ School, daily instruction looks vastly different from other school models. For example, in a lesson where students were learning about the Sistine Chapel, a picture worksheet was attached underneath the desks and students became young Michelangelos, lying underneath the desks, painting their own work (NCArts, 2022). In this manner, students are not just learning facts about history, they are engaged in it. To illustrate how multi-disciplinary the instruction can be, science classes can learn about forces in motion through dance while dance classes learn about the science of forces in motion (NCArts, 2022). Consciously or not, the A+ School model connects with Goldberg's three-legged stool concept:

[3] A more in-depth history of the National A+ Schools Program can be accessed in this A+ Schools timeline.

1. Arts Instruction: Students of an A+ School participate in arts classes.
2. Arts Processes/Arts Integration: Core content teachers are infusing arts processes and skills into their content lessons and providing students with various ways to learn and understand the material.
3. Arts Experiences: Teaching and professional artists come into the school to expose students to artistic fields and professions. Additionally, students are able to experience the arts on school field trips to museums, galleries, and performances.

Being research-based, the A+ Schools model has hard and soft data showing the positive impact of arts integration. A study by Thomas & Arnold (2011) found that when it comes to academics, students in A+ Schools performed at comparable rates to students in public schools, suggesting the additional time spent in arts competencies did not take away from core content learning. However, a case study conducted by the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2014) found more positive impacts of the A+ Schools model at three schools in North Carolina: students developed individual strengths and intelligences, gained critical job skills, and took ownership over their work. A teacher at Bugg Elementary (one of the schools involved in the case study) reported:

> I feel like our school is committed to A+. I love seeing students who often have behavior issues in a regular classroom setting thrive when using their “body smarts.” I think that the essence of A+ is celebrating the differences in people. Those differences are not focused on socioeconomic status or intelligence; rather they focus on the differences in learning styles. No one is deemed stupid or unable to learn—instead they are celebrated for having different styles and challenged by other people’s styles (as cited in North Carolina Department of Cultural Resource and North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014, p. 8).

The principal at Bugg Elementary commented on the improvement in test scores: “Our test scores go up by pouring on the arts. We doubled the specials last year and our scores went up 14% with the most growth

in math and science" (as cited in North Carolina Department of Cultural Resource and North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2014, p. 15). Throughout the case study, teachers champion the use of diverse learning pathways and the academic results they are seeing in their students. The teachers have noticed their students independently making connections between the core content and arts content as well. The A+ model connects to Wiggins and McTighe's (2005) six facets of understanding, referenced earlier. Wiggins and McTighe (2005) identified that students have a mature understanding of a given topic when they can explain, interpret, apply, and empathize, as well as have perspective and self-knowledge. Expressing knowledge through the arts demands a robust understanding beyond simple recitation of rote facts; interpretation, perspective, and empathy are hallmarks of the arts, and the iterative creative process demands constant exploration on a topic. Through the use of artistic processes, students are naturally utilizing all six facets and teachers are better able to assess the level of understanding in their classrooms.

## EDUCATING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY AND BEYOND

Moses Goldberg (2006) posits that we have to decide if we are educating students for the world we live in today, or if we are educating students for an unknown future. This affects the decision of arts in education. If we choose to educate students for a future we do not know, arts integration would assist by offering outlets for critical thinking, innovation and creativity (p. 23). Arts integration has been practiced, studied and theorized for decades and there is an extensive amount of research outlining its benefits over time. As mentioned in the research put together by the Arts Education Partnership (2017), the arts support the development of what is referred to as deeper learning skills. Deeper learning skills, as outlined by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (2013), include:

1. master core academic content
2. think critically and solve complex problems
3. work collaboratively
4. communicate effectively
5. learn how to learn
6. develop academic mindsets

These deeper learning skills relate to Wiggins and McTighe's six facets of understanding and also connect to the job skills employers look for in college graduates. A recent *Forbes* article highlighted the in-demand skills needed for jobs in 2030 including critical thinking and analysis, creative thinking, emotional intelligence, and lifelong learning (Marr, 2023). In other words, a robust arts integrated education reform would help students succeed in future careers and in life, not just academically in the here and now.

David C. Banks says he wants to change the reading curriculum and start a "massive turnaround" for New York City students, but a new reading curriculum alone will not create a "massive turnaround." Rather, Banks should call for a new pedagogical approach in New York City schools and mandate the use of arts integration in every New York City public school. By infusing the arts into core curriculum, Banks could aid in increasing literacy skills, advancing math skills, helping students develop critical thinking, improving school culture, and so much more. While it is daunting to take on such a task, it can be done by using the National A+ Schools Program model. The National A+ Schools Program model has longevity and proven effectiveness in schools on a global scale and could be readily implemented in New York City schools. With the introduction of arts integration, students will gain a multidimensional understanding of the topics they learn in school and teachers will reach the diverse learners in their classrooms. Furthermore, exposure to the infinite creative process will develop a student's lifelong academic appetite. With arts integration, students will graduate with hierable and lifelong skills needed to take on the future. Arts integration is the massive turnaround that New York City so desperately needs to radically transform its educational outcomes. Students and teachers deserve better, and it's within our grasp.

## SUGGESTED CITATION

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