Nurturing Civic Dispositions in a Participatory Theater Space

Praxis Project Thesis: Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts — as part of the Community, Youth, and Education Studies Major at Clark University

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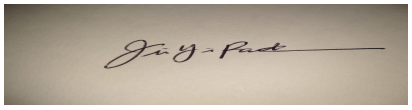

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Acknowledgements

With a thesis so centered around relationship and interdependence, I would be remiss not to acknowledge all the people in my life who contributed to the creation of this thesis.

Firstly, there are many people who contributed directly to my landing on this particular thesis. My forever inspiration: my parents who I thank for exposing me to theater and art and activism and organizing and community throughout my entire life. Later in life I was inspired Mino Lora and Cara Berg Powers who ignited and fueled so much of my thinking about community and change.

To Calla, who despite her lack of interest in theater, volunteered to join me in conducting 10 sessions of silly games and improvisation. I am beyond grateful for Calla's insight and friendship. She is the coolest sophomore ever and I wouldn't have asked for any other partner on Saturday afternoons in JC 217.

To Eric and Jie, my professors and constant mentors. I am beyond grateful that I ended up in the magical major of CYES. Thank you for all the wisdom and encouragement over the last few years. To Jie, thank you for setting me up on this journey in the Spring of 2025 and for being so very generous to purchase the beloved snacks that we enjoyed each Saturday. To my advisor, Eric DeMeulenaere, for being a constant cheerleader and coach throughout the bulk of this process. And for pulling me across the finish line until the very end.

To my praxis cohort, these last 18 months have been filled with laughter, tears, and so much growth. I am endlessly proud of all of us and so grateful to have been on this journey alongside each of you.

And finally, to the kids of Rise Up for everything that they taught me. Without them, I would have learned nothing. Their eagerness and excitement to participate in games and

activities and their willingness to get to know me in a strange and unfamiliar place was appreciated and will never be forgotten.

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Abstract

This project explored the impact of an out-of-school time theater program on the development of civic dispositions in youth participants. Drawing on Augusto Boal's (1973) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, as well as my own experiences as a performer and educator, I piloted a 10-week theater program for upper elementary and middle school students (ages 9-13). The program used theater exercises and creative activities to help young people develop both intra- and inter-personally, nurturing their civic capacity and relational abilities. Grounded in participatory and anti-adultist methodologies, the project facilitation centered youth voice and emphasized relational and creative approaches to civic learning. I collected data in the form of interviews and observational field notes, focusing on the youth and their pre-existing knowledge, opinions, and actions. Through analysis of my observations and the youths' reflections, I found that theater practices can in fact nurture in young people a confidence and heightened relational capacity that contributes favorably to their civic dispositions. Findings revealed how theater can serve as a tool for building civic dispositions among elementary-aged students in an out-of-school-time program.

Civic Engagement as Performance and Performance as Civic Engagement

Halfway through high school, I volunteered for my first political campaign. The candidate was Mino Lora—a Dominican-American mom, immigrant, nonprofit theater founder, and my first-grade drama teacher—running for office against an establishment-backed opponent. Mino explicitly connected her campaign to her theater background because she saw theater as a tool for political imagination and collective action. As a campaign volunteer, I knocked on doors and adapted my messaging depending on who answered. I started to see how civic engagement was itself a kind of performance: relational, improvisational, and dependent on connection with others. That's when I got the idea to write my college application essay about my experience on that campaign. What follows is an excerpt from that essay.

> *Standing in the Bronx Ale House after a 12-hour day campaigning in my home borough, we felt gleeful knowing the polls closed; our work was done. [...] We'd worked for weeks knocking on doors, calling voters, and holding rallies; the election was now out of our hands. This collective gratitude reminded me of something I experienced before: the talented individuals who poured their hearts into this project felt like my fellow actors in a play, and this was our cast party. [...]*
>
> *After knocking on hundreds of doors, refining a Mino elevator pitch which I adapted depending on the neighborhood I was in and who came to the door, I noticed the performance of campaigning when engaging with voters. I used skills I practice in drama class to keep people at the door for longer. As Mino said in an interview,*
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> > *"Theater is an activist's tool; it's an organizing tool. In order for us to create something different we need to imagine it first."*

Performing and campaigning seek to inspire a community. But just like theater, politics isn't solely win or lose. We measure success through connections formed with the audience. Mino didn't win, but that doesn't mean we didn't succeed. The connections we made reminded me of connections I've been able to make throughout years of performing.

It wasn't a completely new idea to me that theater is a tool for social change. I've been reflecting on this idea for many years, and actually wrote a high school application essay (I went to school in New York City, where everyone had to apply to their high schools) on a similar theme, highlighting what I had learned from theater. When I volunteered on the city council campaign of my first grade drama teacher, it really started to sink in and I realized this was going to be something that would follow me.

As I reflect on my own educational journey I see how my ideas have been building all along. The throughline is clear: I believe in the transformative power of youth, and I believe in the power of performance to bring communities into dialogue and action. I believe theater is a powerful tool for practicing the kind of imagining we need to do in order to build the kind of world we want to live in. As Mino said during her campaign, "Theater is an activist's tool; it's an organizing tool. In order for us to create something different, we need to imagine it first."

During the Spring semester of my junior year I took a Problems of Practice course called Civics in Action with Prof. Cara Berg-Powers. There were about 28 of us in the class, including five high school students from University Park Campus School. Through their stories, I learned first hand of their experience in Worcester Public Schools and participation in civic action projects. In 2018 Massachusetts state legislature passed the Act to Promote and Enhance Civic

Engagement reinforcing the civics requirement in grades K-12, and introducing a new student-led, non-partisan civics project for students (Senate, No. 2631).

This prompted me to get curious about how educators, in and out of Massachusetts can get creative in implementing authentic civics instruction. Growing up in theater, I experienced firsthand how transformative it can be in developing a young person's sense of self, belonging, and understanding of working as an ensemble. As I've studied both education and theater at University, it has become clear to me that theater will be part of my teaching practice, wherever that may be. This research became a space for me to explore the ways that elementary school students engage with civic skills through participation in theater-based exercises and activities.

Theory of Change

I believe meaningful social change begins with a collective reimagining of what could be. Our ability to imagine—and to do so in collaboration—depends on the kinds of narratives that shape our collective memory. When histories are hidden or erased, it becomes harder to dream beyond the world we've inherited. Framed by my understanding of inequality, I see social change as possible when people are equipped with the tools to envision the world they want to live in and empowered to author their own narratives. I believe theater is one such tool: a space where imagination, memory, and agency intersect to make new futures feel possible.

I want to support young people in understanding how to harness their power and intelligence collectively. If students in elementary school can understand that our freedom and well-being is intertwined, we will have more just societies with more engaged citizens. Once we realize that the overall wellbeing of the collective is dependent on the wellbeing of each individual that makes it up, we have an intrinsic desire, and also need to care for the broader

well-being. This interdependence goes both ways in that contributing positively to the greater good also fosters intrapersonal growth and a better understanding of the self.

I often run into tension when I think about how I'm best positioned to promote social change. Do I want to work within the systems I'm critical of, or work against them to reduce the harm they cause? My experiences—especially during my time at Clark—have shown me that both approaches are necessary. One can't exist without the other. Leaning into this tension, I see theater as a medium that moves us beyond reform and resistance, opening space to reimagine our world.

(Positive) social change occurs when the status quo is challenged by people who come together equipped with the tools to imagine a better world and an understanding that their liberation is intertwined. We are best suited to make change by building power from the ground up, where the "ground" is society's young people. By re-entering the school system as a classroom teacher, I hope to give kids the trust and opportunity to develop their critical consciousness. Productive social change can happen when decisions are made by all relevant stakeholders. No one is more relevant than the young people of our societies.

Action Plan

My praxis project is rooted in a belief that we need to radically reimagine how we approach civic learning, especially with young children. I believe theater can support that reimagining. It is a space where collaboration, storytelling, and visioning futures are central. It gives young people a chance to take risks, work in ensemble, explore identity, and practice making change—all through creative, collaborative, and embodied means.

For my praxis project, I designed and implemented a theater-based pilot curriculum for elementary school students (ages 9–13), held weekly on Saturdays at Clark University's campus. The program used theater exercises and creative activities to explore how young people develop relationship-building, problem-solving, and critical thinking skills, while also practicing collective dreaming toward a more just future.

Throughout the program, we focused on building and sustaining a strong sense of community within the group. Participants got to know themselves and one another through theater games, ensemble work, and reflective dialogue. We engaged in silly improvisation exercises, discussions about community, power, and the futures we want to create, while also reflecting on experiences both in the program and at school. As the group grew together, we collaboratively devised an original creative work to be shared with others beyond the program—an expression of our learning, dreaming, and collective vision.

I believe that through participation in this program, the youth will practice relationship building skills that can be taken beyond the confines of this program, as I did from my own childhood theater experiences. My focus was not on instructing the youth participants to be actors ready for Broadway and Hollywood, but to develop in them - through theater and dialogue - skills, capacities, and dispositions that will nurture the capacity young people already have to engage actively in civic life.

I refer mainly to "dispositions" rather than skills to reflect not only isolated action, but a broader stance and orientation toward the collective. Rather than measuring the growth of the participants through traditional static outcomes, this qualitative research examines dynamic shifts in participants and their engagement with the space. Evidence of this transformation appears

when youth are vulnerable and willing to show up as their authentic selves, and when a group culture is formed through authentic interpersonal connection.

Research Questions

This praxis research explores how theater can serve as a tool for nurturing civic dispositions among 9-13 year-old young people in an out-of-school-time program. Grounded in participatory and anti-adultist methodologies, the project centers youth voice and emphasizes relational and creative approaches to civic learning. As I facilitated this project I collected observational field notes and interviewed the youth participating in the program to answer the following research questions:

- What is the impact of an out of school time theater program on developing civic readiness skills among elementary school students?
- What do the youth learn about themselves and each other as a result of the theater program?
- What will I learn from the young people as we work together on a theater project?

Review of the Literature

Despite the influence of Augusto Boal's, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1973), there is not a large amount of research on the impacts of his pedagogy with elementary-aged participants. There seems to be more research with youth on the impacts of theater used in educational contexts with strictly academic goals, than explicitly for civics or consciousness-raising purposes. There is some literature which explicitly makes the connection between theater and civics (Minillo & Baccarini, 2021; Hallgren & Österlind, 2019), however there is even more

literature which may not explicitly use the word “civics” but still write of skills and concepts that align with civic attitudes (Bhukanwala, 2014; Anderson, 2012; Dobson & Stephenson, 2019; Wells et. al, 2023).

To situate my research, I drew from three bodies of literature: research on civic skill development in young people, scholarship on theater and civics, and broader studies on theater-based learning. Across these areas, several themes consistently emerge related to agency, collaboration, critical thinking, and sense of self.

In this review, I synthesize how overlapping concepts demonstrate the efficacy of theater-based practices in nourishing the civic attitudes of young people through the development of specific skills and dispositions. Through analysis of the literature, I have identified the central skills that I have found present across the areas of my literature review.

Youth Civic Development

Children begin engaging in civic life long before they receive formal civics instruction. Through everyday interactions, they construct their own understandings of community, justice, and participation (Yoon, 2020) – yet traditional civic education often overlooks these early meaning-making processes, narrowly defining citizenship in ways that obscure justice-oriented civic development (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Civic learning in childhood has traditionally been framed as the acquisition of knowledge about government structures, voting, and individual responsibilities (Niemi & Junn, 1998; National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 2013). Yet growing research shows that young people, including elementary-aged children, engage civically long before they encounter formal civics curricula (Yoon, 2020). Westheimer and Kahne (2004) help explain this disconnect,

illustrating how dominant models of civic education privilege personally responsible forms of participation while marginalizing civic learning that emerges through everyday, relational experiences.

Attending to these early forms of civic engagement requires greater conceptual clarity around the civic skills that children develop through everyday social participation. Yoon (2020) identifies these interactions as "critical conversations, or the opportunities for children to speak honestly about the conditions filling up their everyday lives" (p. 295). Through everyday conversation, young people are nourishing their communication, perspective-taking, and critical thinking skills by externally making sense of both shared and unique experiences with others.

Ata (2019) looks specifically at the school-level factors which promote effective civic education and finds that structured curriculums and standards requirements limit the ability of teachers to create authentic opportunities for civics instruction. Through cross-analysis of existing literature, Ata defines the concepts most present in the various definitions of civic skills to be critique, communication, and collaboration (p. 78). In looking at these skills alongside Yoon's findings, there is clear overlap around communication and collaboration.

Schneider et. al (2023) identify four domains commonly associated with skilled citizenship—political engagement, building an informed community, volunteering, and interpersonal tasks—each of which implies a constellation of underlying civic skills. This research provides useful framing, however it is not without limitations. Using the word "skilled" risks emphasizing individual civic capacity, without acknowledging the external forces that constrict their civic engagement and skill development. Moreover, the term "citizen" itself carries contested and potentially exclusionary implications, particularly in contemporary

educational contexts. What I take from this research are two identified domains that prioritize relational foundations: building an informed community and managing interpersonal tasks.

Through analysis of these articles and in conjunction with my own theories of civic engagement, I find that interpersonal connection is the crux of strong civic attitudes. Through an analysis of these articles, I work from Ata's (2019) definition of civic skills which includes critique, collaboration, and communication. Among these skills, many others exist such as perspective-taking, empathy, confidence, self-awareness, critical-thinking, problem-solving, and more.

Theatre and Civics

Scholarship on arts-based and theater-based pedagogies shows that creative, embodied, and dialogic practices offer powerful opportunities to nurture the skills and disposition associated with civic readiness (Winner & Hetland, 2008; Hallgren & Österlind, 2019; Minillo & Baccarini, 2021).

Minillo and Baccarini (2021) conducted a study with college students that parallels mine in its goal of evaluating the effectiveness of theater as a tool to enhance civic skills, but with college students. Findings showed that the project did in fact succeed in promoting civic values and skills such as criticality, confidence, communication, and self-expression among students and suggests that similar programs modeled after Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) would do the same. I expand on their research with a focus on much younger participants based on the argument that this type of civic education is even more valuable when it is introduced earlier.

Several other studies find that the dialogic nature of Boalian theater activities allows participants to engage in critical conversations (Bhukhanwala, 2014; Hallgren & Österlind,

2019). This not only connects to Yoon's (2020) findings of dialogic civic engagement in early grades, but to Freire's (1970) theory that authentic dialogue in education is what develops a critical consciousness in all participants. Bhukhanwala's (2014) study of a middle school TO program focused on Forum Theatre as a way to draw from students embodied experiences, and then through creative and theatrical means, give them space to embody making the situations just. This study, while not explicitly mentioning civics, does center justice and injustice which are aligned with the civic skills associated with critique and collaboration. Hallgren and Österlind (2019) use Process Drama with the explicit goal of enhancing civic skills in secondary school students. While they did not find their program to be successful in presenting critical questions to the participants, they did find that the dialogue-based drama pedagogy was successful in creating democratic opportunity.

Winner and Hetland (2008) find that visual arts education can develop skills in young people that are critical to their development, but also overlooked by standardized exams, such as visual-spatial abilities, reflection, self-criticism, and a willingness to take risks. I argue that theater works similarly to nourish many of these same skills which align with those identified in the previous section to be civic skills. Reflection is crucial to critical thinking and the collaboration required of performance as distinct from traditional visual arts only adds opportunity for students to practice working with others.

Theatre-Based Learning

There is a broader category of scholarship written on theater-based education for the purposes of developing more academic skills both in and out of the classroom. While not directly connected, this literature is relevant to my research focus as these articles have overlapping

concepts with the civic concepts I am exploring and can deepen my understanding of the power of theater in promoting change.

For example, Anderson (2012) looks at the influence of Process Drama on developing written language skills in elementary students. While the goals for this intervention were strictly academic, the findings showed that Process Drama builds communication and expressive skills, which are related to the civic competencies discussed above. This is significant because it tells us that theater can develop confidence in public communication and expression of ideas, a crucial quality when working towards collaborative action and building on the civic development outlined above.

In another case, Wells et. al (2023) investigate how Process Drama in primary school can contribute to the development of holistic empathy, a pillar of all three of the civic skills highlighted by Ata (2019), communication, collaboration, and critical-thinking. The research finds that by providing participants with "collaborative and embodied experiences," Process Drama does help participants make sense of the world and understand the perspectives of others, crucial abilities for critical thinking and collective action (Wells et. al, 2023, p. 822).

Dobson & Stephenson (2019) write of the benefits for youth engaging in creative and embodied experiences for their literacy development. The benefits include increased agency, problem solving abilities, and engagement in learning, which are not only crucial for literacy development, but are also crucial in the development of civic skills.

Conclusion

This review highlights a growing recognition that young people develop civic identities and capacities long before they are formally taught to do so, and that creative, relational

practices, such as theater and embodied play can serve as powerful tools for supporting this development. While existing scholarship documents numerous benefits of drama in educational contexts, much of it centers on outcomes related to academic identity or classroom-based learning. Far less attention has been given to how creative drama might cultivate agency and civic capacities in young people outside of school environments. And when research does examine this connection, it is universally focused on older youth, in high school or college.

Most of the research focuses on academic skills, but mine focuses on dispositions. By dispositions I mean the stance or orientation with which one approaches the world. A disposition is more about a way of being than it is about the actions taken. While a skill is discrete, and often tied to ability or capacity, disposition is a way of moving through the world based on a set of values. I choose to center my exploration and analysis on how the development of civic skills cultivate a greater civic disposition, or disposition toward the collective.

My research aimed to extend current findings by examining an out-of-school-time program designed to empower youth agency through creative drama activities. Importantly, this work does not position young people primarily as students or performers, but as individuals and community members whose experiences, insights, and developing civic identities matter. As Sharon Bailin (1993) argues, drama instruction alone is not inherently transformative; its potential emerges when it is paired with intentional, rigorous reflection that enables participants to question, expand, and reconstruct their understandings. Following this perspective, my study emphasizes the co-created knowledge generated through guided reflection after drama exercises, exploring how these reflective practices help young people make meaning, take ownership of their experiences, and see themselves as active contributors within their communities. Further, I

have chosen to focus my theater program on students much younger than have been typically studied in the past.

Theoretical Framework

Theatre as Education for Critical Consciousness and Solidarity

Framed by my belief that young people have an intelligence and ability to critically understand the world around them that is systematically diminished, I hope to affect social change by working with youth, centering their knowledge and experiences. There are countless examples of young people leading social change, even in the face of strong opposition and systemic barriers to organizing. As Terry Eagleton writes in *The Significance of Theory* (1990), "Children make the best theorists, [...] Since they do not yet grasp our social practices as inevitable, they do not see why we might not do things differently" (p. 34). The systems which diminish the contributions and perspectives of young people are actually preventing creative and comprehensive social change.

This research was grounded in a youth-focused, participatory framework that reflects my belief that the most meaningful knowledge comes from those directly experiencing the issues being explored. Centering young people as experts of their own lives, my work recognizes their capacity to engage critically with the world and to co-create new understandings. In alignment with Paulo Freire (1970) I believe that education can be a tool for liberation, and in alignment with Augusto Boal (1973), I believe theater is an effective tool which can empower us to develop a critical consciousness of the world around us that moves us to action.

Challenging rigid hierarchies of knowledge production, this work was grounded in the belief that youth bring unique and valuable knowledge and experiences to the group that are

critical to our learning. Paulo Freire (1998) writes, “whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning” (p. 31). In this spirit, I collaborated with the youth participants in designing and implementing the curriculum as we went.

In alignment with my broader theory of change—which positions education as a central tool for social transformation—I believe that knowledge is best created communally and intergenerationally. This approach guides both my research and my pedagogical practice, where I intentionally design learning environments that elevate youth voice and foster collaboration across age groups. My choice to use theater as the central medium is informed by these frameworks. Theater invites collective meaning-making, emotional expression, and the rehearsal of possible futures—all of which align with my belief that education should be liberatory and rooted in joy, creativity, and collaboration.

In particular, it resists adultist assumptions that position adults as the sole knowers and children as passive learners. This informs my decision to create a theater-based program; as Augusto Boal (2002) writes, “theater is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, rather than just waiting for it” (p. 15). Boal’s specific practice of Forum Theatre intentionally disrupts the artificial boundary between the performers and the audience. By engaging in this kind of theater practice, the artificial hierarchies of a traditional classroom environment can also be disrupted.

This contributes to a changing society in three ways:

1. Youth feel empowered by an “adult” centering their experiences
2. Youth share knowledge with one another, building community
3. The “adult” learns from the collective knowledge of the youth

Theater practices, and specifically improvisation, model the kind of relational skills needed for organizing and social change. The improv principle of *Yes, and* teaches values of relational organizing such as active listening, affirmation, and co-creation. It teaches participants to build on each other's ideas with openness and trust—skills essential for fostering the deep relationships that drive collective action and long-term movement building. Often described as the first rule of improv, this "rule" can be applied in a myriad of ways both within and beyond theater. The idea of *Yes, and* is reflected in the work of both Freire and Boal as they emphasize the inherently collective nature of social change and knowledge construction.

Redefining Civic Engagement

My project is grounded in the belief that civic education must go beyond voting practices and knowledge of the Constitution to include a broader set of skills necessary for active and engaged participation in community life. Civic engagement requires the ability to listen, communicate, collaborate, and imagine alternative futures—skills that can be cultivated outside traditional civics curricula. It is also critical to my understanding of civic engagement that it is collective and relational. More than a set of skills, a civic disposition is one that orients us toward the collective. I believe, as Boal does, that theater is one such way we can cultivate this disposition and create space to share stories, explore identity, and collectively build meaning.

My vision of authentic and effective civic education begins in early elementary grades and focuses on the social and thinking skills that promote engagement in community from an early age. I draw on principles of relational organizing, which emphasize the importance of building deep, trust-based relationships as the foundation for collective action and social change. By creating a space where children can express their ideas, experiences, and identities through

performance, I aim to foster their sense of agency and encourage active participation in their communities, not just as individual actors, but in collaboration with others. This approach positions children not just as future citizens, but as current contributors to public discourse, whose voices deserve to be heard and valued. Moving away from phrases like "civic skills" in this paper I discuss how theater practices nurture civic dispositions in young people toward themselves, and toward others.

Methods

Methodology

My research was a qualitative practitioner inquiry study which examined the implementation of a drama-based program with young people aimed to center their knowledge and empower their voices. With the enacting of the theater program, my project became action research that positioned youth as not only participants, but as co-designers and co-knowers.

I engaged in practitioner inquiry research to understand and question my own practice as a facilitator and youth worker to inform my future practices in education. I included the youth in this reflection as well by inviting them to share reflections on our sessions and centering their perspectives as I made sense at every stage of my research. This approach is based on the work of Marilyn Cochran-Smith and Susan Lytle (2009) who pose to educators the idea of "inquiry as stance" such that practitioners examine their practices through intentional and systematic reflection. I took a deep look at the complexities that showed up between my own perceptions of the program, and the perceptions and findings of the participants.

Ultimately, this drama-based methodology is about creating conditions where youth can reflect, take risks, build trust, and imagine change together. Theater is a powerful tool for

this as it encourages relational practices through the development and understanding of characters and the inherent need to collaborate with an ensemble. This research was not just about what youth learned from theater, but what we can learn from youth when we center their experiences, ideas, and capacities in the work of creative civic transformation.

My theory of change is rooted in the idea that education is a space for empowerment, collective inquiry, and civic development. This methodology supports that theory by positioning youth as active participants in their learning and in shaping the civic world they want to live in. By engaging young people in participatory theater, this project creates space for reflection, collaboration, and critical civic imagination. Guided by a practitioner inquiry methodology, this project also opens up my own conditions as the facilitator to build trust, reflect, and imagine change.

This research is grounded in a youth-centered, participatory and practitioner inquiry approach that treats children not as passive recipients of knowledge but as co-constructors of it. By embedding theatrical practices into civic learning, I aim to create a space where students not only develop concrete skills, but also feel ownership over their ideas, identities, and relationships. The methods I have chosen allow me to center the experiences and perceptions of the youth participants by focusing on their reflections and noticings.

Positionality

I am a senior on Clark's campus, and my co-facilitator Calla Stark is a sophomore. We are both students within the education department at Clark. Our situation is unique as Calla and I are a part of Clark's community while the youth participants were not. In this sense, Calla and I are insiders at our site, while the participants were outsiders. This sets up our position as researchers uniquely as we were inviting participants into our space, rather than moving as

outsiders into their space. Within my relationship with Calla, I am more of an insider than she is as this is a project I designed independently, while Calla was brought on at the launch of the program.

Our site is also the city of Worcester, of which Calla and I are both outsiders, having only moved here within the last four years. We also are Clark students before we are Worcester residents which impacts our positionality in the context of this project and with these people, especially considering the history of university research in urban contexts. Being a college student who is not from here made me an outsider in a project where I plan to work with youth residents of the city who are attending school here. Another complexity is surfaced here because while I have facilitated theater programs before, this one was created for the explicit purpose of this research and therefore, mainly for the purpose of my personal betterment. With this in mind, I facilitated a program that centers the knowledge of the participants and allows the youth to engage as co-designers, and even co-researchers.

I am inherently positioned as the "expert" in the space of this project for several reasons. First of all, I am the "adult" in the room as well as the designer and primary facilitator of the program. As strongly as I believe that this program offers immense value to the participants and their families, there is an inherent selfishness in this fact that I am conducting this program for the purpose of furthering my own academic career.

I am further positioned as an "expert" in the space due to my years of experience as a theater participant and student as well as theater practitioner. Simply by launching this program, I am claiming to hold expertise on the topic which then sets an expectation for the group of the content and quality of the program. However, I am still a student and so therefore closer in age to the youth participants than other adults in their life might be. This impacts how the youth see and

engage with me and potentially help them to open up and feel comfortable in the space. My age also contributes to my own insecurities when it comes to leading this program which arose particularly acutely in my interactions with parents.

A crucial piece of my positionality that is specifically relevant to this project is my identity as a Theater Kid. I have been performing since I was eight and instructing theater since I was 14. After attending Frank Sinatra School of the Arts as a drama major in high school, I have performed in shows almost every semester at Clark. 'Theater Kid' is a widely accepted term by youth with a strong passion for not only performing, but consuming musical theater. I was and always will be a Theater Kid, and some of the Rise Up! participants could be described as Theater Kids, although I did not ask them about it directly. Facilitating a program with a group of some Theater Kids and some non-Theater Kids, my own identity as a Theater Kid influenced the way that I related to the youth and therefore developed relationships with them over the course of our program.

Finally, my position as a white Clark student impacts the way that parents perceive me and my doing this project, and also influences the way that the young people connect with me. Further, as a candidate for Clark's Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program I will be student teaching in a Worcester Public School next year and thus my positionality is complicated by the fact that I will soon be a teacher in the schools that some of the youth participants attend.

Site

The weekly theater program took place on Clark's Campus in a classroom (JC 217) on the second floor of a main academic building, Jonas Clark Hall (JC). Each Saturday I would arrive about 30 minutes early to push all of the rolling desks to a corner to create more space for

the group to play. Sometimes I would push all of the chairs out of the way, but other times I left some out in a circle depending on the plan for the day.

Quite different from the environment of JC during the week, Saturday mornings in the building were almost eerily quiet with no one walking past our classroom or making noise in the hallway. This created an intimate feel for our group and gave the youth a sense of comfort, while also granting them some ownership of a space that was new to them. JC is quite an old building which is made clear by the presence of wooden wainscoting and large chalkboards in every classroom. Before the youth arrived, I would often write “Welcome” or “Rise up” in big letters on the chalk board, and almost always wrote out the activities and games that I planned for the day.

Part of the preparatory tasks also included Calla or I grabbing the big boxes of snacks from the first floor and walking them upstairs. Each week I put out various chips, cookies, apple sauce pouches, juice boxes, and cheese sticks for the group to choose from. They were always very very excited about the snacks.

Participants

The primary participants in this research were the youth that participated in our weekly program, as well as Calla and myself as co-participants, and facilitators. The program had 8 participants, all girls between the ages of 9 and 13, who attended a combination of Worcester Public Schools (WPS), charter schools in Worcester, and public schools in neighboring districts. Aside from the 3 non-consenting participants, who all attended the same school, none of the others knew each other before the start of the program.

Through our 10 sessions, we had different combinations of the 8 youth each week, with only one attending every single session. Of the 8 youth participants, 5 assented and had family consent to the research. To introduce the youth who will be mentioned throughout this paper, I will give a brief description of each consenting youth.

Kelly (all names have been changed to protect the identity of the youth) is a tall, white eighth grader and the oldest of the group, attending a local charter school. She participates in many theater activities in and out of school and also competes with a gymnastics team, requiring her to miss almost half of our sessions. She is a strong actor and kind community member who can sometimes be quiet in a group setting but opened up as we played games and got to know one another.

Bella is white and in the fifth grade in a nearby school district and was almost always the first person to arrive at our sessions. She often wore pink and sometimes brought a purse with her containing trinkets and lip products, and was the only one who was present at all 10 sessions. Bella was particularly kind to all of the members of the group, intent on including everyone and making people feel welcomed in the space. When someone would arrive late, she was often the one to fill them in on what we were doing, and if someone didn't have a partner she was quick to welcome them into her group.

Lila, a bi-racial WPS fifth grader, often spoke quite softly but was always eager to share personal anecdotes or ideas with the group. Lila was unique in that she often repeated instructions that I gave to the group to other students, in a constructive, not bossy way.

Eliza is a white sixth grader at a WPS and consistently arrived with wet hair that had “frozen” in transit since the program took place during a very cold winter. She was the one who most frequently brought up musicals such as Newsies and Hamilton.

Ivy is a white seventh grader who attends the same WPS as Eliza, although they didn't know each other before meeting at the program. She often came in wearing band t-shirts and was comfortable sharing stories with the group early on. She plays instruments and really likes music and musicals but is self-proclaimed "not a singer." Almost every session she referenced the musical, Hadestown.

The remaining three participants, who I will not name since they did not consent to participation in the research, all knew each other prior to the start of the program. Two are cousins, the third is a family friend of both, and they all speak Spanish with their families. All three arrived each week with the same parent, who I communicated with entirely in Spanish.

From the very first session it became clear that some of the youth were, as I had written in my field notes that day, "hardcore theater kids," while others seemed to be trying something new by signing up for this program. When I asked about what the group hoped to gain from this program or what they thought they might learn, many students shared that they hoped to develop acting skills that would help them in shows they might be in and help them to get to Broadway one day. The three non-consenting youth were the ones who had the least experience in theater, although they all participated in a dance program and were familiar with the concepts of performing, rehearsing, and working as a team. The other 5 youth (listed above) seemed to have relative experience in theater in varied forms.

Eliza (who chose that pseudonym out of her love for Hamilton) brought up musicals and songs every week during our sessions. When I brought in a speaker and asked the group what songs they wanted me to play during snack, she always suggested musical theater songs, and lots of them. She even suggested that our final performance for families be based on the stories of her favorite musicals. Abby was another participant who clearly had a deep love for and experience

in theater, specifically musicals. She mentioned taking classes at the Hanover Theater and began rehearsals for her school production of Hadestown at some point during our time together.

The distinct theater backgrounds that each of the youth had was exciting to me, but also presented as a challenge for myself and for the program. Observing these distinctions, I knew I would need to be intentional about making the space and activities accessible for all participants, regardless of experience or familiarity.

Data collection

I used three primary methods to gather data throughout the program. The first two were conducted consistently week to week throughout the program. The third method took place in the second half of our program, in February of 2026.

1. Artifact and Document Collection:

   Artifact and document collection consisted of any written reflections, drawings, or scripts created by the participants collectively, or individually that captured their thinking and engagement. These materials provided insight into how participants processed the drama curriculum, responded to activities, and reflected on their own experiences. Artifacts also served as a tool for youth to give feedback and document personal growth over time. Additionally, all lesson plans or materials created by the facilitators of the program were collected and used for the purposes of analysis and evaluation.

2. Field Notes and Journal Reflections

   Both Calla and I captured observational field notes at every session to record what happened. These notes captured observations of group dynamics, questions raised by

participants, notable interactions, and emergent themes. These reflections helped contextualize the artifacts and interviews, as well as track changes in participation, confidence, or group cohesion over time.

3. Audio-Recorded Interviews

   Half way through the program I conducted 30-minute, semi-structured interviews with consenting participants. These interviews explored participants' reflections on their experiences, their understanding of drama education, and any personal transformations or insights gained through the program. In the end I completed four interviews.

In the end, my collected data consisted of two sets of notes from each of our ten sessions, an array of documents/artifacts, and the transcripts of the 4 interviews I conducted. These research methods allowed me to change and adapt our programming as we engaged with the data during the program, and as the youth participants offered feedback.

Data Analysis

These research methods are conducive to my iterative process of data analysis as I collected and analyzed data throughout the process of creation and implementation of curriculum with the youth.

Each week after our session, I looked over the notes that were taken by Calla and myself and reflected on what happened in the form of analytic memos. From those analytic memos I reflect on what content to include the following week and thus, each week is inspired by the data analysis of the week before.

I used manual coding methods to identify themes that influenced how I conducted the following session, and also how I coded the next set of data. This connects to my theoretical framework by positioning the young people as knowledgeable and myself as a learner alongside them. Drawing from my theoretical framework, my coding often centered around themes of agency, collaboration, critique, and disrupted power hierarchies.

Drawing from my theoretical framework which emphasizes the relationality of civic and social life, I coded data to pull out distinct components of the relationships that developed over the course of the program and the youths' own sense of self. I also paid close attention to times that they mentioned applying skills we developed in the program to situations in their lives at home or at school. Through this way of coding and analyzing the data, I was able to develop several insights into the interdependence of individual and collective growth, showing how they constantly inform and reinforce one another.

Findings

In the space we created together, the youth participants were able to show up authentically, develop real relationships learning from one another, and therefore collaboratively make sense of their worlds. I run into tension as I write these findings because the growth that students experienced was not linear, but rather a dialectical relationship between individual (or personal) growth, and interpersonal growth (or growth in their engagement with others). Myself and the youth participants engaged in activities developing relationships that cultivated a deeper civic disposition in all of us. The throughline is how the space that we created around the theater activities and principles made it possible for these interrelated areas of growth.

To contextualize my findings, I begin by outlining the structure and content of the program as I had designed it prior to the launch. I will then go on to detail the program as it was carried out and the kind of community culture that was established in the group over the course of the program. Then I will analyze the growth of the participants and my own growth as the facilitator.

Designing the program: Hopes and Dreams, Plans and Procedures

Before launching the recruitment processes for my program, I developed a detailed curriculum for the 10 sessions I planned to hold. After some deliberation, I landed on Rise Up! as the title for the program. I knew I wanted a name that referenced my intended purpose for the program. To serve as a foundation, I used a recently-published curriculum written by Gopal Midha (2025) framed as a Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) instruction manual for educators. In adapting the curriculum to make my own, I used many of the TO activities

which Midha included, but also supplemented with activities and theater practices from my experience as both an actor, and (theater) educator.

My initial intentions for the content of the program were quite loose because I felt strongly that the content of the program should be co-constructed with the youth as I got to know them. While Boal's theory and practice are very relevant to my work, I did not want my project to focus solely on TO as the only form of theater activities. One reason being that it was not what I am used to instructing, and another was that I wanted my program to mimic a more "typical" theater program to see what findings emerged.

I had many ideas and a large bank of activities from prior theater instruction I have done and felt confident in my ability to draw on this knowledge base as it made sense to do so once the program began. I also wanted to adapt the curriculum to more accurately reflect the typical theater program in order to draw conclusions about what theater can be used for, even when not explicitly implemented with Boalian intentions of facilitating social change. While still including many Boalian activities, I added more general improv activities to Midha's curriculum to observe the growth that a more broad program curriculum might produce.

I planned to loosely follow Boalian theater practices, while centering fun and laughter, following the kids' lead as to what direction each class might take. For this reason, it was helpful to have Midha's curriculum as a guide, but, as she suggests, I took the liberty to move activities around and add ones of my own. As for the supplementing activities, I drew from my experience in a pre-conservatory high school theater program, in improv and acting classes at college, and working as a theater instructor in various youth work capacities. I employed Midha's curriculum and Boal's arsenal of games with a *Yes, and* approach, taking some things, adding games of my own, and relying on the youth to steer us in a new direction.

I did not feel strongly about carrying out the curriculum exactly how Midha had written it originally, or even how I adapted it. I was excited to follow the flow of the youth participants to decide what made the most sense to do each week.

Midha's curriculum and Boal's games that are included in it, puts emphasis on the practice of reflection as a method of knowledge creation. Reflection was important to me as both an opportunity for the youth to deepen their learning and understanding and learn from one another, as well as serve as a method of data collection. After many activities, specifically the TO ones, I planned to facilitate a conversation about what the experience was like by asking questions like, "What did it feel like to do this activity? Did you enjoy the activity? Why or why not? Were any parts of this challenging? What was hard about it?" And then with a youth-centered lens I would follow the conversation where the group guided us.

There were several Boalian activities I knew I wanted to include, as well as some improvisation principles I was hoping we would explore. My intentions were to create a space that would promote the development of the civic dispositions I have been referring to that encompass practices such as listening, risk-taking, personal agency, etc. To understand the thought process behind how the theater space would be conducive to the development of these dispositions, I must first explain the first rule of improvisation, *Yes, and*.

Yes, and encourages actors to agree and build on what their scene partner says, because negating ideas ends up blocking any movement in the scene. This is both a rule of improv, and a concise way of summarizing the benefits I and others argue that improv holds. *Yes, and* does a few things; first, it requires that scene partners listen to one another and add to what is said, rather than critiquing or disregarding it, which promotes collaboration and positive relational dispositions. Secondly, it encourages creativity and unconventional thinking as those

practicing improv are responsible for contributing to the development of the scene in order to keep the story moving, and interesting. Together, the two are constantly reinforcing one another.

Another improv principle with wide reaching implications is *Give and Take.* This refers to the practice of contributing to a conversation/scene, while also making/leaving space for others to add to the scene as well. This principle aligns with one that often appears on classroom community guidelines such as “one mic” or “make space take space.” These improv principles set up the space to be one where risk-taking is encouraged, mistakes are appreciated, and there is no fear of judgement or ridicule. I was curious to see how the youth embodied these improv principles and what connection they were able to make to their lives outside of theater.

To offer some direction and structure for myself, and for the program, and because Midha’s curriculum includes it, I decided we would finish the program with a performance of some sort for the youths' families. I also wanted to explore public product as an element of theater because I wanted to explore confidence, stage presence, and collaboration as the group worked toward a collective/culminating project. I was hoping to see something interesting in the way that they worked together to develop a final product. I even included this point on my recruitment posters (see appendix A) with the idea that it might encourage families to participate. I only had vague ideas of what that might look like, and wanted to keep it that way to leave room for the group to form, gel, and then potentially it magically become clear to me what the final performance should look like.

Midha’s curriculum centers Forum Theater as the main Boalian practice to take place in the final two sessions of the program and to serve as a final performance for the group. This

offered one idea for what our final performance could look like, although never having facilitated Forum Theater, the idea was daunting to me. Because I planned to balance Boalian elements with more general improvisation exercises, I was presented with a different idea of what the final product could look like; I knew that if all else "failed" and no "final product" was created, we could invite the audience to witness a bit of our class as it normally happens, playing games and performing improv.

Collaborative Construction of the Space

I was thrilled when I had about 10 signups just from putting up posters on Facebook and around Worcester, but I was still nervous when it came time for the first session. What if no one showed up? What if I wasn't clear about where to meet? What if the parents were really concerned about the research? What if the kids were mean to each other?

Calla and I arrived early and waited anxiously for everyone to show up. Thankfully 8 youths and their guardians arrived and after some timid small talk we got started with introductions. Once the parents left, we played games and began getting to know one another. For the next few weeks we would continue to construct a community culture while learning about and practicing improv. During our second session we created Community Norms (see appendix B) as a group. This was important to me as theater can be an especially vulnerable space which can offer opportunities for risk taking and interpersonal conflict.

Right away there were some clear social dynamics present amongst the group. The three non-consenting participants all arrived together and were family friends so they often chose to be in groups with one another. Aside from them, none of the other girls knew each other prior to the start of the program. There were some clear Theater Kids who shared a

passion for and intense knowledge of musical theater and got talking about certain shows and songs during snack times. Overall, there was some timid engagement from everyone from the beginning that developed over time as the group got more comfortable with each other, the space, and the activities we were doing.

Social dynamics fluctuated over the course of the program. There was great growth in the cohesiveness of the group over time which was apparent both to me, and the youth participants. Many of them referred to the development over time of friendships and a comfortable environment in their interviews.

Some of my most profound observations came from activities that I hadn't planned to do, but ended up facilitating based on something that I noticed in the kids that day. During our first two sessions the youth talked a lot about school, giving me the idea to facilitate a tableau activity at our third session where the youth used their bodies to express their feelings and opinions about school. We followed the activity with snacks where the group naturally stayed on the topic of school, narrowing the theme of their conversation to focus on disciplinary systems. Inspired by this conversation, I rethought the second half of our program to stay on this theme in the hopes it would be generative. I asked youth to think of times in school where something felt unfair, share with a partner, and then develop a scene to tell one of the stories. Once we presented these scenes, I facilitated some Forum Theater with the scenes, asking students to jump in and take over a character or add a character to make the unjust scene just.

This activity prompted interesting discussion among the group, and also surfaced new ideas about the function of theater as a way for students to embody both oppression and change. There was something special about the way that the kids were empowered by stepping into a scene and changing what they deemed was unfair. Despite the original

curriculum centering Forum Theater towards the end, this was the only day we actually engaged in it. Several kids mentioned these scenes in their interviews both prompted and not, indicating that these scenes were memorable and stuck out among the other experiences.

Curriculum: To Follow or Not to Follow

In conducting the workshop, I planned to develop the curriculum as we went, using what I learned about and from the kids the week before to design the curriculum for the following week. This iterative teaching practice reflects the *Yes, and* framing as I built upon what the group did one week to construct what we might do next week. Despite this fluidity, each session followed a somewhat similar pattern. We always began with physical and vocal warmups before playing some quick and low-stakes theater games. Once we were sufficiently warmed up and loose we would move on to the activities of the day.

About half way through we would break for snack, which often took up about 10-15 minutes of our session, before returning to games and improv to finish out the day. I was always happy to let the kids have snack time to just be, without instruction. It was interesting to see who talked to who, what conversations came up, and it was a useful break during which I could assess the session so far and confirm or change what we were going to do in the second half. As we neared the end of our time together each week, I was very aware of the emotional state of the group and sometimes would pivot to do a final fun game like the ones we did at the beginning to get the group giggling again before the adults arrived in the hallway awaiting pick up. It was important to me that we ended on a high note and the kids left with smiles on their faces for several reasons. Firstly, I wanted the parents to see that the kids were energetic and joyous when participating in the program. For myself and the kids, I wanted to

end on a high note so that in the week before our next session they might think fondly of the last session, and to help with my own confidence and self-esteem. I preferred to end on a silly low-stakes game rather than the larger activity from the session so that regardless of how it went and how the youth engaged, we finished by coming back together and being silly as a group.

Despite designing a full week-to-week curriculum prior to the start of the program, the content of each session was greatly dependent on the week before. At the start, I referred to my adapted curriculum before each session and made a new plan from there, but after the first 3 or 4 sessions, I stopped referring to the document as much. Instead, I focused more on my own reflections of each session to prepare for the next, and took the lessons learned from one session to inform the content of the next. In reflecting on each session, I often made a list for the following week of things I wanted to do, and then created a plan from that list, sometimes in combination with the curriculum I had created. This meant that, as I had intended, I did not end up facilitating all of the activities offered by Midha's curriculum, and focused more on general improv games and theater activities I was used to facilitating.

One game that dominated many of our classes and was thoroughly enjoyed by everyone was a game I had added to the curriculum from my own experience, Scenes from a Hat. In pairs or small groups, participants pick a prompt out of a "hat" that is not really a hat, but a box. They are then tasked with creating a scene inspired by the prompt that was chosen. At first, I organized the game so that each pair or group had about five minutes to come up with a scene and rehearse it before performing it in front of the class. After a few weeks of collaborating on different scenes in different groups, I introduced a new way of playing this game where the improvisers did not have any time to plan the scene before acting in front of

the class. As we got to know one another by playing games and creating scenes, the group dynamic began to switch and a comfortability emerged between participants and the space.

The youth would frequently suggest games they wanted to play, or offer new ideas for ways to play old games in a bit of a different way. This exercise of agency read to me as a level of comfortability with the program and the people that make it up. I also would say that as a practitioner, I made it clear to the youth from the beginning that their opinions were valuable to me and that I took their ideas and suggestions seriously. Suggestions and opinions of this sort were consistently solicited and shared unprompted every single week. It also indicates that one benefit of centering youth voices in this type of programming is an increased level of agency and engagement from the youth.

I grew to rely on the youth and their signs of engagement as helpful guides for my own instruction/facilitation. It was comforting to know that I didn't have to stress about creating the perfect plan for the session, because it would likely change and that would be a good thing. As we chatted casually during our fourth session, someone began to sing and it reminded me of a game I had played with my own improv teacher called Musical Jukebox. The game involves standing in a circle while the players take turns stepping into the middle and singing a song. The circle of people left surrounding them is asked to sing along, dance, and cheer on the person in the middle. This was the first time I facilitated this game and it became one that was frequently requested in the weeks to come. Another example was the request by one participant to play Human Knot, which particularly excited me as that is a game often associated with Theater of the Oppressed (TO).

There were also less explicit ways that I took the lead of the youth when facilitating the program such as noticing their excitement when playing Scenes from a Hat and choosing

to play that game almost weekly. Most of the time I found comfort in leaning into the desires and interests of the kids. I remember articulating to a friend that it took some of the pressure off of me and what I planned when I knew going in that it would almost surely change based on the energy of the room and the engagement of the group.

However there were times when this was challenging, when the kids would ask for something and I was hesitant to agree. One example was their insistence that we go on a field trip to the Clark gym. I was unsure what motivated them to ask for this week after week, I thought maybe they were just excited to be on a college campus. I was resistant to take them on this field trip because I saw it as a distraction from the theater work that I wanted to be doing. I wanted to stick with our theme of theater, while still honoring their desire to see the campus, so I pivoted and suggested we go on a field trip to the theater building. Once I suggested the idea of going to the theater, they stopped asking about the gym.

Building a Culture

Over time I noticed small changes in the engagement of the youth that signified that a group culture was forming. As the sessions went on, youth started asking after absent participants, wondering where they were and curious if I knew when they were going to come back. At our fourth session, and the first one after winter break, the youth with phones shared their phone numbers with one another to be able to keep in touch between our sessions. In the following weeks they occasionally referenced texting one another during the week. One day when Ivy had not yet arrived, Lila took out her phone to text her asking where she was and if she was coming. About 30 minutes later Ivy came in, thanking Lila for reminding her that the program was happening.

During the first several weeks I paid close attention to who chose to work with whom, and tried to find ways to encourage the youth to work in new pairs and groups to see what relational observations might emerge. At the beginning, I let them pick their own partners/groups with the idea it would help them feel comfortable, and also so I could get a sense of who they chose to work with. As the weeks went on, and the group began to solidify, I found ways to get them into different pairings to practice working with people who they did not explicitly choose to work with. The young people noticed a shift too, multiple participants mentioning a change in the group dynamic over time that contributed to a feeling of ease and comfortability.

On our second to last day together, Lila suggested that their parents exchange contact information so the group could stay in touch. “I feel like after this is over our mom’s should get each other’s numbers so we can all hang out [...] Maybe one night if we all get together we can have a girls night” (Field Notes, 14 February 2026). The youth agreed with this idea echoing Lila’s excitement, although to my knowledge, didn’t take action to make it happen.

Youth that were at first very shy and timid, especially when working with those that they didn’t know, grew in their ability to participate fully and authentically with others. At the final session it was heartwarming to see Bella jump up with excitement to greet each person with a hug as they walked in for our performance.

Final Performance

As we got closer to our final session together I began to facilitate brainstorming with the kids to think about what our final performance might look like. Since the Forum Theater exercise from session three was so generative, I suggested that we do something like that and have their families come up and join them on stage. This idea was passionately shut down

every time I brought it up. I think their reaction had to do with the thought of having their parents come up with them on stage but I'm not sure if it was out of embarrassment, or a desire for the attention to be focused on them. We also hadn't done Forum Theater since that session, and so I think also the idea didn't feel as comfortable to them as it might have if we had practiced forum theater more consistently.

We started off with each of the youth designing characters for themselves by drawing a picture, deciding on characteristics, and answering some questions I wrote on the board. Once characters had been created we discussed the setting and conflict, deciding on a story that would allow for Kelly to still be a part of our final performance on show day through the use of videos. The story went that Kelly's character invited friends to her birthday party, but she wouldn't be there when they arrived, leaving them to solve a mystery and try and get along.

It was really exciting to me to see the kids show up in their performance ready attire - whatever that meant to them. Bella came in a "preppy" outfit wearing a black skater skirt, chevron sweater vest, and a leather jacket. She also had some cute and large black maryjane style boots on. She was the first one there, as she often was to our sessions, and went up to excitedly greet each of the other girls as they arrived. Ivy came in next with her mom, homemade brownies in hand. Eliza came in wearing a bright orange t-shirt with sharpie writing all over it, hair wet as it always was when she arrived. We spent an hour practicing the scene and getting accustomed to the new space before welcoming families in.

After spending so much time playing improv games like Scenes from a Hat, the kids had grown to be quite good at improv. I wanted them to show those skills off to their parents in addition to sharing the scene they had planned in the weeks leading up. I realized that the story we had created together, while a good experience, was not necessarily reflective of what

we had been learning and practicing over the 9 weeks we spent together. This was even more apparent after the performance when we got to see the semi-scripted scene side by side with close to ten improv scenes. While their mini-play made sense to me because we had talked about it and rehearsed it during the two weeks leading up, sitting in the back of the audience I realized it might not make much sense to the audience, and the kids were not showcasing the parts of themselves that I had gotten to see during the prior sessions. When we switched to playing Scenes from a Hat, the kids came alive and all the growth they had done during our sessions really shone through.

In what follows, I articulate the manifestations of the culture that was built (as described above) and the impacts it had on the youth participants both from my observations, and the reflections of the young people themselves.

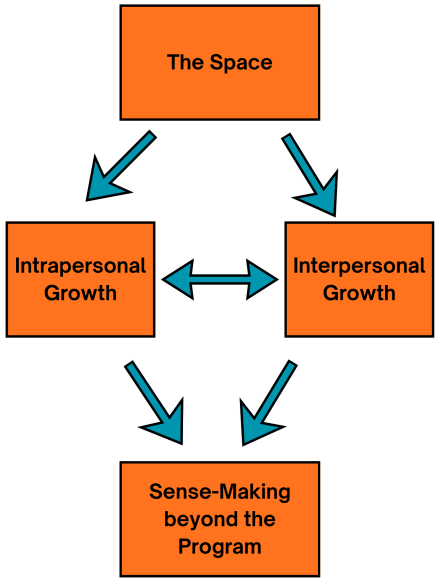
Impact of the Program

The culture that was created due to the nature of the program, made room for both *intra*personal and *inter*personal growth among participants. While at first I was tempted to separate my findings along this artificial distinction, it quickly became clear that that would be an incomplete and unproductive analysis. In reality, the transformation of youths' dispositions was not a linear acquisition of skills, but a *Yes, and*, or reciprocal cycle between intrapersonal growth and interpersonal engagement.

The *Yes, and* culture prompted an internal shift towards vulnerability and authenticity, which was then sustained by the group's commitment to the success of one another. Thus, there existed a cycle where the participants' dispositions toward the self was transformed by their experiences with others. The interpersonal nature of the ensemble acted as a catalyst for further

intrapersonal shifts which, in turn, contributed to a space that was conducive to the development of relational capacities.

In this section, I will explore my findings in greater detail, explaining the areas of growth experienced by the youth participants in three sections: dispositions toward the self, dispositions towards others, and dispositions towards the world. The interconnectedness of these categories make it challenging to write this in a linear way, so I have created a visual to demonstrate how I understand the relationship of each of these categories.



As articulated above, the critical element at the foundation of all changes and growth is the space that we created and through theater games and activities. It is the space that provided room for both intrapersonal and interpersonal growth for participants, which is why it is placed at the top of my diagram. Instead of positioning intrapersonal and interpersonal growth as artificially separate or linear, I choose to focus my findings on the center arrow between the two, exploring how dispositions towards self and others combine to develop in the youth a heightened ability to make sense of the greater world, and their position and ability to make change within it.

The Space

For the youth participants in this program, theater practices served as a catalyst for intrapersonal growth by offering a creative and fun environment for the exploration of identity and agency. In particular, the youth grew over the 10 weeks in their willingness and ability to show up as their authentic selves and engage with the authentic selves of others. The intentional silliness of the theater games we played prompted authenticity among participants, allowing them to unmask and show up as their true selves.

One popular game, Kitty Cat Career, requires participants to sing a silly song and then act out a cat doing a job, only with meowing. The rest of the group is meant to guess the job the person is acting out by shouting "Kitty Cat doctor!" or "Kitty Cat lawyer!", etc. Games like this not only got us giggling, but also instilled a confidence in the young people that they are able to do silly things, without fear of ridicule. Sometimes the group guessed right, and other times they didn't, but the emphasis on silliness over correctness developed in participants a commitment and desire to show up authentically in the space.

Similarly, Scenes from a Hat was a game that required much use of *Yes, and* thus contributing to the development of a space for authentic engagement. This style of improvisational and participatory theater differs from more traditional or scripted youth theater experiences. While alternative theater programming is not without benefits, rehearsal processes for scripted theater can sometimes turn toxic, diminishing the agency or young people, and instilling further fear of failure or judgement.

There are two key distinctions between improv and scripted theater that I will mention as they are relevant to the findings of this research. First, scripted theater requires a level of perfectionism and correctness with pre-written lines and blocking prescribed during the rehearsal

process. Improv on the other hand positions the actor not only as the conveyer of the story, but as the creator of it too. Thus, there is no correct or incorrect way to "do improv," no lines to mess up, creative freedom granted to the performers. The second distinction is that improv is meant to be performed once, in the moment that it is created and never repeated, meaning there is less pressure put on the quality of the scene. In contrast, scripted theater is rehearsed over and over again, often with the intention of giving multiple, impressive performances. This puts a lot more pressure on the performance quality, while not necessarily a bad thing, is distinct from the temporal nature of improvisation.

Through the games, activities, and reflections that comprised the program, a culture of silliness, acceptance, and risk-taking was created by all the participants and their willingness to engage. This created an authentic space where young people felt comfortable exploring themselves and their worlds. This was made clear through my own observations of the group, and the individual reflections of the young people.

Vulnerability

A comment made by Bella during our third session indicated a comfortability in the space that struck me as significant at such an early point in the program. While groups were discussing their unfair moments for our Forum Theater activity, I walked around the room listening in on their conversations. Bella and Lila, noticing that I was nearby and listening, turned to me and we had the following interaction:

Bella: It feels like therapy in here

Devin: (pause) In a good way or a bad way?

Bella: I hate talking about my feelings, but here we feel comfortable to do it.

Lila: Yeah, here we feel comfortable.

(Field Notes, 13 December 2025)

At the moment, this was quite an affirming thing to hear from these young people on only the third Saturday we spent together. In reflection, this interaction holds much more significance. With this comment, Bella was acknowledging the vulnerability she felt engaging in this activity and also pointing out the nature of the group which made her willing to be vulnerable. Bella was able to articulate on the third day a profound noticing about the community that developed just in the first few Saturdays. Her mention of therapy, while in a very distinct setting, also offers the perspective that the work we were doing together was more than theater.

Authenticity

Bella identifies a shift in the group dynamics that occurred as the group got to know one another.

> "… in the beginning, a lot of the kids were just kind of like, keep to themselves. I think I'm just gonna stick to myself and they didn't really like, blend together with other people, and neither did I. But then when it started to like, come together in the middle-ish, it was just a great, you know, experience." (Bella Interview, 31 January 2026)

This observation further describes the shift in the group dynamics from isolated and hesitant, to a cohesive ensemble. I find the use of the word blend to be quite interesting in this response from Bella. This explanation implies something different than what others said about becoming "friends" with the group. The word "blend" offers a richer description of the group's change by implying a unification that reflects important relational practices. It suggests that while each

person brings distinct qualities to the space, the group found a way to exist cohesively while not only preserving, but highlighting those individual identities.

> Kelly similarly reflects on a shift in the group, identifying vulnerability as a root cause. "On the first day, we were all just, like, we didn't know each other, so it was kind of, like, awkward, but I feel like we became friends over time, and it was less awkward. And, um, it actually, it wasn't awkward at all, because, like, I knew them, like, as friends and stuff like that." (Kelly Interview, 31 January 2026)

To understand better what Kelly saw as the reasons behind this development, I asked if she felt like she bonded with the group faster than normal as compared to other programs to which she responded, "yeah, I think it was faster, because we were, like, kind of, like, being our true selves, and, like not, like, fake self, if that makes sense." Kelly identifies the reciprocal relationship between intrapersonal and interpersonal growth as she articulates the development of a strong group dynamic made possible by the group's commitment to showing up authentically. This illustrates a key argument of my research which is that theater-based practices are uniquely equipped to connect participants because of the vulnerability and silliness that they demand. As Kelly says, they were able to get comfortable with one another quickly because they could be their "true selves" due to the nature of the program.

Kelly referenced how she felt like she could be her "true self" in our program and even went on to say that she thinks the program would be helpful for people not interested in theater because, "I think it would be helpful for people because it helps them, like, open up to people, sort of, and like, show their true self and not, like, have to like, mask their personality." Kelly articulates here the intrapersonal benefits of the program as she sees it to be a unique opportunity to show up authentically, dismantling the masks of social pressure, something she doesn't feel

like she can do in school. She makes the profound observation that being your true self helps when "opening up" and getting to know others.

Bella, a student who struggles socially in school, made a similar point as Kelly's in her interview saying that this program is "better than class [at school] [...] because it's like, fun and like, we can, like, be our normal selves, without like, being made fun of or anything" (Bella Interview, 31 January 2026). In this comment Bella articulates that she was able to be authentic in her participation in the program, something she feels is lacking from her experience in school. It is clear that the silly and collaborative nature of the program made the youth feel comfortable to be themselves authentically and try new things without the fear of being judged.

Bella's use of the word "blend" and Kelly's use of the word "friends" can be seen as developed by the *Yes, and* culture of the program. Bella refers to the group as "blending" which implies an acceptance of the individual identities and connection with the group. And Kelly describes friendships which require more than just kindness and pleasantries, but an honest and real connection between people as their authentic selves.

Taking Risks

The commitment to showing up authentically was eventually shared by all the participants who moved from hesitant participation to authentic engagement, and created a space where the group felt comfortable taking risks – something admired in theater and especially in improv.

The improv principles guiding our work require that participants let go of any fear of looking silly, for the benefit of constructive collaboration and storytelling. As Bella implies, the commitment and support of the collective group provided a sense of comfort that meant youth

were willing to take risks they may not have before. When interviewed about risk-taking, many participants attributed their willingness to take risks to the comfort they felt with the group, citing the support shown by others and a perceived lack of judgment.

Kelly referenced Musical Jukebox as an example of a time she took a risk, saying that she surprised herself when she went into the middle of the circle.

> "If I'm at, like, a school dance, and there's like, a dance circle, I would never do, like, a dance in it because this is the best dance I have [does the disco, laughs]. So, and I definitely probably wouldn't sing in a singing circle, so I feel like that's something that I'm kind of surprised that I did" (Kelly Interview, 31 January 2026).

When I asked why she thinks she felt comfortable doing that in our program she said, "I think it was because, like, everyone was being really supportive of everybody, and there was, like, no judgement." In her interview, Kelly explained that this was not something that she felt at school. This clearly explicates the reciprocal nature of intrapersonal and interpersonal growth as she articulates that she felt willing to take a risk because of the group's demonstration of support. Additionally, I argue that Kelly's willingness to take a risk contributed to other's willingness to do the same. When one removes their mask and shows up authentically without consequences or bullying, it signals to others that they can also show up without a mask. In the *Yes, and* framework we can see this as *Yes*, I see you doing that *and*, now I feel inspired to join you.

Ivy makes a similar connection attributing her willingness to take risks to the group culture which ensured she would be supported in how she engaged.

> Ivy: Um.. I feel like sometimes when there's like scenes that we have to pick from, I enjoy them, but sometimes I get scared to like go up and actually do the scene. So, when I first, like, had to do that, I feel like that was kind of like a risk.

Devin: Yeah. And does it... What, like, the other people in the room, how does that influence how you feel about getting up there?

Ivy: I feel, like, now that I know these people more, I kind of, like, and, like, that these are not, like, judgmental people. Like, it's easier to get up in front of those kinds of people more so than an entire audience who you have no clue who they are, and you just have to get up and do something in front of them.

(Ivy interview, 7 February 2026)

Here Ivy is explaining that she felt comfortable taking risks, expanding her sense-of-self, because of the group dynamics and the relationships that they had formed with one another. This translates to a multitude of other situations where one might be resistant to try something new in the company of people they don't know very well. Ivy's reflection tells us that theater-based practices can be helpful in forming authentic relationships which create a comfortable environment for productive risk-taking.

Many interviewees also mentioned that they felt they grew in their individual ability to connect with others outside of the program as well. Bella for example, referenced an example of talking with strangers in the supermarket, and Kelly said she feels like she has "become more extroverted around people that I'm not too familiar with" (Kelly Interview, 31 January 2026). These are examples of a growing relational capacity, as the youth saw a direct connection between the relationship development practiced in the rehearsal space and their ability to communicate with others in their everyday lives.

While these examples indicate development of the individual, they could not have happened without the collaboration and connection of the group. The lessons learned and capacities developed by the youth participants were made possible because of the culture established by the group and the interpersonal connections that were made throughout the

program. Simultaneously, the intrapersonal exploration ignited a vulnerability in each of the participants that made room for profound interpersonal connection. In the next section I will explain the expanded relational capacity that came from the collective participation in this theater program.

It is clear from these examples that it is nearly impossible to separate intrapersonal development from interpersonal experience. Instead, these constant developments exist in a continuous cycle, a *Yes, and*; The interpersonal experience of participating in theater as we did invites intrapersonal exploration and authenticity, which in turn fosters a deeper interpersonal connection with others. It is a reciprocal loop where each development both feeds and is informed by the other.

Relational Capacity

The youth expanded their relational capacities through participation in this program in many different ways. The vulnerability discussed in the prior section set the group up well for authentic and deep connection. Relational practices came up in moments of disagreement, in Boalian games about power, and in the youths' own reflections about what they gained from the experience. I analyze comments about and instances of friendship building, risk-taking, and conflict resolution to elucidate the relational aspects of the program and the ways it was experienced.

Much of the growth and developments outlined in the previous section on intrapersonal growth were made possible because of the interpersonal connections within the collective. Youth were able to show up as their authentic selves because of the nature of the program, but also because of the group culture that made the space feel safe and welcoming for this kind of

exploration. Conversely, an authentic group community was formed and strengthened by the youth showing up as their true selves.

Thinking on Your Feet

A common reflection from the youth participants was an increased ability to "think on their feet" after participating in the program. While this reflects a personal confidence within the individual it also has implications for their relational capacities and broader sense-making. The improvisational theater that we engaged in removes the mask of perfectionism and allows participants to prove to themselves that they do not need to focus on doing something "right" but rather doing it authentically. This translates to experiences in everyday life which, like improv, require flexibility, critical thinking, and active decision making.

The idea that the program helped youth develop a capability of thinking on their feet is a personal skill that is only activated by interaction with others and the world. This affirms the reciprocal relationship between dispositions toward self and dispositions towards others.

Kelly attests to this idea as well, explicitly stating the relational component of improv and describing a connection to her own life as "Acclimating." Kelly shared, "I think I've learned like [...] how to like think on, like, the spot and how to, like, acclimate to what other people are saying and how to react to that" (Kelly Interview, 31 January 2026). Kelly is articulating here the idea that her increased confidence in her sense of self is helpful in expanding her capacity to interact with others and make adjustments in order to do so.

Another element of relationality is the ability to work with others through conflict and difference. The authenticity described in the previous section also sets up the community well for a constructive handling of conflict. Because the youth were committed to showing up

authentically, and to engaging with the authentic selves of others, they were well prepared to surface and resolve any conflict that arose. My intention behind having youth initially plan out their scenes in partners was for the engagement of skills like listening, compromise, collaboration, and conflict resolution. However, I didn't think as much about the conflict that would come up within the scenes themselves.

Week to week, Calla and I noticed the repeated theme of conflict appearing in many of the youths' improv scenes. There was often one person yelling at another, a disagreement between peers, or a "mean girl" situation. This made me sad to see but also led me to wonder why the group was drawn to these types of scenes. Calla offered that it might be easier for them to create a scene, especially in improv, when there is an obvious conflict.

There weren't many instances of conflict between participants outside of their scene work but since we did a lot of creative group and partner work, disagreements did occasionally occur. One example of this came up during our fourth session when Bella and Lila disagreed about how their scene should play out. We were playing Scenes from a Hat, as we so often did, and I had given pairs about five minutes to plan out their scene after choosing a prompt from my 'hat.' Bella and Lila received the prompt "odd things to find in your lunchbox." As I was moseying my way around the room to the different groups, I walked over to Bella and Lila who were still in their chairs, side by side, not facing each other. The following interaction took place:

Devin: Hey how's it going over here?

Lila: Good!

Bella: Not so good…

Devin: What's up?

Bella: We're just not really agreeing.

Devin: Okay, well let's think about how we can combine some of your ideas. What were each of you thinking initially?

Bella: (explained the difference between their ideas)

Lila: Let's do a bit from each of our ideas.

(Field Notes, 10 January 2026)

This interaction is familiar to me and likely most other educators as well. Working in pairs or groups can often lead to a conflict of ideas that can devolve into more dramatic conflict between partners, prohibiting work. What I love about theater, and specifically improv, is that there is a lot of room for compromise and flexibility in finding solutions. When I returned to Bella and Lila's group a few minutes later, the mood had drastically changed as they were excitedly planning out the details of their scene which included ideas from each of them.

Lila actually brought up this interaction during her interview three weeks later as an example of what it was like working with other people during our program. "It was really hard because we didn't - didn't really agree on anything, but we kind of, like, mixed our ideas" (Lila Interview, 31 January 2026). This is a clear example of the way that scene building offers young people opportunities to collaborate with one another and work through conflict. In this instance, they addressed the disagreement with a *Yes, and* compromise, combining their ideas. The creativity demanded and silliness allowed by activities such as this one gave this pair a uniquely primed opportunity for constructive collaboration.

This interaction evidences a comfortability in surfacing conflict, present already in the fourth session. Instead of remaining quiet and performing a scene that didn't reflect her own ideas, Bella articulated to me and her partner that she wasn't happy with the direction they were going. Upon hearing how her partner felt, Lila was able to empathize and then adjust, understand

it without taking it personally, and offer a solution of compromise. Their authentic commitment to one another made space for constructive problem solving, an important skill in all areas of life.

By dismantling social masks through shared silliness and play, participants cultivate a radical visibility that fosters deep interconnection. In this space, the act of being seen as one's authentic self transforms the individual while simultaneously strengthening the interpersonal trust of the collective. This process of authentic visibility and connection is what transforms a group of people into a collective, capable of the vulnerability required for collaborative action.

Rehearsing for the Revolution

Through the experience of developing relationships and scenes as a group, the improvisational nature of the program gave youth the opportunity to make sense of phenomena from their own lives. As Boal puts it, they were able to “rehearse for the revolution” (1974). But also, by just embodying situations that either mirror or are just inspired by experiences in their lives, the youth engaged in a process of sense-making that is fun and can prompt reflection.

Beyond relationship building and its components, the youth created scenes relevant to their own lives that suggested they were using scene improvisation as a process of sense-making. The most obvious example of this is during session three when we did Forum Theater with the unfair scenes. But also in many interviews youth brought up ways that practicing improv has helped them in their “real lives.”

Ultimately, the practices of this program gave youth the opportunity to explore phenomena from their own lives, and equipped youth to see the world not as a fixed reality, but as a stage where they have the power to enact meaningful social change. Both

intrapersonal growth and interpersonal growth provide young people with the necessary tools to make sense of their world, and their position within it. The combination of deepened intrapersonal exploration and a heightened interpersonal capacity makes it possible for youth to authentically show up in the world and work constructively with others.

As Lila so aptly put it, "real life is technically improv, like [...] technically, whole life is scene." I appreciate this framing because it articulates exactly how I conceptualize improv and its usefulness in our lives beyond theater. In this quote, Lila is likening the practices of improv to real life skills, similar to Boal and very similar to my own theories of the implications of *Yes, and.*

When reflecting on the experience, youth identified ways that participation in this program enhanced their abilities to navigate conflict at home and school. By navigating moments of conflict, the youth grew in their capacity to both surface and resolve conflict in distinct relational contexts. Lila reflected that when working on creating a scene with Bella, it was really hard to agree on anything, but in the end they were able to mix their ideas. And because they did so in the "low-stakes" fun-filled context, the lesson is learned that it can be done in other contexts as well.

Practitioner Inquiry: Lessons I've Learned, What I'm taking to the classroom

As I conclude my undergraduate career and prepare to student teach as part of my Master's of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program, my reflections have centered around the lessons I will bring with me into the classroom next year, and into a career of teaching. When asked in her interview if there was anything else she'd like to share, Lila said, "I think you'll be a pretty good teacher because of this program" (Lila Interview, 31 January 2026). Hearing this put a smile on

my face, and also affirmed my own reflections; I did think I would be a good teacher because of this program.

On the most basic level, by creating and implementing an entire program on my own, I developed confidence in my abilities as an educator that I will take with me as I start my career in schools. I hope that by acknowledging the work that it took to make this happen, I will be reminded of my strengths and abilities when it comes to doing new things, like student teaching and all of the firsts that will come with it.

Inquiry as Stance

Conducting research with the input and reflections of young people reaffirmed my belief that we can learn so much when we trust our kids to be knowledgeable about their own experiences. The process of note-taking and reflection that was so present in this project, because it was required for my thesis work, was a great opportunity to immerse myself in the practice of practitioner inquiry. I am especially grateful for this opportunity as I approach the MAT program next year and will embark on a full year of student teaching. It has become incredibly apparent to me that I will want to be taking notes and writing reflectively about my experiences while teaching, both so I can show up better for my students, but also to expand my own practice and learn from them.

Prior to engaging in this praxis project, I might have thought that it would be possible to do this kind of generative reflection without much intentionality, however it is very difficult to facilitate a program and also take notes. If it was hard for me to dedicate time to sit and reflect and narrate what happened in the week between sessions, I can't imagine how hard it will be when I am teaching all day every day. I am grateful for this intense immersion and

know that having exercised this muscle and understanding the importance of it, I will be that much more committed to reflective note taking when I do not have the pressure of research motivating me.

In the context of this research, intentional reflection on hyper-specific moments of our program, as opposed to more causal or unstructured reflection, allowed me to notice things I wouldn't have otherwise. It became clear the depth of the lessons and insights that can be gleaned from moments of uncertainty, of which there were many.

One example which I have already mentioned is when the group asked week after week if we could visit the Clark gym. From the very first time this suggestion came up, I was hesitant to agree, searching for a good reason why we couldn't. This was challenging for me because I don't like to say no to kids if there isn't a good reason, and in this instance I couldn't think of one. I ended up telling them that we would "have to see" and "maybe we could go." Secretly I hoped that they would forget about it and I would be off the hook. But alas, the next week came and they asked again, following up on their previous inquiry.

I was made uncomfortable by these requests especially since they *all* wanted to go, and thus I felt further compelled to follow their suggestion. When one would ask, the rest would perk up and join in her pleading. Looking back, it seemed significant that this was one of the first things they *all* asked for. I am wondering who was the first to suggest it and who were the ones to bring it up week after week. In the time between our sessions I did think a little bit about how I might make the field trip work. I reached out to a friend I know who works at the front desk of the gym who offered to send me a practice schedule, but didn't go further than that.

I mentioned to the kids I might write an email to arrange our visit, but because I do not play on a Clark sports team or even frequent the Clark gym, I didn't know off the top of my head who I could email. I could have checked the staff and faculty website as I often do when I don't know who to email, but I didn't take that step. I claim that my research is conducted with an anti-adultist and youth-centered methodology, so why should I ignore the wants of the group?

I think partly my hesitation was due to my unfamiliarity with the space, but there was also some insecurity at play in my not wanting to go to the gym. First, I was nervous about taking them outside the building, would I need to tell their parents beforehand? What if someone told us we couldn't be in there?

Even broader I thought, what will this mean for the course of our program? I felt like going to the gym would be a waste of our precious time together, but I wonder what might have happened if I had instead seen it as a distinct opportunity to get to know this group of youth. I may have also been concerned that my authority or expertise that I had worked hard to cultivate in the space would be undermined were we to walk over to the gym and be turned away or told to leave. At the time I thought a field trip to the gym would be a hindrance to the goals of the program. I wonder what we might have found if I had figured out a way to make it work.

Because ultimately this is a research project, I was worried that a trip to the gym would not produce relevant data. This is uncomfortable to admit because I mostly do not think about my research in this way, where the intention is to collect as much data as possible. This creates another opportunity for *Yes, and* as both can be true. *Yes*, different data would come from a trip to the gym, *and* maybe that data and the experience would provide me with deeper

insight into the young people and help to deepen my relationship with them. *Yes,* visiting the gym might mean less time for the theater activities I had planned, *and* perhaps deviating slightly from the center of the program would have emphasized the understanding that theater can show up in many places and in many ways. *Yes,* we can have critical and holistic approaches to research and data collection, *and,* when doing research the primary goal is always going to be data collection. This *Yes, and* is not without tension as I would like to say that my focus and guiding force in the facilitation in the work was always the youth more than the data, but again, both can be true. I do not regret my decision, but I now realize that the data that might have come from a trip to the gym would be generative and valuable in its own way.

As they kept asking, I was curious to figure out *why* they wanted to go to the gym. When I asked them they said "to run around" or offered suggestions for games we could play. On my own, I decided that they were really more excited about seeing a different part of the college campus. I didn't confirm that this was their intention behind asking for the gym, but I figured their desire could be quelled by a visit to The Little Center. The Little Center is our theater building on campus and is therefore a building I have spent a lot of time in. I work in the building's office three days a week and have spent many hours in long rehearsals in the main theater. Because of my familiarity with the space, I had access to information about who would be there if we visited during our program time. Distinct from the gym, I know all of the faculty and staff who work in the Little Center and this was not concerned about not being allowed into the space. This felt like a far easier lift for me, and I legitimized the trip framing it as a tour of a potential performance space for our last session.

In reflection, I'm not sure if this trip truly satisfied the desires of the group. One of the main advocates for a field trip to the gym happened to be absent the day we did end up visiting The Little Center but everyone else seemed to moderately enjoy the visit. It definitely satisfied my desire to stay on the theme of theater, but I wouldn't say that there was any profound data that came from that trip. What I take from this reflection after the fact is the lesson to dig deeper and stay curious not only about my students, but about myself and the decisions that I make, especially those that challenge me.

In making this decision I made a mistake that I often notice in young improvisers saying "Yes, but" rather than "Yes, and." I could have said, "yes we can go on a field trip to the gym, and I will try to figure out how to make that happen" or even "yes, and why do you guys want to do that?" But instead I opted for, "yes we can go on a field trip, but instead of the gym what if we went to the theater?" I am curious to continue to explore how *Yes, and* emerges in my teaching practice in the moments of uncertainty I am sure to encounter.

Another moment of uncertainty came towards the end of our program when it was time to begin curating a final group performance. I had included it in the curriculum and also advertised it on the recruitment flyers and so felt obliged to produce a performance. I also wanted to give the kids a final celebration of the end of our time together and a chance to show families what they had learned. A critical element of theater, including improv, is the shared performance element and so that felt important to me as someone who has participated in many rehearsal-performance cycles. Selfishly, I also wanted to show off to the parents (and my parents) what we had been doing together.

Once we passed the halfway mark of our program, I attempted to facilitate brainstorming among the group on a few occasions but struggled to strike a balance between

scaffolding the process, and making room for the youth to take the lead. After our eighth session where we built out the story to tell, I felt unhappy with what they had landed on. I think I felt that what they had chosen was somewhat trivial. In my dreams they would have created a scene about fighting the power, but for many reasons it makes sense that this is where they landed. Maybe most importantly, this was the first time they had ever been asked to create a scene longer than a couple of minutes or even to script a scene at all. Prior to this point we had been strictly doing improv and they only had 5 minutes - if any - to plan their scene. On another level, the message of their story was the power of relationship development, becoming friends, or as they put it, “be a lover not a fighter.” It is also impressive that the small group eagerly took on the task of incorporating Kelly into the scene through video, to accommodate her not being able to be at our final performance.

Calla and I shared uncertainty as we noticed the consistency of conflict as a central theme of the improv scenes created by the youth over the course of several weeks. Sometimes it was mimed physical conflict and more often it was yelling and anger as the central plot of the scene. I was intrigued by this observation but chose not to explore that curiosity and did not address the noticing with the young people. Part of me was nervous about facilitating a conversation with no idea where it would go. Outside of scenes, however, there were only a small number of interpersonal conflicts among the group that often were handled with graceful communication by the girls.

These moments of interpersonal tension left me deeply confused and uncomfortable with no clue how (or if) I should address them. At our third session the group was doing some improv during our “unfair scenes” Forum Theater activity. In a scene about a teacher-student conflict, the participant playing the role of student stuck up for another student by yelling at

the teacher. The student ended up making some personal jabs at Kelly who was playing the teacher. I was concerned about these comments but had no idea how I should address them at the moment. After the scene was over I opened up a surface-level conversation where I talked about how when we say things in scenes, it is not the same as real-life, and when we step into a scene we are taking on a role separate from ourselves. I added that this also should apply when we are addressing our scene partners. The student in the scene made comments specifically about the appearance of Kelly, as the teacher so I was worried that they might have still hurt Kelly's feelings. I mentioned to the group that there is a difference between insulting the character in the scene, and the actor playing the character. I wonder what might have occurred had I followed this line of thinking more intentionally and interrogated conflict a bit more throughout our sessions. Instead, it popped up here and there during our sessions and

While I didn't take this conversation very much further, I suspect that my mention of the instance left somewhat of an impression on the group because of an interaction between Bella and Eliza during one of our last sessions. Bella and Eliza both played sort of "mean girl" characters in the final scene the group created and so made jabs at each other in our first day of (mostly improvised) rehearsal. The following week before we ran the scene, Bella said, "I don't like how mean Eliza is being to my character" (Field Notes, 14 February 2026). Although she wasn't addressing Eliza directly, Eliza quickly apologized, explaining that she did not mean to make her feel bad and said she would adjust. I wonder if part of Bella's thinking in that moment was inspired by the conversation we had about insults during session three.

Positionality

Prior to the launch of this program, I had not considered my identity as a performer to be important to my positionality. However, when talking to a family friend over winter break, I was reminded that my identity as a performer influences the way I show up (and am perceived) in the classroom and how I interact with young people.

I have thought about how my identity as a performer influences my teaching practice for the better. I have spent years practicing projection which is helpful when developing a "Teacher voice," I am used to pivoting and making changes on the fly which is incredibly helpful for teaching, and I have worked with distinct ensembles, overcoming challenges and developing strong communities. However, I had not yet thought about the way that my confidence and comfortability in front of a crowd might influence the way that my students engage with the activities, or how they grow comfortable (or not) in the space.

One moment where I reflected on this was when we played Musical Jukebox for the first time during session 4 and I noticed that there was a focus on the performance of the songs with youth clearly trying hard to sing "well" and lots of nerves about picking a song and showing it off. In reflecting on this, I realized that I set the tone with my own participation in the game. As a performer myself, and someone who is quite animated when working with youth, it was natural for me to participate in the game in this way. But I realized that that set a tone for the rest of the group in how they should engage with the game.

Theater in the classroom

I have often said that while I do not plan to be a theater teacher, I know that theater will be ever present in my classroom. But prior to conducting this research, I hadn't given very much

thought to what that would look like. After designing this program and reflecting on the outcomes, I have explored the exercises and activities I might choose to facilitate in my classroom, and also now have the vocabulary to articulate why certain activities are beneficial to developing classroom community and why.

Through deeper exploration and reflection on these activities I now have the vocabulary and experience to articulate which activities are beneficial to developing classroom communities and why. From this experience I hope to be able to choose to facilitate games and activities that target the particular strengths or areas of growth in my classroom.

The youth also aided me in this by offering suggestions for the games I might choose to bring to my classroom and how they might be received by a classroom of students:

> I feel like when you're a teacher, maybe like, you could do like, stretching, and then like, you could do like, like after all this stuff, like MCAS and stuff, then you could, like do, like acting things and, like, hang out. And honestly, that's really fun.
>
> (Lila Interview, 31 January 2026)

I was giddy to receive direct suggestions for my teaching practice from Lila and enthused by her mention of MCAS and the idea that maybe our theater games would be good to do after sitting for a long test.

Showcasing Student Learning

The final takeaway I will outline here has to do with the creation of our final performance, and what it taught me about constructing a showcase of student learning. I was concerned with what our final performance would look like because I wanted the kids to feel

like they had something to show for what they had done, and I wanted the parents to see what their kids learned.

I went into it with only vague ideas of what a final performance could look like for our group. In reflection, I wish I had been more thoughtful in scaffolding what this final project would look like from the beginning. As it got closer to the final session, I decided one thing about the performance and that was that I wanted the youth to create and perform something together. At the time, the way I saw to do this was by facilitating a collaborative creation of a story that we would then rehearse and then present. Looking back, that wasn't aligned with what we had been working on every week. What I realize now, is that is not the only way to achieve that goal. Every single session the youth were doing just that in their improv scenes.

Reflecting on the presentation of scenes at the final performance and the distinction between the scene that had been planned in weeks prior and those that were completely improvised, it became clear that the presentation was best when it actually represented what the group had been working on in the weeks leading up.

Conclusion

Summary

The process of designing and conducting the Rise Up! program expanded my view on theater and deepened my understanding of how civic dispositions can be developed. By participating in the program the youth recognized that they grew not only as actors, but as people. Through participation in theater games which centered silliness and connection to others, youth grew in their capacity to build authentic community. This research provides valuable findings to practitioners and community members as it not only explores the benefit of theater, but offers insights for practitioners looking to develop civic attitudes and nurture relational capacity.

Through the design and implementation of a theater-based workshop with young people, I gained a better understanding of what young people are capable of in terms of relational development, authentic vulnerability, and committed connection. I also explored the complex ways in which interpersonal connections promote intrapersonal exploration, and how a commitment to individual vulnerability and authenticity creates opportunity for the development of a strong and committed collective.

By analyzing the reflections of the youth participants, the ways that our theater space contributed to the development of civic dispositions in young people became apparent. By engaging with this theater program, participants were impacted positively in their understanding of themselves, and their capacity to develop authentic relationships with others. Participants recognized theater as an opportunity to practice for everyday situations by deepening their sense of self and their capacity to build strong relationships with others.

The research conducted left positive impacts on the youth participants, and on me as the facilitator by deepening my own understanding of what it truly is about theater that supports civic dispositions. Through a practitioner inquiry approach and because of the environment that was cultivated, I was able to interrogate my own practice as the facilitator authentically. The silliness and play facilitated by improv contributed to an ability to show up authentically, providing the opportunity for the development of an authentic community. This research supports the use of theatrical practices as a means of relational development through the exploration of the individual through collaboration and play.

This research was conducted with the intention of gaining a deep understanding of the value that theater and theater-based spaces can offer young people in their development of civic dispositions. The findings show that theater can provide a space for the reciprocal relationship between intrapersonal and interpersonal growth to flourish and nurture the civic capacities of young people.

Collective Analysis

This research had many unique findings, but in this paper I focus on the criticality of the relationship between intrapersonal and interpersonal development among a group of people. The overarching finding is that the individual dispositions youth gained towards themselves and towards others can not be separated from the ensemble nature of the program. The *Yes, and* culture cultivated this cyclical relationship contributing to the development of civic dispositions in participants. Conducting this program and analyzing its impacts made clear that authentic individual growth and development of a strong collective can only be achieved through reciprocal nature of both intrapersonal and interpersonal development.

I knew that theater spaces inherently offer opportunities for growth in many ways, and that that growth is deeply connected with civic dispositions that make for engaged citizens. In my research, I was curious to explore the specific ways that this happened for young people, following their lead to better understand how they engage with theater intended to expand their civic dispositions. What I found was very helpful in developing a strong understanding of what young people gain from participating in this kind of theater space.

Theoretical Implications

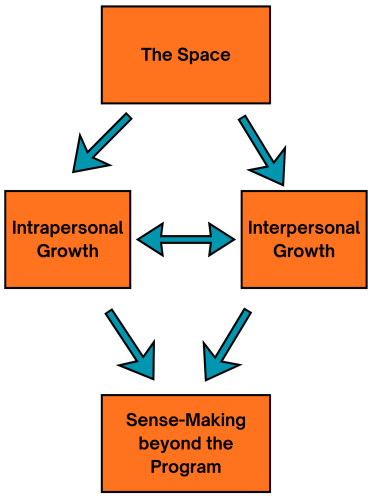
A core tenant of my theoretical framework around civic readiness and civic disposition is relationality. In my experience, theater offers a breeding ground for powerful relationship building, and the interconnectedness of working on a theatrical work mimics the natural interconnectedness of humans. The ensemble nature of theater necessitates a shift in students' dispositions toward others from passive (or judgemental) observation to active empathy and constructive communication. Theater is more than just an extracurricular, hobby, or source of entertainment, it is a pedagogical space where true visibility is demanded and authentic relationships are built. Through the intentional creation of a participatory theater space, civic dispositions can be nurtured due to the authenticity and vulnerability that is required.

This research has implications for the power of improvisation as a space for complex growth which can be understood through the principle of *Yes, and*. This improv rule requires a deep listening and collaboration, igniting a shift between passive participation and active engagement. Not just yes, but yes, *and* requires listening and then collaborative construction, skills that are critical to civic life.

Reflecting on this research provides a blue print for my future practice. It provides me with a deeper understanding of how young people engage with the qualities I am interested in nurturing, and how theater is uniquely positioned as a way to do so. This work reveals the complex ways that young people navigate communities both intrapersonally, and interpersonally.

The main theoretical implication is that one can not accurately assess individual growth apart from the context and community in which it was founded. This has many implications beyond a theater program and can be applied in a myriad of contexts. It is important that when analyzing individual growth or group dynamics we do not do so in isolation. Instead, it is important that we pay close attention to the reciprocal relationship between the collective, and the growth of individuals.

Returning to the graphic that I use to understand my theoretical framework behind this analysis, my findings can best be understood as existing in that center arrow between Intrapersonal and Interpersonal growth. You cannot have authenticity and vulnerability without risk-taking and a community of care. The focus on the two-way arrow is the crux of my findings.



Implications for Practice

This paper is a call for educators to facilitate intentional intrapersonal and interpersonal exploration in their classrooms through creative means. It is a call for practitioners of all kinds to pay special attention to fostering deepened relationships in their communities founded on authenticity and trust. Through reflecting on my experiences facilitating this program I've developed a clearer vision of what I mean when I say that I want to cultivate and nurture civic dispositions.

Building a Classroom Community

I have often said that while I do not plan to teach theater specifically, theater practices will always have a place in my classroom. This research cemented that idea and allowed me to explore the specific games and activities that I might one day use to build classroom community in a school environment. Not only will I take specific applications to my classrooms in the way of games, but the more general understanding I have developed of what it takes to build committed communities will inform how I approach fostering community as a teacher. It is ever clear to me now that to build a committed community, we each must commit to being our authentic selves. By engaging in this vulnerable task, we can build trust and deeper understanding of one another therefore building a solid community that is committed to collective success.

As I was designing the Rise Up! curriculum I thought about including an activity on identity I had designed for a different program I was facilitating with youth of a similar age. I call the activity "Identity Flowers" and essentially students depict elements of their identities that are important to them as petals of a flower, and then the group puts the flowers together in a "community garden" to reflect the group's community and interdependence.

I felt conflicted about whether or not to include this activity in the curriculum. On the one hand, I liked it a lot and was proud when I had designed and implemented it successfully before. But I was struggling to rationalize its presence in this particular program. In the end, I decided against including it, although we did spend a little time during the second session talking about which communities we are a part of which touched on identity.

As I reflect now in the context of these findings, I realize that there was certainly a place for Identity Flowers in this program. I would have loved to have started off with a celebration of our distinct identities and am curious about what further connection between the *intra-* and *inter-* personal may have emerged from it. I look forward to implementing the activity in my future classrooms as part of the effort to cultivate a classroom community.

Improv Instruction

While TO is a famously explicit method of using theater to promote social change, this research suggests that it is not the only form of theatrical programming that can cultivate civic dispositions. Improvisation games and activities have distinct elements which engage participants in exploration of themselves and the collective, heightening their civic capacity.

Emerging Questions

In the spirit of *Yes, and*, the findings of this research serve as an initial offer, extending an invitation for further inquiry. While I began this research with many questions, even more have emerged through the facilitation and then subsequent data collection and analysis. Limited by time and by the fact that this is my very first time ever doing anything like this, there are a plethora of lessons that would inform my facilitation were I to do the program again.

For example, my field notes focused on the growing confidence of the youth and the development of relationships between them. Because the theatrical nature of the program centered on improvisation and thus, the youth were the creators of each of the scenes they performed, in another world I might have been more intentional about recording and tracking the types of scenes and conflicts that the students chose, and the types of characters that they portrayed. This could have deepened the findings that surrounded individual sense of self and sense-making of the world if patterns emerged. Instead, I focused less on the characters and plots portrayed, and more on the connections between participants. Future research should be informed by this and be intentional about what direction field notes are taken in.

Much of my own learning came from the presence of school in our scenes and conversations. It was clear to me that the youth were using improvisational scenes to make sense of experiences and power dynamics that they encounter in school and in their own lives. Had the content of scenes been more of a focus of my field notes, I might have encountered a distinct set of findings that speak more to the value of embodiment and play as an opportunity for young people to develop a deeper understanding of their own lives and empower them to move through the world with a stronger understanding of their own identity and position in the world.

There are also many unique findings that would have emerged had small and large aspects of the program been different. Group size and demographics could have been different offering insights about cliqueiness within groups, racial dynamics, or gender differences. I am curious about the significance behind the fact that only girls participated in this program. I wonder if it helped with risk-taking, vulnerability and authenticity that the participants all had gender in common. Gender as a topic did come up occasionally when talking about school

when the youth were discussing or embodying moments of school. There was some collective commiseration about the "boys in the class" who are disruptive and problematic. I would be curious to explore how the fact that all participants were girls contributed to the growth of the individual, of the group, and to overall sense-making that occurred throughout the program. Additionally, had there been participants of various genders, it would have been interesting to notice how gender roles may have contributed to the formation of relationships or potentially conflict within the program.

Designing and then carrying out individual interviews was incredibly daunting and were I to do this project again, there are many more questions I would ask. Additionally, I conducted interviews in the second half of the program to glean insights from the youth, but I regret not building time in for reflection post performance. Future iterations of similar research should conduct reflective interviews with participants after the final session of the program. I could have asked participants more about their relationship with theater and tracked how that may have evolved through participation in the program. Had I received consent and assent from the three participants without a theater background, I would have asked them about their initial perspectives and subsequent growth as participants who would not have initially considered themselves to be Theater Kids.

It wasn't a conscious intention of mine that we would focus solely on improv, as compared to scripted acting. In my head we would try to do both, or I was just leaving open the opportunity for either to happen. Other findings would have emerged had I focused more on scripted acting, and also many of the same ones would too. Many of these findings are widely applicable to a diverse array of theater practices, including scripted acting. The collaboration and relationship-building aspect is definitely universal across many modes of

theater as they (almost) always require work between people, often in a large group. However others arise specifically from the improvisational elements of this program.

My *Yes, and* framework returns here in making sense of this distinction between scripted theater and improv. It is not that one is good and one is evil, and we must not place a false boundary between that which is gained from participation in either. One element that is offered by scripted theater as opposed to improv, is the element of performance, which offers unique lessons and learnings that the temporal nature of improvisation might not offer. However the lack of this element in improvisational theater also made room for further risk-taking and creativity.

This program was conducted in an out of school time space which made it easier for traditional hierarchies of schooling to be disrupted. If a similar study were conducted in a classroom environment, especially one where relationships and a culture have already been developed, different pedagogical moves will be required to ensure that students

The out of school time space was isolated and almost like a “blank slate.” I didn’t have to worry very much about pre-conceived social dynamics or systems and structures guiding us. Everything was created from the ground up. This may seem like the more challenging route to some, but I am curious about the distinctions that may arise when a similar program is conducted in a pre-established group or community.

Significance

This project highlights the importance of vulnerability and authenticity in developing one's sense of self, and symbiotically, the capacity to connect with others. It also tells us that theater practices such as these are highly conducive to these developments. This research offers

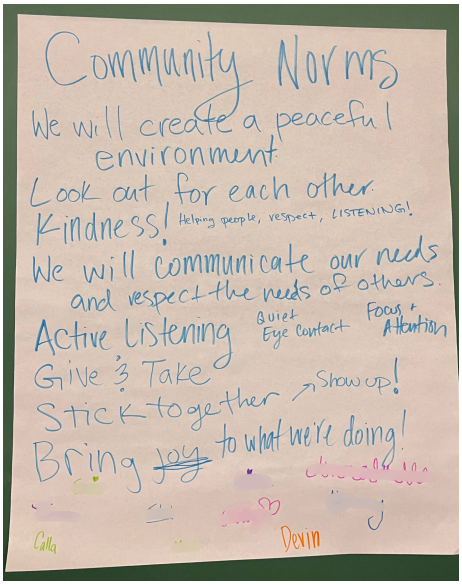
more than just commentary on theater and its benefits, but it tells us that we should expand our understanding of how young people make meaning of their own lives, and how we might be able to offer them opportunities to do so in creative, fun, and authentic ways.

Whether or not you plan to facilitate theater exercises like these, I hope that this research and subsequent findings offer valuable insight into the development of civic dispositions in young people.

Appendix

Appendix A - Recruitment Flyers

Appendix B - Community Norms

Community Norms	
	• We will create a peaceful environment • Look out for each other • Kindness! (helping people, respect LISTENING!) • We will communicate our needs and respect the needs of others • Active Listening (Quiet, Eye Contact, Focus + Attention) • Give and Take • Stick together (Show up!) • Bring joy to what we're doing! *Everyone signed their names at the bottom*

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