

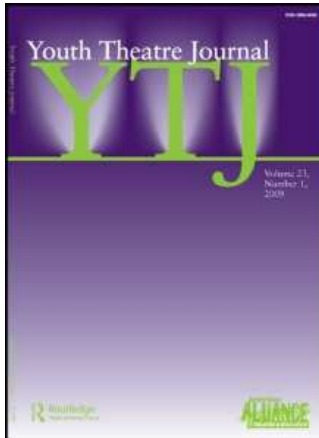
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Theatre of the Oppressed with Children: A Field Experiment

Johnny Saldaña

Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed was facilitated with fourth and fifth grade children to assess any influences and affects on their social interactions with peers.

"Sometimes, you can't be nice to deal with oppression."

—fourth grade girl

This report shares selected observations and perceived outcomes from instruction of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed with fourth and fifth grade children in a southwestern American school.¹ Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) consists of participatory, improvisational, dramatic forms that critically examine power relationships; explore how humans oppress each other in physical and psychological ways; and empower participants for liberating self and others (Boal, 1995, 1998, 2002).

The TO with Children Project employed three Boalian forms: *Games* for exploring concepts such as "power"; tableaux and movement for *Image Theatre*; and verbal improvisation for *Forum Theatre*. Boal's (2002) arsenal of games generally serves as preparatory work for both Image and Forum Theatre. Image Theatre relies on the non-verbal language of the body to explore and express internalized and social oppressions. Forum Theatre relies primarily on interactive dialogue to simulate strategies for combating human oppressors, and provides participants with a sense of personal and social agency.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Rationale for the Study

The April 20, 1999 shooting tragedy at Columbine High School in Colorado served as a wake-up call for educators at all levels working with children and youth. Testimony by one teenage girl at a United States congressional hearing investigating violence in schools in the summer of 1999 encouraged curriculum programming and forums to provide "a place to vent anger and teach compassion". Gardner (1999) and Goleman (1995) assert that childhood and adolescence are critical windows of opportunity for such learning experiences and social development. Theatre of the Oppressed sessions I conduct with in-service elementary school teachers to help children cope with bullies and racism are well received and called "important" and "just what we're looking for" by the adult participants. Theatre of the Oppressed serves not only theatre educators but also elementary educators and the children themselves through their exploration of

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social issues to hopefully create a more positive school and social environment.

Most published materials on TO and related dramatic forms for social change report their applications with and impact on adults (e.g., Schutzman & Cohen-Cruz, 1994; Taylor, 2003), adolescents (e.g., Bagshaw & Halliday, 2000; Banaszewski, 2001; Conrad, 2002; Rohd, 1998; Saldaña, 1999; Whybrow, 1996), and in theoretical/critical contexts with youth (e.g., Doyle, 1993; Wright, 1998). Theatre of the Oppressed naturally finds its way, through selected practitioners, into the elementary school classroom; but reports of these experiences are usually presented as conference workshops.² Rarely is TO with young children examined from ethnographic perspectives and published for wider dissemination to other facilitators (e.g., Giffin & Yaffe, 1999; Grady, 2000). Thus, the report of this particular field experiment is a contribution to the qualitative research literature in drama education with elementary school youth.

Participants

Wilson Elementary School (pseudonym) regularly collaborates with Arizona State University (ASU) for educational research projects if the primary investigator secures ASU Human Subjects Review Board permission to conduct the study. Once this permission was obtained, the school principal (female) and six fourth and fifth grade classroom teachers (five female, one male) volunteered to participate. The school's population and community are classified socio-economically as lower- to lower-middle class and multiculturally diverse.

The ASU research team consisted of myself and four graduate students in our Theatre for Youth program—Gordon Hensley, Doyle Ott, Emily Petkewich, and Michelle White—all of whom had taken advanced improvisation with youth and TO course work before the study began. We labeled ourselves ARTists (Artists-Researchers-Teachers) and worked with approximately 125 children ages 9–11 during an eight week residency in the spring 2000 semester. Due to the six elementary classroom teachers' varying schedules and availability, the number of weekly TO sessions (approximately 60 minutes each) varied from six to twelve within the participating classrooms. Elementary classroom teachers and ARTists received a modest stipend for their participation in the project.

Method

This study was, admittedly, an emergent investigation. I called the project a "field experiment" (a standard term in research design) because the work took place in a naturalistic classroom setting, yet provided participants an experimental TO treatment for the specific purpose of creating positive behavioral change. Quantitative measures were deliberately excluded in favor of qualitative inquiry. The latter is a paradigm in harmony with a social project of this nature, and provides richer descriptive material for analysis.

Preliminary research questions were developed as part of a grant proposal, and they served as initial guidance for fieldwork and data gathering:

1. What oppressions encountered by children (e.g., bullies, teasing and verbal abuse, teachers as oppressors) can serve as content for Image and Forum Theatre work?
2. How can relevant social concepts and terms (e.g., oppression, antagonist, agency) be instructed to children through TO?

3. What adaptations or modifications, if any, of Boal's Image and Forum Theatre techniques are needed for young children?
4. What are the observed and reported influences and affects of TO on children in their school environment and classroom culture?
5. What developmental and gender differences exist when examining the above questions (i.e., differences between boys and girls ages 9–11)?

I will not systematically address in this paper each question in the order they are listed above. Instead, I will use our TO curriculum as the organizing framework for reporting salient observations from this project.

Data Sources

Data sources for the project included audio-taped and transcribed individual pre- and post-field experiment interviews with the school principal and teacher participants; periodic focus group interviews and discussions with ASU ARTists; and pre- and post-whole class interviews with selected fourth and fifth grade participants. The school principal did not permit individual interviews with children due to her concern with what could have been "sensitive" issues raised by the participants. Unfortunately, these types of interviews might have generated richer data and provided children opportunities to privately and confidentially voice genuine concerns about personal oppressions.

ARTists maintained and submitted participant observation field notes and journal reflections of the school and classroom environments, daily classroom routines and special events, playground activities, and all TO sessions. One to two sessions facilitated by each ARTist was video taped for more extensive analysis. Documents submitted included the ARTists' TO session designs, plus any written artifacts developed by children during TO sessions such as journal reflections, written stories of oppression, and written solutions to a hypothetical oppressive situation.

Data Analysis

I analyzed all data using Strauss and Corbin's (1998) *in vivo* coding—not to construct grounded theory, but to find prominent themes and patterns rooted in the participants' own language. Once these codes were organized into categories, Erickson's (1986) assertion heuristics were applied to develop general interpretations from the data corpus. Though some might have adopted critical pedagogical or feminist positions for a research study of this nature, I opted for the educational constructivist paradigm since I was interested in new learnings that would emerge from field experimentation for future classroom applications.

THE FIELD EXPERIMENT

Participant Perceptions of Oppression

Before the teaching phase of the project began, I interviewed the school principal, elementary classroom teachers, selected classrooms of children, and ARTists to gather everyone's recommendations for session content and desired outcomes. This strategy harmonizes with the philosophies of constructivist education, critical pedagogy, and liberatory praxis (Freire, 1998; hooks, 1994; Oakes &

Lipton, 1999; Shor, 1996), principles interwoven with Boal's theatrical work. Since children were our primary constituents and stakeholders in this project, we prioritized their recommendations above the adults when designing TO sessions.

After the interviews, I reviewed the transcripts, searched for and coded forms of oppression, and organized the categories into a simple taxonomy (McCurdy, Spradley, & Shandy, 2005). Most parents and teachers who work daily with upper elementary school children may find the results compiled in Figure 1 common knowledge. The list, in fact, correlates closely with Berk's (2004, pp. 322–327) "textbook" examples of children's social development. But it may also inform us how children themselves perceive the various forms of oppression in their lives.

In this *particular* diverse site, such social constructs as race, ethnicity, and social class were not observed as sources of oppression among ages 9–11 children. Intra- and inter-gender oppression—horizontal and vertical hostility—were the primary sources of conflict. To girls, oppression happens primarily when they are intimidated by "*feelings*"—as one girl said, "When other people make you feel bad, and they're trying to do it on purpose, 'cause maybe they don't like you." To boys, oppression happens primarily when they are intimidated by "*force*"—as one boy said, "forcing you to do something you don't want to." Neither of these two categories are gender exclusive, however; oppression through "*feelings*" is the most prominent form children encounter.

The list of oppressions is fairly self-explanatory, but the reasons why these types of oppressions occur ("because") merits a brief discussion. Children generalize others with physical, behavioral, or cultural differences as "weird", a dynamic confirmed by one of their teachers:

We've got a little girl in here—she looks different and she acts different, so they'll make up some name that they call her. It seems like every year there's one kid that gets picked on more than somebody else because they're different, because they might look different, they might act different. . . . And out on the playground they do tend to sometimes get pushy-shovy. . . . Like with her [pointing to a desk], I've watched them actually walk by this little girl and purposely bump into her. . . . You know, once they have this idea that something's wrong with them, or they don't like them, then when they start to interact with the kids . . . they're not accepting.

Wilson School's culture includes separate and distinct grade and classroom division, which reinforces social boundaries and hierarchies on the playground ("They're in a different grade"). Children also noted how peers and parents cultivated contagion for oppressive actions: "Our friends have a big influence on how we behave, we don't want to be left out of anything, [and] our parents teach us some things about other people." Finally, children acknowledged that oppression also arises from everyday tension since "Sometimes, we're just in a bad mood."

Teachers felt the primary reason for oppressive behaviors stemmed from children's emerging knowledge of power structures: "A lot of kids are just scared or they're not aggressive, and I think a lot of kids pick up on that." Consequences for the oppressed include "negativity", "withdrawal", "low self-esteem", and boys who "explode" in anger. Teachers, more cognizant of their class's personal situations, acknowledged "parental neglect" and "poverty" as a source of a few children's woes. ARTists initially perceived that teachers themselves may have been significant adult sources of oppression, but children regarded them as the

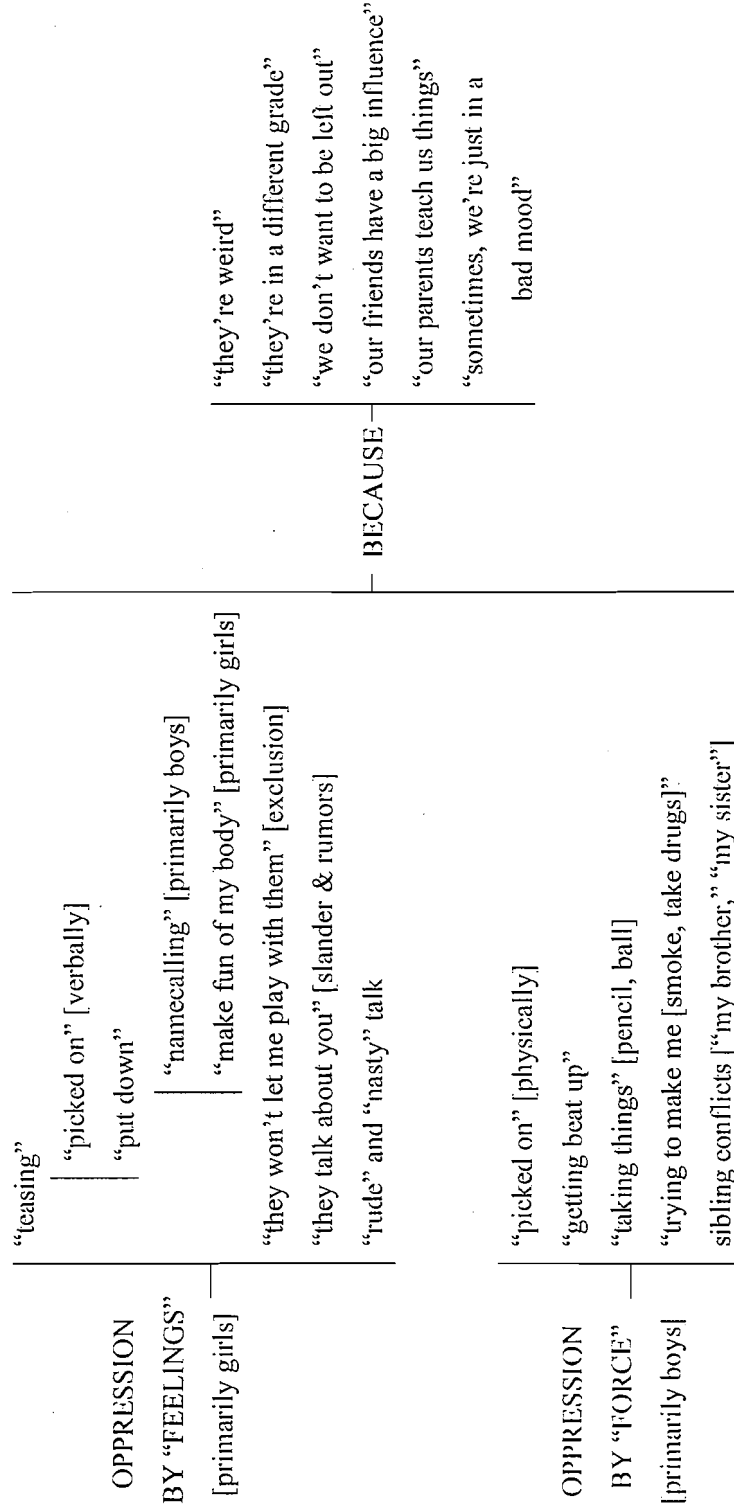


Figure 1. Children's perceptions of oppression.

least of their troubles (though some may have been reluctant to identify them as such to the visiting research team).

Emergent Goals

All participants converged on *conflict resolution strategies* as a common theme and goal for the project, yet variations appeared in the suggested pathways toward that goal. Adult participants wanted to achieve a more inclusive classroom climate through community building; children asked for individual problem solving tactics. Teachers wanted children to exhibit more positive actions (“respect”, “graciousness”) and self-regulating behaviors (“anger management”, “dealing with negativity”, “feeling good about themselves”). Children simply wanted to know what to do when they become victims of oppression (discussed later).

While the ARTists were not reluctant to explore the negative emotions that arose during oppressive situations in their classroom sessions, the classroom teachers perceived this as an undesirable reinforcement of the problem rather than a way to cultivate positive, yet compliant, behaviors. Classroom management dynamics established by participating teachers at Wilson School can be illustrated through an amalgam of “Classroom Rules” posted prominently in each room. The ARTists found these rules somewhat antithetical to the principles of TO and our personal ways of working; nevertheless, we adhered to the rules as a courtesy to the participating teachers and to maintain an agreeable collaboration:

1. Raise your hand to speak
2. Keep your hands and feet to yourself
3. Follow directions
4. Line up quietly and quickly
5. Work quietly so you don’t disturb others
6. Respect others: No name calling, put downs, or swearing
7. Work and play safely

Consequences if you choose not to follow the rules of the class:

1. Verbal Warning
2. Time Out (Resource Room or loss of recess)
3. Parents Contacted (letter)
4. Sent to Office

Small prizes are awarded at the end of the week for those who show good behavior.

I will be a great learner and do my personal best!

ARTists found themselves reconciling paradoxical dilemmas as they modeled non-oppressive facilitation behaviors, struggled with typical classroom management issues, and enforced classroom rules.³ Some children, primarily boys, took advantage of the TO sessions to display obstreperous behavior (i.e., horseplay)

among themselves. Ironically, classroom forums to explore oppression became opportunities for a few to exhibit oppressive playing behaviors within simulated dramatic contexts. Image and Forum Theatre gave them “permission” to violate classroom rules with impunity.

As the study progressed, it was interesting to note how initial and ongoing goals from all constituencies conflicted. The school principal saw the opportunity for TO to develop children’s literacy more than their social skills: “Emphasize the ‘six traits’ of good writing. Develop their expressiveness.” A school teacher wanted to minimize the negativity of conflict exploration: “Gear it towards more of a positive thing. Give a scenario that is negative and ask them how to solve it in a positive way.” Most striking, however, was a parent overheard telling his child: “If someone hits you, you have to hit them back.” ARTists attempted to sway children away from reactive toward more proactive responses: “I’d like you to try to come up with other ways aside from insulting back, because anybody can do that. What we’re trying to find out are new and different ways of overcoming oppression.” In a moment of angst, I felt that the entire project may have been doing more harm than good:

Maybe we’re teaching [children] how to be better oppressors as opposed to rehearsing for resistance. . . . We were giving them a forum for being oppressive. We were saying, “Make an image of oppression.” and that was OK, “Say something oppressive,” and that was OK.

But one child noted when Forum Theatre scenes generated negative responses: “Sometimes, you can’t be nice to deal with oppression.”

Terms and Concepts

ARTists instructed children on relevant terms and concepts as sessions progressed to develop a common vocabulary for our work together. These terms reflect the general content we explored and cluster into five major categories:

1. Power and related constructs: oppressor, oppressed, control, resistance, target, agent;
2. Social actions and constructs: inclusion, exclusion, respect, disrespect, stigma, stigmatize, rumor, gossip, slander, difference, uniqueness, mainstream;
3. Emotions: regret, encouragement, jealousy, pride, defensiveness, etc.;
4. Image Theatre: image, sculpting, dynamize, dissociation;
5. Forum Theatre: activating scene, problem solving, protagonist, antagonist, tactic, negotiation, conflict, change, confrontation, lightning forum

Most children could articulate an adequate understanding of oppression once it was explained to them and explored during TO sessions. Boys usually provided a rote definition while girls illustrated the concept through examples. Classroom curricula varied from ARTist to ARTist, yet we all began with Boalian games and Image Theatre before proceeding to Forum Theatre. Each dramatic form presented us with unique challenges and observations, so they will be discussed separately.

Boalian Games with Children

Boal's repertory of games functioned not only as warm-ups but also as metaphors for enacting and reflecting on power relationships. Games both prepared the group for more advanced work in Image and Forum Theatre, and served as ports of entry for discussions about oppression: "How does this game relate to real life in terms of power?" In some cases, we used games as springboards to discuss a particular class's particular oppressions. The French Telephone demonstrated how rumors spread among fifth graders get more exaggerated with each retelling.⁴

Colombian Hypnosis served as an overt and graphic way to physically illustrate *power* and the difference between two new terms for the group at the introductory session: the *oppressor* and the *oppressed*. One ARTist noted:

Children were able to describe who had the power as well as verbalize what it felt like to have/not have that power. [They said,] "When you were leading you felt like you could make that person do anything"; "When I was following I felt like, if I didn't do what that person wanted me to, that they would hit me." One boy found his personal understanding in a moment of discovery after playing the game: "Oh, the oppressed is the oppressee!"

Perhaps no other game in Boal's repertory illustrated so perfectly the dynamics of power for these young participants.

ARTists also discovered that the *way* games were played exhibited children's social and cultural dynamics. Selected games served as diagnostic instruments to assess their process and progress as a community. The Space Series (renamed The Grouping Game by ARTists), one of the most easily played games by adults, was difficult for these children. In this game, the facilitator asks, "Get in groups of twos; threes; fours; fives. . . ." Participants then quickly assemble into groups consisting of the number called out. Children's genders and existing friendships prevented them from efficiently achieving the goals of the game. When adults play this activity, they usually group by moving quickly toward each other. Children, however, physically concretized their group through holding, hugging, and expressing "tightness" with "my buddies". Though nothing is wrong with physical contact, the action suggested forthcoming trouble with those the group would later include and exclude. Despite the ARTists' initial efforts to continuously reinforce, "It doesn't matter who you're with," to children, it *did* matter whom they were with.

A fourth grade classroom playing the game, captured on video tape, serves as an example. When the facilitator asked to assemble in twos, most children found a partner quickly, and most often a good friend. For groups of three, children called out for a certain person to join their twosome, usually a mutual friend, and children dashed to them. "Residual" children saw they were too late to join a threesome and were directed by them to look for another group. Gathering in groups of threes and fours took progressively longer for children to negotiate, fours usually taking the longest time to assemble. They not only looked for a cluster of people to form the right number, they verbally (and sometimes physically through a tug-of-war with a child) negotiated and sometimes argued who could be in which group of friends—not just groups, but groups of *friends*. (An ARTist noted: "They all

looked frantic and worried that they wouldn't be a part of a group.") On fours, fives, and sixes, children shouted out others' names; some were pulled into a group, others were pushed away if they attempted to join. During this exchange and rearrangement, boys rushed to other boys and girls rushed to other girls. Boys would rather have been "residual" than join a group of girls to help them compose the right number of people in a group. If and when a boy did try to join a girls' group, he was pushed away from it. Occasionally, a girl voluntarily joined a group of boys, if needed, yet she was not accepted willingly or touched.

During reflection, facilitators shared what they observed and asked children to rationalize their ineffective playing. One girl explained:

It's mostly because some people have certain other friends that they like. There are certain people that don't like other people, and that do like other people, and so they want the people they like to come in their group, and the people that they don't like, they don't want them to. And if the person that they don't like likes them, then that makes people feel bad.

I myself felt it was necessary to share my honest reaction to the dynamics I witnessed:

If we're going to get over our oppressions, one of the things we need to do is be willing to just accept who comes and not exclude. . . . You don't have to like everybody, but it is important that you must respect everybody. Liking people is different from respecting people. Respect is simply showing common courtesy and good manners towards someone, you know? I might love some people more than I do others, but I treat everybody the same when it comes to respect. . . . The important part is to include everybody, regardless of who they are.

Reflections such as these were intended to raise children's consciousness about the dynamics of playing the game. Unfortunately, in not all cases did this consciousness change children's actions or preferences, as one ARTist noted: "The second time they played it they weren't much quicker. There was still a lot of discussion and desire to create the 'right' group." Eventually, we discovered that calling the numbers out randomly rather than successively forced children to think about the *numbers* in a group, not necessarily the composition of them. The Grouping Game became a key diagnostic to assess a class's ability to inclusify and develop as a community. The shorter the amount of time the game took to play (assuming task familiarity was not confounding the assessment), the more the class was lessening their oppressive tendencies among themselves.

Image Theatre with Children

The most salient aspects of Image Theatre in our field experiment were matters of children's physical technique and observations of gender differences.

The majority of children participated actively when ARTists asked for images to be formed individually with each child in his or her own space. Yet many had difficulty physically maintaining a frozen image. For some it may have been due to physical awkwardness, self-consciousness from being looked at by others, or discomfort with the time required to hold the images still. Others broke their frozen images when peer observers commented on them, whether seriously or

flippantly. ARTists found themselves frequently prompting “Freeze it” or “Hold it.” Video and photo cameras encouraged children to keep their images still; the media devices added a sense of importance to what they created. The physical contact necessary for sculpting and group imaging required ARTists to develop a specific repertory of image theatre guidelines for sculpting others, such as: don’t pull on a person’s clothing to shape your partner’s body; respect the frozen image of another by maintaining some distance from it. ARTists also reminded children that the sculpture has an obligation to hold the image the sculptor created, unless it causes physical discomfort.

Dynamizing an image is to set it in motion. The purpose is to come to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of the oppression portrayed. This concept and its undertaking was, at times, also difficult for children as this ARTist noted: “It just must be that they don’t have the focus, or the trust in themselves, to be able to just go with a movement and let it slowly take over and transform into something else.” More common phrases such as “setting the image in motion” or “moving in slow motion” didn’t necessarily crystallize the concept for participants. Counting as they moved was one tactic to help them get from one point to another. A count of 10 was too long; 5 worked much better. Some perceived the count as a *countdown* to move swiftly into the next image, rather than take the time to transition. Finally, asking them to explain the *process* of what was going through their minds during the dynamizing was also difficult for them to articulate.

One successful technique adapted from a non-Boalian source for Image Theatre sessions was a “thought balloon”—a comic-strip convention made into a cardboard cutout, held directly over a child as a strategy for motivating spectator inferences about the image. Children most often identified internalized thoughts in the third person (“He’s thinking that nobody will play with him.”). ARTists prompted children to rephrase their inferences in the first person (“I feel sad because nobody will play with me.”) in hopes of developing not just sympathy but empathy. Though children had a limited emotional vocabulary, they trusted their intuitive and tacit knowledge and showed developmentally appropriate skills at inference making, reading subtextual cues, and interpreting the nuances and intentions of the image creators.

When children selected their own partners for pair and small group work, virtually everyone clustered with same-gender classmates. This provided an opportunity to compare and contrast differences in image compositions between boys and girls. Their independently constructed images of such negative concepts as “disrespect” and “enemies” showed several physical patterns, extracted from field note and video tape analysis of their work. All groups used pointed fingers and multi-leveled arrangements to demonstrate oppressive images. Boys, however, created both realistic and heightened compositions of physical violence, while girls’ images were rooted in friendship clusters or cliques. Boys used raised arms and clenched fists; girls used open hands and extended or folded arms. Boys maintained close physical proximity to their same gendered partners, but girls made more physical contact among themselves. In small groups, boys arranged their bodies in nondescript clusters, while girls created circular arrangements. The patterns reinforce what we stereotypically attribute to male and female body images and confirmed the children’s own gender-based oppressions: for boys, by “*force*”; for girls, by “*feelings*”.

Forum Theatre with Children

Overall, ARTists perceived that children were highly engaged with Forum Theatre's spontaneity, the intrigue of a puzzle to be solved, and the recognition of their own reality dramatized.

Forum Theatre, as described by Boal (2002) and "traditionally" practiced, was considered more successful with fifth graders than with fourth. Verbal improvisation ability (i.e., oral language skills) of older children was attributed as the primary factor for their enhanced work. Variations of Forum Theatre were developed for use with fourth graders, such as teacher-in-role as the antagonist with children as a collective protagonist improvising an initiating scenario—for example, the ARTist as an older sibling bossing around the children as a little brother or sister. Simple non-verbal conflicts were also developed, such as two children moving toward each other, stopping face-to-face, and finding a way of continuing in their respective directions (this is the basic conflict of Dr. Seuss's children's book, *The Zax*). One fourth grade class was asked to write brief activating scenes for Forum Theatre exploration with ARTist guidance. Two examples include:

PROTAGONIST: Can I use that [*a student's pencil*]?

ANTAGONIST: No. I don't want you touching anything of mine.

PROTAGONIST: Wanna work together?

ANTAGONIST: You're so stupid. I'm not working with you.

Fifth graders were able to improvise and write traditional albeit brief Forum Theatre scenarios in small groups and perform as protagonists, antagonists, and spect-actors with the teacher as Joker. Examples of activating scenes constructed by one fifth grade class (required to work in mixed-gender groups by their classroom teacher) include:

"I Got it First" [of all scenes developed by children for one ARTist, this one received majority vote for exploration]

(*FIRST BOY and GIRL reach for a ball at the same time*)

FIRST BOY: Gimme.

GIRL: I got it first.

FIRST BOY: No you didn't.

GIRL: Yes I did, I got it first.

FIRST BOY: Well, fight for it, then.

GIRL: I don't wanna fight.

(*SECOND BOY enters*)

SECOND BOY (to GIRL): Wuss.

GIRL: Shut up!

SECOND BOY: Wuss.

(GIRL pushes SECOND BOY)

SECOND BOY: Wuss!

(SECOND BOY grabs the ball; he and the FIRST BOY walk away)

The scene that received the second most votes for exploration was titled “They Do Not Mix”:

(A BOY on the floor, reading; a GIRL circles around him)

GIRL: That spiked hair and those shorts do not mix.

BOY: Why do you care?

GIRL: Because I couldn’t help noticing that you look like a freak show on ice.

BOY: Bet you have front row tickets.

GIRL: At least I’m allowed into the arena.

BOY: Just back off.

GIRL: No.

BOY: I like my hair and my shorts mixed together.

GIRL: Fine.

(The GIRL walks away)

BOY: Fine!

During replayings, some children called out “Stop!” to replace the protagonist almost as soon as the protagonist began his or her dialogue. The immediacy of whether their ideas would work or not was apparent as children applied their tactics, only to see them stalemate. Children often presented solutions through a limited repertory: name calling (matching verbal taunt for verbal taunt), or walking away to appeal to the adult authority of a teacher (as they had been instructed to do in actual situations). Neither of these two promoted solutions that “worked”, though the latter was reinforced as one possible method for solving a problem. ARTists, through critical reflection, encouraged children to go beyond the “fight or flight” options they presented and to find more proactive solutions to the problem.

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Banks and Nieto’s (1999) three-stage model of social consciousness development was used to evaluate the TO Project’s influences and affects on the child participants. The model was chosen for its elegant, readily identifiable categories for assessment. The three stages progress from awareness (*Knowing and Questioning*), to emotional involvement (*Critiquing and Caring*) to action (*Walking the Talk*).

Knowing and Questioning

The first stage of TO work attempted to cultivate individual and group social consciousness through *Knowing and Questioning*. An ARTist remarked in his journal:

One student, who is often made fun of due to her slight weight problem, offered that after working in this class she has finally realized just how much they all oppress each other: "I never noticed it before." Many of the students agreed. They then offered specific examples dealing with bullying, exclusion, physical fights, name calling, etc.

One teacher, however, felt that the short length of the residency was insufficient to generate significant results: "The concepts are within reach—practicing them is not. . . . They weren't exposed to it long enough. My concern is that I don't know if we're doing it long enough for it to be a permanent change."

Critiquing and Caring

The second stage cultivates sympathy and empathy among participants through *Critiquing and Caring*. An ARTist entered in her journal:

The scared look in their eyes clarified something for me. I've been feeling that they were ready to learn some actual tools for dealing with their oppressions. The work that we've done thus far has helped to build a sense of empathy and sympathy for those who are being oppressed—i.e., these students might now think twice about oppressing anybody else.

One teacher affirmed the development of caring in some of her students, but only speculated and hoped that it was making a difference:

They realize that they hurt somebody or they said something that they shouldn't have said, and they go ahead and try to correct it. And there's a couple of students who actually—they do this a lot, but I'm wondering if maybe now they're starting to think about it a little bit more before they say it. I mean, that's what I'm hoping is happening.

Action—Walking the Talk

The third stage is behavioral evidence of change, "the opposite of oppression" as ARTists called it or, more formally labeled, *Walking the Talk*. Toward the end of his sessions, one ARTist noted after playing The Grouping Game:

It seems to me this time that they were more challenged by getting the right numbers in their group than who was in their group. I saw more of helpful behavior between classmates. For example, as a whole they would try to help the "lost" people find a group to join. I only saw one example of bickering this time and I didn't catch anyone banning any other student from his/her group. They might not go out of their way to bring them into their own group but they will help them find another one.

One teacher replied when asked in an interview, "Has the name calling changed?":

I think it's been better in the classroom, but I really don't know about the playground. I think it will always be a problem because it is part of their lives, and has been for so long. . . . I would say at least a third are getting something out of your activities. It's not always the same third. Some children you will never reach.

Another teacher affirmed that the indoctrination of gender roles may be too entrenched by fifth grade:

I did see some of the kids who were unaccepting of certain kids look at them in a different light. I found that more with the girls than I did with the boys. They're nicer to somebody else, but the boys are not as into that. Girls try to fix things. They seem to be interested in learning social skills. Boys are just power monsters. They are not willing to compromise.

ARTists and teachers maintained different perspectives on the general outcomes of the TO Project. But we all agreed that precise "measurement" of the field experiment's influences and affects on children was impossible to conduct. There *were* individual success stories, such as the fifth grade scapegoat who appeared more comfortable and self-assured on the last day of the residency and the Korean fifth grader with limited English skills who spoke confidently before the video camera on feeling good about herself. To the ARTists, what children themselves offered as their learning mattered most to us.

Children's Recommendations to Peers

On the final day of the residency, child participants from two representative class groups were asked to recommend to others in their grade level at other schools how to deal with oppressive actions. Their responses were video taped, transcribed, and pooled into composite narratives by weaving individual responses into a coherent narrative. Whether their responses are simply "talking the talk" for the research team's benefit, or genuine learning outcomes for "walking the talk" in the immediate future, is difficult to verify. Nevertheless, note how girls' recommendations generally focus on emotional reactions and strategies ("*feelings*"), while boys' recommendations generally focus on behavioral tactics ("*force*").

Girls' Recommendations

Fourth grade girls advised their peers:

People who are mean to you are, like, just jealous. Say it's a boy being mean to a girl: Don't let the boys make you feel bad because they're just doing that because they either like you or they just want their friends to like them. Boys want to show off to girls to get friends to think that they're cool and stuff, but they're not really cool, they're really mean. I usually fight with my best [girl] friend, and in a coupla minutes we'll ask each other if we wanna play. Girls sometimes can't control themselves; like after the fights, they're very, very sad, and they'll, like, apologize to each other.

Fifth grade girls recommended:

In my opinion, if someone doesn't like you because of what you look like, and a lot of people like you 'cause of what you act like, it's their loss if

you're a really friendly person. Nobody should be judged from what they look like, it should be all from the inside. A lot of time people are made fun of because they look different. You're beautiful and unique in your own way; don't listen to anyone who says you're not. Ignore people who mistreat you. Feel good about yourself.

Boys' Recommendations

Fourth graders suggested:

Just take it to the bathroom after school [or] forget about it. Talk it out [or] walk away. Don't say anything, think of something else, try not to give in to them. [Girls oppress us because] they might be jealous that we're boys and they're girls. Set 'em straight. If you're mad at your brother or sister, don't, like, destroy something of theirs or something they own, because probably next day you're gonna be really happy with them, then you'll feel sorry that you destroyed something.

Fifth grade boys advised:

Treat people the way you like to be treated. If you don't like the way they treat you, then you should treat them nice. If people think you're a little different, and you look a little different and you're weird, you should just walk off and go play with someone else; everybody has their own opinion. If someone's being mean to you and calls you names, just back off, walk away, try to ignore them. Don't use self-defense unless you really have to because it can hurt other people really badly. But if someone's really provoking you, and they're hurting you, then you should fight back. Don't take any rap from anybody.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

The ARTists may not have changed the world, but we feel confident asserting that we took some of its young inhabitants at Wilson School through the first stage of social consciousness development. To Boal, TO is "rehearsal for the revolution". With ages 9–11 children, however, TO seems more like an "audition" for preadolescent social interaction. Theatre of the Oppressed overtly reveals the interpersonal social systems and power hierarchies within a classroom microculture. It shows which children are leaders, followers, and resisters; who is influential and who is ignored; which children may continue to assert dominance in later grade levels; and which children may succumb to those with more authority in later grade levels.

One fourth grade boy jokingly called our TO sessions "group therapy," suggesting that TO with children can be both beneficial and, in the wrong hands, dangerous. Creating community through TO is an ideal goal, but—realistically, as teachers noted and ARTists observed—not everyone in the upper elementary classroom will do his or her part to achieve it. Natural child development and individual personality formation, coupled with competitive playground politics and gender socialization embedded within American culture, may inhibit short-term TO experiences from making a permanent, positive impact among some of its

participants. But Boal abhors defeatism. These minimal results should not discourage TO facilitators from their continued, valiant attempts to change the world. Children's recommendations to peers for combating oppression may be rhetoric without substance, for not everyone "walked the talk". But children's continuing cognitive and social development will enhance their future ability for critical thought, enabling better analyses of the complexities and ambiguities of oppressive situations, possibly leading to more informed solutions.⁵

What ARTists and teachers hoped for could not be assessed by the end of the field experiment, for it is in the long-term, not short-term, that results may become more evident—a finding supported through comparable research by Giffin and Yaffe (1999, p. 133) and Bagshaw and Halliday (2000, pp. 100–102). As Doyle (1993) asserts, "Transformation . . . usually comes in small doses and usually happens over time" (p. 130). Thus, as Boal advocates, we may have planted seeds in hopes that they would take root. And one cannot tell from a seed just planted whether it will die underground; sprout but then wither; or grow, flourish, and mature.

NOTES

¹ Funding for this project was provided by Arizona State University's Katherine K. Herberger College of Fine Arts Research Council, J. Robert Wills, Dean.

² The annual Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed and National Association for Drama Therapy conferences, regularly feature such workshops. Recent publications (e.g., O'Toole & Donelan, 1996) have documented TO presentations at international conferences.

³ ARTists found themselves enacting more than just the *facilitator, teacher*, and even *joker* role with children. Aside from the traditional dramatic functions such as *storyteller, playwright, actor, director*, and *dramaturg*, ARTists used such descriptors to identify their multiple roles in this project as: *moralist, ethicist, philosopher, confessor, devil's advocate, humanitarian, disciplinarian, counselor, analyst, theorist, big brother/sister, surrogate parent*, and *friend*. Though we understood these multiple roles as responsibilities of any educator of young people, the content of TO heightened our attunement to them in journal reflections.

⁴ Children's favorite games from Boal's (2002) repertory, based on their responses and requests for replaying, included: The Bear of Portiers, Colombian Hypnosis, One Person We Fear /One Person is Our Protector, The Machine of Rhythms (and variations), Person to Person Quebec-Style, Complete the Image, The Vampire of Strasbourg, Who Said "Ah"?, The Glass Cobra, String Puppet, The French Telephone, and The Great Game of Power.

Games that required a large playing area, such as The President's Bodyguards, were difficult to conduct in the limited space of school classrooms. Two teachers reluctant to move students' desks for our work forced us to think of alternative ways to structure some of the games. For example, The French Telephone, ordinarily played while standing in a large circle, was adapted to accommodate children seated in rows at their desks.

⁵ Counseling literature suggests that school violence prevention programs succeed when there are comprehensive and collaborative training efforts for teachers, children, and their parents, plus environmental and ecological reorganization within the school and community (O'Toole, Burton, & Plunkett, 2005; Smith & Sandhu, 2004).

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