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The Theatre Arts and Care Ethics

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In this current political climate, which narrowly defines educational quality by test scores, educators may overlook the importance of building relationships in which students can learn to care and become agents for social justice. Caring for one another and caring about ideas is all the more important now, as students inherit a world faced with local and global political and social crises. This case study chronicles one school's attempt to teach students to care about each other despite differences through an all-school theatre-arts program. The data include teacher and student interviews, discussion groups, surveys, and students' written work concerning a play about the life of Martin Luther King, Jr. These data show that (1) the performance aspect necessitated interdependence, fostering relationships; (2) an experience of injustice led to descriptions that reflect learning to care beyond students' individual cultural contexts, arguably a foundation for social justice; and (3) the theatre experience inspired connections between the students and historical figures. These connections fostered students' caring about historical ideas and stories told in the play. While we cannot be certain of lasting palpable changes, the role theatre appears to play in opening possibilities for care is particularly interesting.

This current climate of increased bureaucratization may so narrow our definition of education that we overlook learning experiences that could foster a caring and socially just society. Now, when students face violence in schools and global environmental and political crises, we must consider how the arts offer unique opportunities for students to learn to relate across differences, to care for one another, and to discuss ideas. Furthermore, I believe that standardization and testing can undermine efforts to create the kind of learning experiences that can foster care. The push to cover content may limit teachers' time needed to consider the social implications of learning experiences. Students' pervasive testing experiences could pit them against one another, discouraging collaboration and encouraging competition. When standardization and testing define and evaluate educational processes and products, opportunities to learn caring behaviors are even more important in fostering a socially just society.

This case study examines one elementary school's attempt to teach toward caring and social justice through an all-school theatre-arts experience. Each year this school—where I taught prior to this study—focuses on one country and tells a central, historical and/or mythical story of an individual (for example, the story of the Chinese goddess Quan Yin, or the Persian poet Hafiz). The cultural study spans the year's social studies and language-arts curriculum through, for example, research, dance, improvisation, story-telling, cooking, map making, architecture and art study for set building.

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Figure 1. Scene from the theatre performance.¹

In 2005–2006, the school allowed me to research the students’ interpretations of their experience dramatizing Martin Luther King Jr.’s life (Figure 1). How might students describe their learning concerning King’s life and culture? How do they articulate any cultural and racial differences between themselves and those whose stories they recount? What might this unique theatre program offer as a medium to foster relationships across differences?

As a teacher at this school, I became interested in what parents and teachers at the school often describe as the transformative power of this theatre experience. Many scholars have argued for the cognitive and/or behavioral, transferable or extrinsic benefits of arts education (Catterall, Capleau and Iwanga 1999; Heath and Robinson 2004; Burton, Horowitz and Abeles, 1999; Seidel 1999; Grumet 2004; Wakeford 2004) or theatre-arts education in particular (Heathcote 1983, 1995; Wilhelm 2006). Others highlight the intrinsic benefits of the arts (Eisner 2000; Arnstine 1995) and theatre arts (Heathcote 1983; Schonmann 2006). Eisner writes that the complex and metaphorical nature of art contrasts the certainty and conformity of standards and testing (Eisner 2005). To create or understand metaphor, students must be able to draw connections across disparity. Likewise, the capacity to grapple with complexity (or the lack of a single correct or incorrect response) seems necessary to accept the existence of more than one perspective.

Scholars such as Martha Nussbaum and Jerome Bruner have argued that encounters with the arts expand participants’ capacity for empathy. They suggest that the arts may serve to promote respect between individuals (Nussbaum 1997) and even tolerance between cultures (Bruner 1986; Nussbaum 1990; Trilling 1953; Wilhelm 2006; Weinstein 2003). Maxine Greene (1995) writes: “(I)t may well be the imaginative capacity that allows us also to experience empathy with different points of view, even with interests apparently at odds with ours . . . a new way of decentering ourselves, of breaking out of the confinements of privatism and self-regard into a space where we can come face to face with others . . .” (31). Here Greene’s reference to empathy transcends the quotidian use of the word as understanding an “other,” which could arguably be a merely intellectual experience, to inspire but not demand action on others’ behalf. Like Nel Noddings’s concept of care (Noddings 1984),

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Greene's social imagination suggests affect as well as intellect transcending self-concern. Noddings's notion of care encompasses this understanding of social imagination extending it to require not only the move beyond personal egotism but also to active support of the other. My question revolves around whether the arts can foster students' abilities to care.

Care Ethics and Theatre

To frame my research, I draw on Noddings's notion of an ethic of care as an alternative to traditional Western moral education (Noddings 2002). Care's implications for education can be understood in contrast to character education, the prevalent Aristotelian approach to moral education. Character education comes under critique for a universal predetermination of virtues (Kohlberg 1981), the logical consequence of conceiving of moral education as memorizing a body of content. Furthermore, character education can rely on methods of inculcation (Kohlberg 1981) emphasizing extrinsic motivation, critiqued for teaching students to follow authority (Kohn 1993).

In contrast to character education's focus on a static body of fixed virtues, care ethics centers on how students learn to care in relationships through open-ended process-oriented experiences, such as dialogue. Noddings asserts care as a fundamental human need. Our inclination to be in caring relationships with one another could motivate us to learn to relate—perhaps more effectively than a set of dictums based on a body of knowledge. Instead of segregating moral education as a discrete subject, which John Dewey (1938), famously likened to teaching swimming outside the water, care ethics recognizes the moral relevance of caring relationships as both the site of and the motivation for moral learning. Thus, all experience within the teacher–student relationship has moral significance. The relational implications of pedagogy, such as this theatre-arts program, become an interesting site to analyze for the creation and continuance of caring relationships across differences, such as ethnicity and culture.

Within her schema for care, Noddings differentiates between “caring for” and “caring about.” Caring for demands particular attention to the other's needs; Noddings terms this “engrossment” (Noddings 1984). The individual *caring for* subjugates personal needs to those of the other. In a caring relationship, the one caring becomes aware of the cared-for's experience and acts to support the cared-for's goals. Noddings (1984) and Mayeroff (1971) distinguish between *caring about* those we cannot know given their distance and caring for, which requires attention over time. Noddings underscores caring about's import as the basis of justice, with the caveat that caring for helps acknowledge tendencies to self-righteous assumptions concerning others' needs.

Scholars such as Michelle Knight (2004) and Audrey Thompson (1998) assert that a fully realized care theory demands avoidance of colorblindness—recognizing cultural and racial context—in order to face oppression and. Thompson (1998) argues that failing to recognize context “support(s) the sentimental belief that being natural means not noticing racial differences” (523). Thompson (1998) warns: “One of the important contributions that theories of care can make to education is to theorize educational caring practices so as to reveal their colorblindness, in order for change to become possible. Unless caring theorists take seriously the need to deconstruct and disassemble colorblindness, however, the Whiteness of the theories of care will become further entrenched” (531). In this light, my case study research question arose. Do students learn to recognize differences and consider how they conceive of them?

In telling historical, multiracial, and cultural narratives, Maria Pia Lara's work aligns with Thompson and acknowledges the need to also recognize the atrocities humans have

afflicted in these narratives. Lara (2007) argues that recognition of evil is the first step in critical moral thought: “Understanding what happened does not mean erasing the past. Rather, we are forced to see that things could have been different. . . . But *imagining* and *thinking* give us a—a moral critical space—where we can begin to deliberate if we are capable of transforming ourselves” (79). Thus, we must link the idea of the moral imagination, or of care, to our ability to think critically and imagine better possibilities. Moral deliberation and caring requires knowledge of atrocity and subsequent promise to treat others differently. In fact, Noddings (2002) also recognizes the human possibility of perpetration and domination as the starting point for moral education: “[W]hen we look at the perpetrator, we are . . . comforted because we are not, could not be, that monster. But when we look at the scene of suffering and see . . . possibilities for ourselves, then a new horror is aroused, and that horror provides a starting point for morally directed critical thinking” (50). Learning to care through drama may entail imagining not only the victim’s role but also the perpetrator’s. How might this manifest with elementary school students in a theatre production narrating the Civil Rights struggle? Imagining the suffering of an other is core to care theory. Although imagining others’ suffering is not perhaps impossible, certainly it is complex and requires careful consideration of knowledge claims about others’ needs and feelings. However, caring may be our hope for a future in which morally directed critical thinking could lead to learning to treat one another better than we have thus far. As Nussbaum (2001) writes: “(T)he arts serve a vital political function, even when their content is not expressly political—for they cultivate imaginative abilities that are central to political life” (433).

In narrating and performing the life of Martin Luther King Jr., these students became immersed in the Civil Rights Movement. My case study’s particular focus on learning to care about the other, social justice, and relational ethics renders it an interesting locus of study on multiple planes. In what ways, if at all, does this theatre program offer students opportunities to relate across differences? How do students describe this learning?

Context and Methods

Context

The context for this study is a small independent K-8 elementary school located in the urban Bay Area of northern California. The social economic status of the students is primarily lower and middle class. The year of the play the school was comprised of 75 students: 5 percent were African American, 15 percent Hispanic or Latino, 50 percent Asian, 20 percent white/Caucasian, 8 percent Filipino, 1 percent American Indian/Alaska Native, and 2 percent Pacific Islander. The diversity, small size, and relative freedom of curricular choices distinguish this context as a unique and interesting site to explore. However, certain aspects of the program may be appropriate or possible only in this specific context. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) argue that qualitative case studies are more concerned with “deriving universal statements of general social processes rather than statements of commonality between similar settings” (41).

Data Collection and Analysis

Over the course of one year, I conducted and transcribed interviews and group discussions, administered surveys, and gathered documentation such as students’ journal entries about their play, teachers’ lesson plans, and school newsletters. In interviews with the seven

teachers involved in the process, I audio recorded without note taking to free myself to make eye contact and ask follow-up questions. These 60-minute interviews were immediately transcribed and took place twice, once at the beginning of the play program in the fall and once in the spring. Suspending judgment, I positioned myself as a learner. As opposed to expressing agreement, I often assured teachers of the absence of correct responses and said, "Tell me more." I also audio recorded and immediately transcribed weekly discussion groups with the fourth- and fifth-grade students. Accustomed to dialogue, the students expressed dissent and questions concerning their teachers' and school's practices. I attempted to provide equal opportunities for all to respond. I also gathered anonymous pre and post surveys from all teachers and students involved. Anonymity may have freed them from concern over how honest answers might either influence relationships or grades.

Documentation provided an additional data source. Merriam argues the worth of documents as data sources, uninfluenced by a researcher's biases (Merriam 2002). The students' written reflections on the play, journals (from kindergarten through eighth grade) and social studies research projects (fourth through eighth grades) offered a chance to explore their interpretations. I also gathered teaching materials associated with the play and documents written to parents, such as lesson plans, e-mails, and newsletters.

Last, I transcribed a prerecorded 180-minute documentary on the play program including rehearsals, planning meetings, and interviews with teachers, parents, and students. The year before I studied the program, one teacher at the school made this in-house film. Thus, this documentary afforded further access to participants' views.

Positionality

As a former teacher at the school, I consider myself a participant-observer. Glesne (1999) suggests that feminist research recognizes practitioner involvement in the field: "much potential lies in the concept of practitioners (e.g., teachers, nurses, social workers) as researchers who investigate, with others, their own 'backyard'" (14). My "backyard" connection to the school arguably afforded me access to an authentic view of the theatre, since my colleagues welcomed this study, hoping it would shed light on benefits, complexities, and challenges. However, I recognize that this position may predispose me to interpret findings based on my own experience. Therefore, I made particular efforts to stay close to the data through rereading and participant checking of both data and interpretation.

Theatre Program

This immersive theatre program distinguishes itself in several ways. Although year-long theatre programs are not unheard of (Catterall 2007), this one is interesting in that it involves the entire K-8 school and occurs during the school day. The teachers do not consider the theatre program an extra, as can sometimes be the case (Dodwell 2002). The program's "full immersion" begins early in the year, as students learn about the person whose life story is the play's subject matter through stories, films, and historical accounts. Rehearsals and preparations related directly to the performance start three months in advance. One second-grade teacher described these months: "I can think of no other time when students, from the youngest, take more enjoyment in school, so much that they take over. I mean they know more play details than we do. They include the play characters among their larger school family." These characters who become "family" reflect the school's cultural focus. The figures chosen are central to a country's history and myth, including, for example, the Iranian poet and scholar Hafiz, or the French heroine Joan of

Arc. Second-grade teacher Rachel describes the story choices for her audience on opening night: “We aim to tell the story of people who lived life dedicated to the betterment of humankind. We hope students come away with an idea that there are many ways to be in the world and there are role models other than stars in popular culture.” Students and teachers together study the historical, political, mythic, and wisdom traditions of the culture of the “great person” from kindergarten through eighth grades.

In the summers, willing and available graduates meet with several teachers to research the subject of the play and to map out the storyline and scenes. They work together to improvise and draft the script. Throughout the process, they revise the script as needed to meet the project’s educational and/or performance needs. Under each teacher’s leadership, classes take responsibility for one aspect of the performance, such as costumes, lighting, or set. One teacher takes on the role of director.

The teachers design particular aspects of the program to foster relationships across the school, including inclusion of all students, heterogeneous grouping and opportunities for cross-gender and cross-cultural casting, and the integration of family and community resources into the curriculum. Teachers include every student in the play experience. As a first-grade teacher said, “It’s our work to find a place for every student’s talent to flourish.” Teachers also organize the event to integrate students across ethnic, cultural, and age groups; for example, an Iranian kindergartener acted a scene with an African-American fifth-grader. Furthermore, students often portray characters whose ethnicity or culture differs from their own. To further facilitate students’ association across age differences, each fourth- through eighth-grader mentors a younger actor, helping with costumes, scene changes, line memorization, etc. The program’s efforts at inclusion transcend the school boundaries. Because the cultural and historical curriculum is tied to the play, the teachers welcome family members into their classrooms to share experiences related to the play’s subject. For example, parents consulted on set design, script, and so forth. One family member came to a school assembly to tell how his parents had met Martin Luther King and how King inspired their own work for equal rights. Ultimately, the program is designed so students deeply experience one of the many cultural and ethnic backgrounds represented in the student body through the lived experience of a central, inspirational character.

Findings and Analysis

To analyze the data for specific instances addressing my primary research questions, I used Noddings’s caring for and caring about as central theoretical organizing devices. My research data led me to distinguish between relationships between actual people and historical events, which I considered to reflect caring for and caring about. Aspects of this theatre-arts program afforded opportunities for students to learn about caring (1) for one another, (2) about cultures other than their own, and (3) about history.

Caring For

The teachers described particular methods used to cultivate relationships and the forming of relationships during the theatre experience. According to both teachers and students, the interdependence necessary for live performance provided students with particular opportunities to begin to learn to care for one another.

The Teachers’ View. Although the theatre experience could be drawn on to foster competition between students (over parts, for example), in this context teachers described that

the “intense cooperative” circumstances in theatre lead to students’ interdependence. For example, one said: “Throughout the rehearsal process students have an opportunity to experience the consequences of an intense cooperative effort. As fellow actors deliver lines. . . my students see that each person is really essential to the play. A feeling of solidarity evolves. Friendships grow through repeated cooperative effort. Every actor discovers she or he needs every other for the story.” In order for students to “feel solidarity,” the teachers described guiding them to consider peers’ experiences and needs. For example, one such moment is recorded in the documentary: “The kindergarten teacher, Clare, sits in a circle with her class after one rehearsal and asks, ‘How does it feel to get up and perform?’ The students share feelings of excitement and fear. One says, ‘I get really nervous.’ After several such comments, Clare asks, ‘What can we do to help our friends on stage?’ and the group discusses supporting each other in whatever way is needed. One says, ‘I try not to laugh if they forget.’” After the teachers all watched the documentary together to provide feedback on the process, Clare said: “What I notice is that if I am not judging them myself, they will listen to my words about support and they’ll come up with ways to be compassionate towards others’ worry or mistakes.”

This orientation toward the other reflects Noddings’s (1984) characterization of the attention necessary in caring for: “We have to feel something that prompts us to ask, ‘What are you going through?’ and we have to feel something again when we hear the answer, if we are to respond appropriately” (41). Caring for demands attending to the other’s experience and moving to respond to support an other. The collaborative interactive aspects of the theatre event provided students with opportunities to learn skills essential in caring for one another, such as receptive attention. The teachers tapped conditions of theatre to promote practice in caring. For example, in rehearsal, one teacher said, “No matter how small you think your or another’s role is, without each of you the play wouldn’t happen. Everyone is giving and that’s how the magic happens” (Figure 2). The teachers explicitly articulated the nature of the interdependence of theatre and bid students consider each individual relevant.



Figure 2. Actresses during a dress rehearsal.

The Students' View. The students added to their teachers' assertions concerning the social bonds developed during production. Throughout students' journals, surveys, discussion groups, and essays, they described theatre's opportunity for learning to relate to one another. For example, one student wrote: "I think you get to see people you didn't maybe like and you get to like them more." Other students similarly located the theatre experience as central to engender friendships across age or cultural differences. The students claimed particular conditions fostered friendship, and they characterized theatre as "closer" than other work: "In the theatre it's easier to make friends because you're close together through a life-changing experience." Typically, they described performing as "life changing" or an intense interaction that demanded interdependence.

In agreement with their teachers, students also said the collaborative, close interaction involved not only brings them "closer" but also gave them new opportunities to learn prosocial behavior once together. They made comments such as: "The play can teach you to work together . . . without all the actors there would be no play." In particular, students noticed that each person's lines depended on others' lines. Students saw themselves as engaged in an effort in which each person mattered.

The students' comments often referred to theatre experience in the plural possessive. For example, one said: "We try together." Another student described "comforting" someone for forgetting lines: "I learned that I needed to be really, really, really on top of my cues because I almost forgot one. If someone forgets lines you just comfort them. Because you know how hard it is." Consonant with the teachers' descriptions, students specified the theatre experience as cooperative and collective. Depending on one another to create this production—with their teachers highlighting this creative interdependence—seemed to give students an opportunity to relate with care. This mirrors the dialogue that the teachers described facilitating (in which they asked their students to share their experiences and considered how they might treat one another given these experiences). The students and teachers both linked collaborating and interacting in the theatre with opportunities to develop relationships; thus, the students had opportunities to develop a capacity for care.

Caring About

The second set of findings focuses on responsiveness and attention to the concerns of groups of others, such as representatives of a cultural group. Caring about concerns students' learning about more distant others, especially from a cultural group other than one's own. Noddings considers caring about to arise from caring for: "[G]radually, we learn both to care for and, by extension, care about others" (Noddings 2002, 22). While students have opportunities to relate across cultural and racial differences, younger students may relate more over commonalities than differences; as students age their differences can often lead to their self-segregation (Tatum 1997). This often appropriate aspect of identity development presents a challenge to educators to cultivate students' learning about others' cultures and ethnicities—to increase the possibility for cross-ethnic and cross-cultural understanding (Tatum 1997). If students practiced caring for the characters they portrayed from other cultures, they may have had a chance to learn to care about other cultures. This conception highlights teachers' and students' repeated descriptions of how taking on characters from cultures other than their own led them to care about these cultures. Verducci (2000) explicitly relates caring to the process of acting:

An actor must shift out of her own perspective and into the character's (using her own emotional life) to secure an understanding of the inner life of the character. Essentially, an actor's goal resembles that of the caring empathizer;

she ferrets out and, to varying degrees, internalizes and instantiates the mental state of, in this case, her character. . . . An actor also draws information about the character's inner life from the historical period in which the action of the play occurs. She examines the climate of the time and place; the prevalent ideas and values she uncovers comprise a frame through which the actions and behaviour of the character are analyzed. (91)

Verducci correlates acting demands with a core task of caring, receptive attention. She underscores acting's role in fostering greater understanding of others through attention to characters' historical contexts, ideas, and values.

The Teachers' View. Throughout the data, the teachers discussed framing the acting process to offer students a chance to connect with their characters. The teachers described supporting students in questioning their characters' possible feelings and motivations given context, perspective, and experience. In Verducci's terms, the teachers facilitated their students' connection with their characters' "inner life." For example, a teacher described a common conversation to facilitate students' connecting with a character: "Rachel asked an actor preparing to portray an activist, 'How might she feel as she stands up for her rights? What motivates her?' The student responded, 'She could feel sad for the ways people can be so mean.'" This acting experience reflects Nussbaum's argument for the importance of the other becoming "part of one's own circle of concern" (Nussbaum 2001, 336).

When asked about this exchange, the teacher said: "Asking the actor questions like this offers a chance to seriously explore another's life. These questions become personal to the student, for if she is going to portray another she must reach across the divide between now and then, between her current reality and the other's, and try to imagine what the other might have felt." This teacher suggested, as does Verducci, that acting could push students to shift out of their own perspective to acknowledge another's. Noddings cautions against self-righteous claims concerning others' feelings and needs, particularly given different contexts, such as an activist endangering her life for human rights. Yet Noddings, Nussbaum, and others remind us that attempts to recognize that others have feelings and to learn to care about those feelings may counter indifference. In this case, acting out stories telling about the historical mistreatment of one ethnic minority seems an important opportunity for students living in a multicultural, twenty-first-century world.

The Students' View. The students' perspective added to an understanding of the opportunity acting provided to consider perspectives and experiences beyond one's own. Although I recognize limits in the complete possibilities for actually understanding others, the data seem to suggest that students' recognition of other cultural perspectives broadens their own. While describing portraying characters from cultures different from her own Indian background, one student said she became aware of "another way": "By acting out characters from different cultures, ethnicities, and religions, I have an idea of what another way might be like. Knowing this will help me meet new people, and make friends."

Through acting as characters from different backgrounds, another student recognized that people not only appear different but also have different feelings: "I think the acting definitely helped me recognize other possible feelings, perspectives. When I act I really focus on how other people feel and believe, how they are inside rather than how they look." The students described experiencing various perspectives, beliefs, and traditions through portraying roles from various cultures and eras. Overall, the data from students

and teachers pointed to the youth gaining a greater sense of understanding across difference, which further led them to describe caring about others.

Consonant with the teachers' descriptions, students described how acting out the concerns of persons from various cultures affected their notions of difference. Students said the experience of others' feelings through the acting process contributed to changed attitudes toward cultural groups less familiar for any given student. The data reflected that students' prior ideas about the ethnic minority studied (even if students from that background attended the school) derived primarily from popular media. For example, students mentioned fearing Muslims prior to studying Persia through the poet Hafiz's story. One referenced how a Muslim woman visited the school to share and describe her cultural beliefs and traditions. Another student wrote, "I was scared of certain things about Muslims, and now I know more, I'm not."

Finally, students also discussed learning how to negotiate humankind's more violent and negative tendencies. Students all played perpetrators of violence or hatred, at least in group scenes. Lara and Noddings both deem not only the victims' perspective important but also the perpetrators' for critical thinking (Lara 2007; Noddings 2002). Noddings writes of recognizing our human potential for evil, as opposed to distancing ourselves from and judging others (Noddings 2002, 50). Along these lines, I found it interesting when students described how they thought people "learned" to be racist, as opposed to some being inherently racist, which would exempt students from the possibility. For example, one said, "I learned we can make really bad mistakes. Really, we've done horrible things. I learned we can learn from mistakes." Here this student included himself with those who did "horrible things," instead of blaming distant others. Another explained that acting as a racist white she learned how one becomes racist: "When you act as a character, you are them. You see how they got there, not that it's at all right, and you really are telling how it isn't and how bad things can happen. With the whites you see their own mom telling them. They had to listen to the Blacks to learn." Through acting both the roles of perpetrators and victims, students described recognizing human potential for evil.

Although learning concerning evils could remain theoretical, the teachers described their perceptions of its influence: "The playground is really where we see theatre's true effects. Students speak up for themselves, try to let everybody play—with our support and reminders, obviously. . . but they do take it on and they compare themselves to characters in the play." Although we cannot be certain of how or even whether students will act on these initial understandings as future citizens, one student said the importance of learning about the Civil Rights Movement is "so we don't do things like that again." She expressed a sense of the possibility of racism and, therefore, an urgency to counter it.

Caring About and History

Caring about also highlights how theatre can foster students' learning to care about historical figures, which seems to contribute to students' caring more about history. Research on theatre shows deep engagement and comprehension (Wilhelm 2006), yet this study in particular highlights how students' relationships with historical figures fostered concern for the ideas and stories told in the play. The necessity to understand their characters' stories deeply enough to portray them authentically led students to delve into history's moral and existential themes. The relationship between the actors and the audience seemed also to support the students' commitment to the history curriculum they embodied through the play. Relationships between students and their audience and students and their characters figured as catalysts for the deep learning involved in the theatre.

The Teachers' View. The teachers described how the students' relationships with characters led to their caring about history: "The students begin to see the characters as flesh and blood people who they know. Then suddenly the history they're telling is one they are concerned about." Given the relationships students built to bring characters to life, the teachers described how the play evoked an authentic experience of historical events that transcended the abstract nature often characteristic of instruction. For example, one teacher said: "The characters are real and history is literally alive. If we studied civil rights without the play it would be much more vague. In acting it, children sense racial injustice." This statement reflects Heathcote's (1983) description of theatre as "filtering" knowledge "to us 'here'" as opposed to the static, distant past. Care theory highlights the relational work rendering characters "real" and the potentially related emotional and intellectual commitment to these characters and their stories.

The teachers also said that to connect to their characters well enough to portray them dramatically, the students engaged the history on the level of existential and moral themes. For example, one teacher said, "Since the students have to actually delve into the story to the depth of their characters' feelings, we can't avoid really teaching about the deeper moral themes involved." Along these lines, Noddings has argued the centrality of including moral and existential questions in schooling: "Few . . . address the questions that were once thought to be central to liberal studies: How should I live? What kind of life is worth living? How do I find meaning in life?" (Noddings 2002, 72). Simons adds that unless teachers address the moral aspect of disciplines they drain them of interest: "Attention to moral and existential issues in schools is crucial. . . it is a scandal that so many millions of children and teenagers spend their days in boredom in classes that systematically avoid questions of genuine interest and importance" (Simons 2001, 16). To act the part of an activist, for example, brings moral themes in history to the fore. Lara (2007) further argues that moral learning occurs by recognition and critical reexamination of human potential of evil in history through story: "Because we can recognize in stories the concrete meanings of our evil deeds, this process gains a dimension of moral understanding" (29). A fourth-grade teacher suggested theatre necessitates a focus on historical "reality," including the human evils that Lara deems important to ponder. He gave an example of addressing prejudice underlying racial conflict:

They learned about (MLK's) life and history of Civil Rights. Since we do a play and act the history, we must face the racial conflict. When we do curriculum related to the play it is tinged with interest. With 1st-3rd we read, *A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.* We looked and noticed our commonalities (body parts, clothes) and our differences (eye and skin color). We shared our differences. I said, "I'm Indian from India. I'm dark brown. . . ." We asked whether these differences would make it acceptable to allow particular children privileges. We pointed out that outer characteristics do not determine inner worth. We asked what we have in common that cannot be seen and we came up with everyone likes to play, wants to be loved and cared for. . . .

This activity began to address complex and challenging issues of ethnicity at the heart of the civil rights movement. It recalls Thompson's argument that to learn to care across difference, we must acknowledge color. As Wilder (1999) puts it, "[T]he color-blind approach. . . is blind to every color except white. . . A more effective approach (to care), Palet (1979) suggested, would be for teachers to acknowledge color" (as cited in Wilder 1999, 357). This classroom discussion further addressed moral themes involved in racial conflict. Students were introduced to the language of "inner worth" to challenge racial bias.



Figure 3. Bulletin board in Grade 4–5 classroom.

In another example of the historical content of the play in the classroom, a teacher described how students must relate deeply to MLK in order to “do justice to his words”:

In the play students read MLK’s speeches, and they need to think about why he spoke with conviction so they do justice to his words. We read *Martin’s Big Words* in addition to our usual history text and discussed what made King’s “big” metaphorically. Students said they were, ‘true, about real life things, and really mattered.’ We watched King giving his “Dream” speech listening for “big” words (Figure 3). They listen with excitement to anything about the play. I asked what words they consider big. They said, “saying the truth about what’s really right”, “speaking up for what you believe.” They noticed King’s figurative language and repetition and used their own big words in the manner of MLK to write, recite and discuss speeches.

In these characteristic examples, the teachers reiterated that to relate with their characters enough to portray them, students must understand or “really think about” the history involved; this led students naturally to moral themes central to care. In the first example, students grappled with prejudice, and in the second, they considered King’s conviction to “say the truth about what’s really right” and “speak up for what you believe.” Portraying the situation dramatically led to deep consideration of related history. The students needed to understand deeper themes, as opposed to only events, to act out their characters’ stories. Another compelling example came from a teacher who drew on the play to raise the issue of ethnicity in her history curriculum: “Real history is much more complex and requires a lot of interpretation and reinterpretation. When a play portrays something historical, the students benefit from more critical analysis. Did it really happen this way? How do we know? How else could it have happened? Whose perspective does the story represent? Racial conflict complicates this question and kids need to know they’re portraying an interpretation.” This teacher touched on the importance of acknowledging multiple historical interpretations and

recognizing the potential of a theatrical portrayal as a starting point rather than an end. Lara also argues for multiple perspectives in story-telling concerning history. Perhaps the supplemental material and questioning acknowledging the complex and moral nature of history expanded students' understanding of history as interpretative rather than factual.

While the bonds students needed to develop with their characters to dramatize historical stories brought out deep engagement with moral themes and thus transcended superficial understandings of history, another relational aspect of theatre, the audience, also rendered history more interesting. Care theory emphasizes the audience's draw given the relationship between audience and performers. Teachers located performing for an audience as pivotal in rendering the characters' stories more exciting. Students were intrinsically motivated to excel since they performed live. As care ethics recognizes relationships as a universal human need, care theory clarifies why the social aspects of performing for an audience may have been inherently encouraging.

Many of the teachers mentioned the audience as a motivating factor for their students. For example, one said: "Putting it in drama makes it theirs. You see as they express it in their free play in a way I don't see with other curriculum. It may have to do with the social aspect of the play. People come to see them." Another teacher also located the audience as motivational, and she said this imbues history with meaning: "All of a sudden, history is real. It's not just history for some vague something in the future. . . . It matters." The audience's witness to the history told on stage lent significance and intensity to the moment. In fact, several teachers framed the meaning as related to the audience's 'witnessing': "Distance and time can fall away. Students may actually approach another culture, another time, in a more vital way. Their learning gets witnessed by an audience who reacts to their story as though it's real, instead of just reading about it or even doing a few isolated skits in a history class. The music of the culture, the art, the traditions, all come to life through the students' performance." Teachers argued an audience's response motivated their students to care more about the historical context of the play.

The Students' View. Students confirmed the centrality of the audience's role in their concern for historical studies. For example, one explained how dramatizing the story afforded the possibility to feel with the actual characters: "Getting the facts shows why people are different, but it seems like since the plays are stories you tell the audience you get a human feeling." Another described how an audience brought the story alive, making it something she'll "never forget": "When I go on stage with lights and costumes in front of the audience, I'm transported and I will never forget the story because for me it's like it happened." The large majority of students said they were more interested, reflective, or involved in the Civil Rights Movement after performing for an audience; some juxtaposed this to less social pedagogies such as reading and note taking.

In line with developing a concern for the story given their relationship with the audience, students also expressed a sense of familiarity and respect for the cultural heroes involved. They referred to Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks as Martin and Rosa. Demonstrative comments included the following:

"Rosa inspires me to say no when I feel something is wrong."

"I could stand up for myself like Rosa."

"Martin had a tremendous amount of courage to do what he did and I would have supported him 100 percent."

"I learned that Martin never used fists or took out anger on others and this is what we practice on the playground."

And a parent's e-mail read: "On a walk, I heard a 1st grade girl talking about some story in the news involving racial injustice and she said, 'I wonder what Martin would think?' They discussed justice and feeling for others and what Rosa would have done. The knowledge was not book knowledge; it was theirs." These comments reflect students' opportunities to develop relationships with historical figures. To act authentically, the students needed to relate to their characters' feelings and convictions, which demanded they delve into the central conflicts with moral implications. The relationships fostered through theatre, with both characters and audience, seemed to cultivate caring about the play-related history.

Implications

Complexity: A Gestalt

Although students may have learned about caring during this theatre program, perhaps unsurprisingly, some students deemed it challenging. One seventh-grader's survey read, "I am just not ready for such a big experience this year." Another related theatre to the coercive nature of required school experiences: "I try not to get too involved, but it's hard not to." Along these lines, Schonmann argues public performance may increase the coercive element to conform to theatrical conventions (Schonmann 2006). She describes how adult expectation detracts from students' experience of joy in theatre, since dramatic conventions trump meanings. Schonmann's argument emphasizes the importance of classroom activities by and for the students. Perhaps more attention ought to go toward this work "behind the curtain."

Conversely, the audience seemed a central motivation for students. While some students said they regarded the experience as difficult, perhaps given the performance aspect, they often connected the challenge with learning: "It's the hardest thing I'll do at school. But I learn the most." Another put it as, "Even though it's so hard, you come away having learned a ton. We learned so much from this play, you can't believe it."

Despite students' affirmations of learning, we cannot know whether this experience resulted in change in students' lives. As Gallagher (2007) puts it, "One never really knows. And what would be the measure of such change? Would it be enduring change?" (172). Perhaps students forgot what they learned, for example, about Muslims that countered fear. Yet it still seems the medium of theater, tapped in this creative, rich multifaceted relational manner, has the possibility to inspire bridge building between students and those they may have called "other." In Lara's argument to resist the postmodern ineffability of atrocity, she suggests why. Lara says we must open up a critical moral space to face the problem of evil and to question its causality; things could have been otherwise and we have a responsibility to act differently. Lara (2007) writes: "But *imagining* and *thinking* give us a space—a moral critical space—where we can begin to deliberate if we are capable of transforming ourselves" (79). Theatre offers a medium to imagine and think and, in so doing, to consider the feelings and needs of others, to begin to replace fear of others with care.

Conclusions: Theatre Arts and Care

To the extent that it may be possible to cross circumstances that divide us, from place and time to ethnicity, these teachers and students suggested the centrality of the arts in cultivating relationships. Ultimately, more research is needed in this setting; comparison studies might further address questions concerning possible outcomes for fostering care through theatre. The findings here imply that students may have benefited in several ways

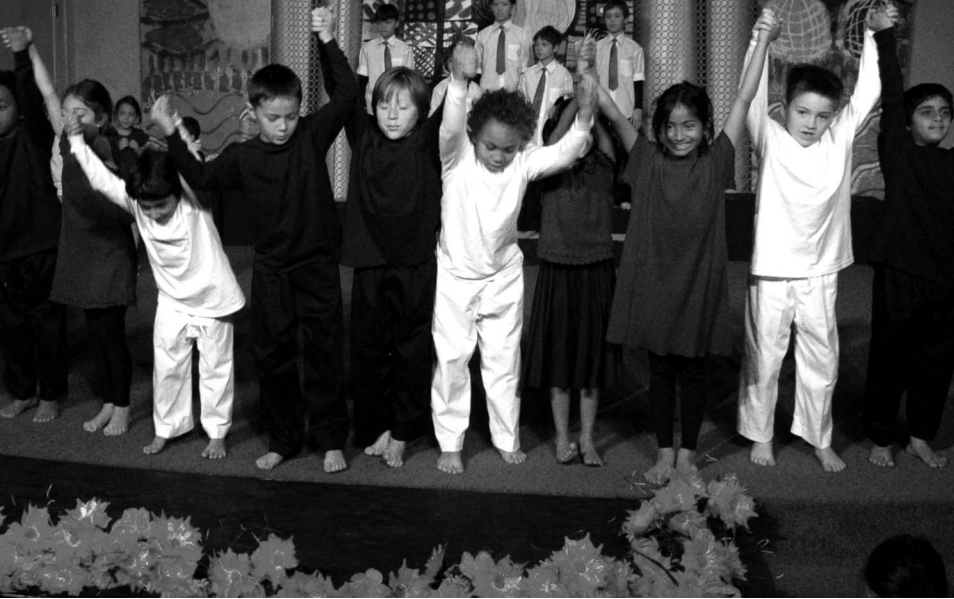


Figure 4. Several second- and third-graders take their bows.

concerning learning to care. In terms of caring for one another, teachers highlighted the intense social aspect of theatre, the visibility and reliance on one another needed to foster relationships. Second, the findings suggested that caring about history may be enhanced through drawing on theatre's social aspects, such as performers' relationships to their characters and audience (Figure 4). Last, the students described portraying multiple cultures in the plays, so performing often facilitated understanding various perspectives. Thus, acting seems to have afforded the opportunity for student-actors to learn to care beyond their own cultural bounds. Perhaps if such richly integrated projects occurred yearly, the experience of care could become the impetus for participants to see themselves as responsible agents in relationship with others. The data in general highlighted visceral connections that theatre created: to history, to the audience, and to those who may have seemed very different before the theatre experience.

Involved, integrated projects such as this take great effort. Today, contextual factors such as narrow measures of learning may militate against students learning to care. Often, the push to prepare for high-stakes tests takes precedence. "Teaching to tests" tends to sacrifice depth for superficial breath and can sap disciplines of interest. Substituting this project with less time-intensive readings in the Civil Rights Movement may fail to engage students' minds and hearts enough for them to transcend "book knowledge" to care about ideas and persons beyond their own immediate experience. If narrowing school curricula eliminates time for the arts, students may miss educational opportunities to learn to care for one another, to care for other cultures, and to care about learning itself.

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