

Northwest University

Performing Arts and Community Development:

Reimagining the Role of Performing Arts in Community Development

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Introduction

Art-based community development can wear many hats, and one is Creative Justice, an art-based alternative program for incarcerated youth in King County. I became a researcher in art-based community development after speaking to Aaron Counts, one of several mentors serving youth in Creative Justice. Creative Justice serves to transform youth through the arts; it helps reduce youth incarceration, eliminate the disproportionate number of youth in the King County Juvenile Court, and bring transformation to the juvenile justice system ("Art-based Alternatives for Youth Incarceration"). In a five to eight week intensive program, mentor artists and youth collaborate to produce a public performance based on the youths' innovative ideas and solutions. After realizing I had stereotyped incarcerated youth as dangerous people charged with crimes such as selling drugs and gang violence, I attended Creative Justice's youth public performance to challenge my own prejudice.

Creative Justice's public event was held at the Washington Hall in Seattle on June 23rd, 2016. A booming voice echoed and caught everyone's attention: "Alright, alright. Everyone listen up! Get yourself lined up! Females on the right side and follow the yellow line. Males on the left side and follow the red line. Go! Go! Go! Hurry up! Hey you!! No smile! I don't want to see your teeth!!! I don't want to see you even have the slightest smile on your face! Do you hear me!!?" The speaker stared hard at one man as if demanding a response. The man, though tall and fit, felt intimidated and said, "Yes, sir." Everyone in the lobby was surprised to realize that the event began with a powerful, immersive atmosphere in which the leaders treated us, the audience, as detainees. I could sense people were confused, and they tried to ask questions of others around them when couples had to separate and sit according to their genders. The whole atmosphere was intimidating as the booming voices shouted and echoed, and I felt emotionally and

psychologically trapped; I felt small and weak as we were forced to be robotic and stoic. The audience's distress was palpable as the theatrical set-up transported us into a detention center.

When a youth stepped onto the stage and introduced herself, I sensed the uneasy atmosphere change into something calmer. However, her story was not a pretty one; she narrated her raw emotions through a poem that expressed her struggle as she faced social stigma and racism. Other performances consisted of singing and rapping. Every youth who performed smiled widely when leaving the stage as if his or her performance had removed an enormous load of emotional pain. Following the performance, I spoke to Wesley Saint Clair, Chief Juvenile Judge of King County Superior Court. He said, "I was changed... [The] arts restored these youths' souls. They may outwardly look tough, but deep inside, they are hurt and in pain" (Saint Clair). From this experience, I learned that my prejudice is the result of my own blindness.

Reflecting on the social stigma of incarcerated youth, I remembered reading a provocative statement from *Unclean*: "...blindness to our own need undermines a life of mercy. The issue does begin with empathy, seeing my need reflected in the lives of others...and it requires a community, a 'fellowship of neediness'" (Beck 177). My personal experience in being treated as a "detainee" during Creative Justice's theatrical act dismantled my schema of the incarcerated. I never knew that the lifestyle as a detainee destroys the natural sense of being human; it robs one's privilege to be creative and emotional. Creative Justice successfully demonstrates the need of performing arts in community development so that empathy replaces apathy, the social gaps about racial prejudice lessen, and the social stigma against incarcerated youth eases into a kinder, more proactive view of the youth's potential.

Creativity is an intrinsic human ability that coexists with social connection. Drawing from various case studies on art-based community development, I discovered that general

research shows positive outcomes when creativity enhances individual lifestyles and society's well-being. According to Bornstein and Davis, "An adaptive society requires that many people construct and collaborate on solutions" (47). In other words, not only do science and technology need people's collaboration toward solutions, but performing artists can collaborate to create positive social change too. However, today, one of the greatest challenges facing performing arts as a social change medium is apathy: the lack of interest in and appreciation of the performing arts from public and governmental sectors. Such apathy can lead to a lack of public funds and inconsistent opportunities for the performing arts sector to expand its social justice work in community development. For example, in March 2017, President Trump proposed a new budget that cuts federal funding for the arts. The budget is still under review in Congress; however, it does indicate that when funding is tight, money to the arts gets cut.

In a nutshell, my research reimagines the role of performing arts as essential for holistic individual and community well-being (social, emotional, physical, and spiritual). Presently, performing arts is underused in community development, but it should play an active role in development efforts, helping people to manage adversity and to build personal and community resiliency. To engage in humanitarian action, performing arts should become part of community development: it can help empower healthy human relationships, support resilience through healing from emotional pain, tackle social concerns of prejudice and marginalization, as well as teach others about cultural and social differences in a nonconfrontational way that dissolves apathy. My research process included a performance project, *Stories of Resilience*, a full length public performance, in which I collaborated with a diverse group of performing artists and art-based organizations involved in social activism (to be described later in this document).

Performing Arts and Community Development

Performing Arts

Performing arts is an art genre which includes dance, music, drama, spoken word, and more. It is usually performed for an audience, either for commercial purposes or for social justice. Both categories involve performers entertaining their audience; however, they can portray different intentions through their performing arts. For example, Broadway commercializes performing arts to attract its audience regularly (Helmcke). On the other hand, when performing arts joins with creative activities for social justice, it becomes part of art-based community development where the focus is to promote the betterment of society.

Art-based Community Development: Performing Arts for Social Justice.

My working definition of community development is this: a process whereby people collectively come together to generate creative actions so that their contributions become a solution for a common problem. Therefore, art-based community development is the partnership of artists, community members, and the co-relation of using arts and creating arts to achieve intended goals in community development. This collaboration welcomes community practitioners who may or may not be professional artists to practice art-based community development.

Performing arts for social justice is a social movement in an art-based community development context. The purpose of performing in front of an audience then becomes an opportunity for the otherwise unheard and the invisible to share their stories. The intention is to advocate for a marginalized group through visual literacy so that the audience thinks deeply about social concerns that are relevant to them, or to a local and/or international community.

Field Site Overview

My fieldwork research explored the connection between performing arts and community development in Seattle and Eastside areas of King County, WA, in the United States. Though conducted in this specific geographical area, my research could be applicable in many local, national, and international contexts. Performing arts is essential to community development and promotes holistic well-being regardless of the location as the research findings are globally applicable.

Public Apathy

Apathy means psychological numbness and emotional indifference about a situation or topic. It is one of many strongholds that feeds systematic oppression and injustice. Apathy can either be conscious or unconscious. Factors that cause apathy in individuals include the following: ignorance of a reality between the privileged and unprivileged, being unaware of one's own cultural norm, and desensitization to a common problem. Regardless, apathy can prevent people from moving, on an individual or communal level, toward acting to discover solutions against social injustice. There are at least two forms of apathy in the King County area: (1) apathy within social norms about social injustice, and (2) apathy of the public and governmental sectors shown towards the performing arts sectors.

Apathy in Individuals

Volf points out that over many centuries, “Diverse cultures engaged to figure out the fundamental philosophical and social problem of the ‘one’ and the ‘many’ ... [and] the theme of identity and otherness” (Kindle Locations 183-185). In the United States, I recognize the poverty of social connectivity, human empathy, and kindness as “the problem of ethnic and cultural conflicts... a larger problem of identity and otherness” (Volf Kindle Locations 140-141). The same social disconnect is also present globally as part of our human condition. Our decision to

empathize with an enemy may never happen unless we are willing to listen to the enemy – the other. Short of physically confronting “the other,” and using performing arts as the vehicle, my performance project *Stories of Resilience*, a “round-table” event, sought to equip people with self-awareness and self-empowerment, which in turn challenged them to disrupt social oppression, and gently penetrated their comfort zones to change apathy into empathy.

Members of the General Public and Their Support for the Performing Arts

Our society, both public and private sectors, undermines performing artists which then negatively affects their ability to foster community engagement necessary for community development. Performing arts is not seen as essential to any public operations. The public and private sectors – governmental organizations, churches, schools, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business institutions, and others – rarely integrate performing arts as an innovative and constructive medium for community engagement. Members of the general public often perceive performing arts as a separate sector that functions solely for entertainment purposes. This misunderstanding undermines our performing artists and virtually erases their artistic ability to help “ensure that sensible ideas take root and actually change people’s thinking and behavior across a society” (Bornstein and Davis 21). Conversely, including performing arts in both the public and private sectors ascribes value to performing artists and recognizes the capacity of performing arts to create positive social change.

Two thoughts compete about this subject: “We have a healthy society, but performing arts does not affect it one way or the other” versus “We want a healthy society and, to become one, we need performing arts.” Over the past few decades, the general public has developed a misperception that performing arts functions only as entertainment (commercialism) rather than

recognizing its human value (authenticity), the performing artist. Darren Walker, the President of Ford Foundation, addressed this issue during the Art of Change Symposium:

As we have seen over decades and in diverse places and circumstances, the arts are usually the first thing to be tossed overboard. In schools, the arts are the first to be cut. [Our] spending at the national government level is the same. In city budgets and corporate social responsibility campaigns, the arts are often the first thing to be sacrificed.

Chrystal Helmcke, faculty at Northwest University and the director of the NU drama program, explained that the arts were considered a luxury, and the general public was willing to “invest in sports” more than in the arts. As a result of this assigned weak value and misperception toward performing arts, sports are funded and appreciated more. This lack of support becomes acutely clear when the public and private sectors struggle financially.

The inconsistent opportunities available in expanding the performing arts sector makes it difficult for the arts to affect social justice. An apathetic and financial cycle (figure 1: page 9) limits the performing arts sector in its ability to function at maximum potential or to build bridges with other sectors. The public apathy (public and private sectors) results in a lack of financial stability for the performing arts sector and vastly limits its contribution toward social solutions. Due to poor funding, performing artists often cannot give back to their communities or consistently function in community development; thus this fact impedes the potential of performing arts “to define and address civic problems; to inspire, challenge, imagine, and build new civic futures; to boost image and identity; to drive revitalization, social bonding, and economic growth” (Borwick Kindle Locations 127-128). The general public then falsely perceives that performing arts is not valuable for social justice. And the cycle starts anew.

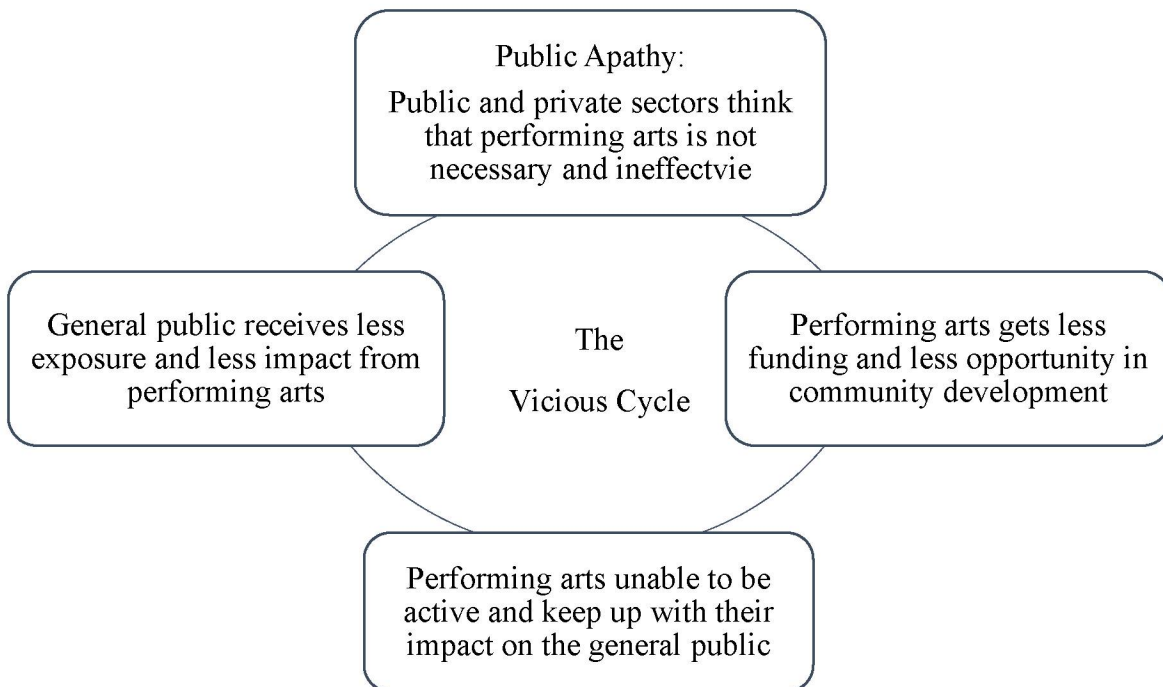


Figure 1. The Vicious Cycle

Meanwhile, the world is becoming both smaller and more exclusive. While collaboration among public and private sectors is an intrinsic necessity for holistic well-being, that well-being is seemingly not for all. Our world evolves quickly in the rise of post-modernity; it benefits those who are already wealthy and powerful, and it pushes others farther into injustice and traps them in the age old system of “survival of the fittest.” Bornstein and Davis argue, “More people need to be involved in solving problems” (47). Everyone in every human sector (schools, churches, art institutions, business companies, and more) has a responsibility to contribute, support, or become involved in the collaborative efforts towards social solutions. Ellen Dissanayaka argues that “our public policies do not embrace the arts as essential to social and personal well-being nor acknowledge the arts as a cultural sector or industry like communication, manufacturing, education or agriculture” (71) and “it is a waste” of our human aptitudes where arts becomes “neglected or even undiscovered [as] alternate ways to solve problems and learn” (74). Hence,

using performing arts as the vehicle, my performance project *Stories of Resilience* invited people of all sectors to get to know performing artists and their work for social justice and human needs. This concept of public invitation will ultimately become a starting point to tackle the vicious cycle that oppresses the performing arts sector.

My Performance Project: Stories of Resilience

The Eastside is a collective term for the Seattle's suburbs – such as Kirkland, Bellevue, and Redmond – located on the east side of Lake Washington. Not limited only to the Eastside, one of the contemporary issues in American urban culture is the rise of materialism, secularism, and humanism which, in turn, has resulted in a lack of social connectivity. Intercultural conversations among people including social topics such as racism, homelessness, prejudice, and social inequalities do not happen enough. The dominant individualistic nuances within the American urban culture permit an invisible “protective wall” that allows people to live in comfort zones and encourages apathetic attitudes that permit people to remain ignorant or indifferent about possible social solutions. Richard Beck argues that “blindness to our need also blinds us to the need in others.... Never experiencing poverty, we fail to understand why the poor (‘those people on welfare’) just don’t go out and get a job” (177). This is a “matter of empathy. Our smug, self-contained, god-like success creates gaps of understanding and compassion...creating boundaries between people” (Beck 177). This blindness to the “fellowship of neediness” (Beck 178) causes fragmentation, and it weakens motivation for humanitarian action.

The dominant role of individualism so highly valued in the United States “is believed to be the root of the country’s greatness” (Hofstede 127). Individualism is “defined in terms of ‘I’” (The Hofstede Centre) and describes how societies appreciate independence versus collectivism.

Individualists tend to have loose ties between each other: “everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family” (Hofstede Kindle Location 1669). The long-term effects of over-valuing individualism over collectivism undermines a life of empathy in favor of self-interest. Former Chairman Mao Zedong makes a strong point when he says individualism could lead “people to placing personal interests above those of the group or simply devoting too much attention to their own things” (Hofstede 127). It is time to combat the over-valued individualism and bring the unheard voices of social justice to people on the Eastside.

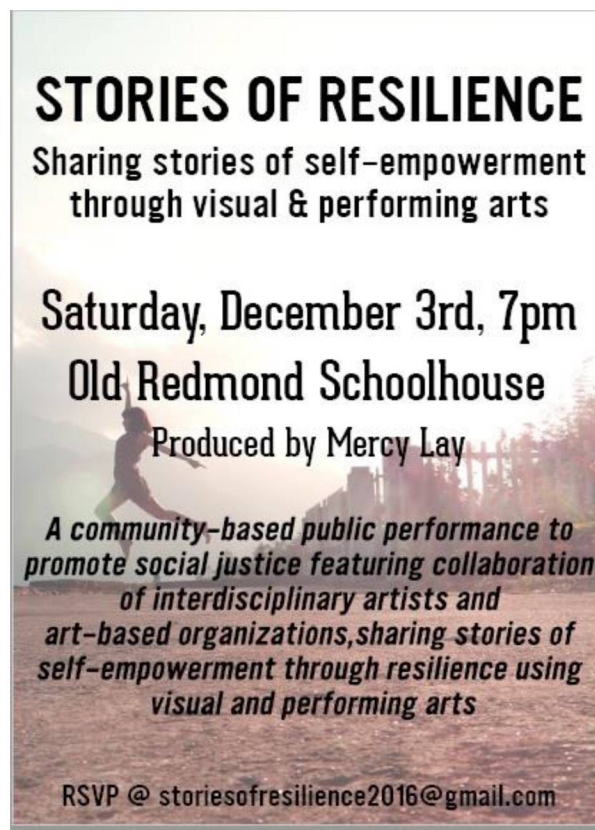


Figure 2. Resilience Building and Collaborative Arts

My performance project, *Stories of Resilience* (figure 2, page 11), was a creative opportunity for the Eastside community to interact and engage with artists who are active in social justice work. It was a community-based public performance in collaboration with five

artists, myself included, and three non-profit organizations from Seattle and Kirkland. *Stories of Resilience* facilitated dialogue between Eastside residents and incarcerated youth, survivors of the sex trade, seniors from retirement homes, creative writers, and dance activists. Through creative storytelling, including rap, dance, spoken-word, and visual art, performers shared their experiences, vulnerabilities, and strengths. Artists covered topics such as body image concerns, mass violence, gender identity, bullying, domestic violence, and racism. Meaningful community interactions such as this empower communities by enhancing their sensitivity, empathy, and love for their vulnerable neighbors. By increasing awareness, empathy, and understanding, *Stories of Resilience* aimed to create a new sense of motivation and commitment among Eastside residents for their disadvantaged neighbors. Hearing the artist's stories challenged Eastside residents to interact beyond a superficial level to reevaluate their privileged status and, thereby, their apathy to other people's circumstances, and to leverage it to create social change.

Reimagining the Role of Performing Arts in Community Development

What is the connection between performing arts and community development? If we look closer at the world around us, we might notice that performing arts is an intrinsic part of what makes us human. From exemplary institutions such as the Louvre and the Asian Art Museum to the humbler yet intensely creative local university drama teams to children's crayon masterpieces, the arts are part of our nature. The arts allow us to funnel our creativity toward holistic well-being and "enable us to be fully human" (Walker). In *Understanding the Arts and Creative Sector in the United States*, Dissanayaka claims that "what we don't realize is that pervading all these practices that make us human are the arts. Just as fish are unaware of water because it is the element in which they exist" (62). It is innate for humans to be creative. As we do not live by bread alone, creativity is a natural phenomenon that humans need.

Performing Arts as the Vehicle to Enhance Strategies for Community Development

Like the air we breathe, performing arts is a life force that harnesses positive social change. To reimagine the role of performing arts in community development, I sought to understand the roles of resilient individuals who serve as catalysts in art-based community development. My research methods included personal interviews to gather individuals' stories related to personal empowerment through performing arts. I also observed and participated in intercultural or cross-cultural collaboration and collected data through note-taking, videography, photography, and audio recordings to learn about resilience-building through creative engagement. The following sections also include personal experiences from the audience and participants of *Stories of Resilience* in which I gathered personal feedback via electronic mail.

Using my research data collection, I attempted to unfold the social impact of performing artists playing an active role in community development through performing arts. Four themes regarding creative performing arts recurred throughout my research:

- 1) The arts empower healthy human relationships.
- 2) The arts support resilience through healing emotional pain.
- 3) The arts tackle social concerns of prejudice and marginalization.
- 4) The arts teach in a nonconfrontational way that dissolves apathy.

Empower Healthy Human Relationships

Community development involves collaboration, helping people with specific needs and advocating for the needs of others. As human beings, "We grow best in community... we grow in faith only through the frail instrumentality of one another" (Thompson Kindle Locations 3047-3050). Performing arts often become a natural starting point for collaboration, which then

leads to many positive social relationships. Many people today still do not realize the arts can change and empower lives because they do not have the opportunity to experience them.

In each of my field sites where performing artists collaborated with the community, participants experienced personal and communal social support that positively empowered them to bond with one another. Ajabeyang Amin, a performer shared the following:

Being a part of [*Stories of Resilience*] helped me realize that I was not alone in my struggles. Although we all had different messages, we were all passionate about something that we wanted others to know. These passions are born from our personality, culture, upbringing, they are also born from our hurts and struggles, which all build our resilience.

In the midst of collaboration, the core of positive social change builds resilience and interweaves the process of empowering healthy human relationships. Brene Brown defines “connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgement; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship” (Location 63). Aaron Counts described that he was “particularly struck by” the social connection at *Stories of Resilience*. He responded as follows:

...between ensemble performers – who seemed to find moments to uplift each member equally – to the way audience members greeted the performers like old friends despite the fact that they were strangers just moments before... Art is a social movement. It can create a better society by bringing people together to learn from and about each other, to share their hopes, their struggles, their fears and their joy. (Counts)

Collaboration in performing arts provides the venue for social connection and helps people become empathetic, holding together as a community to create social change and to restore holistic well-being.

Expressing art is to be creative, and to be creative is to be human, relational beings. As creativity works hand-in-hand with emotional input, an inevitable process of empowerment takes place. Everybody has the ability to be creative, and everyone should have the privileged to express creativity. Moreover, the process of creative collaboration fosters cultural understanding and the exchange of new perspectives (Glăveanu 166). “The essence of creativ[ity]” (Glăveanu 169) relates to the development of social perspectives that affect people’s decision-making, in thought and action. Performing arts as a vehicle stimulates productivity “for creative action and dialogue between self and other” (Glăveanu 178), and it increases creative collaboration for authentic social interaction. An example was Amin’s performance, *Race Matters: What Can We Do?* She performed with music background that accompanied her performance throughout. It was a well-crafted storytelling piece inspired by Amin’s journaling experience as a caregiver to two white, eight years old girls. She unfolded her personal struggles as a black woman and contrasted the two girls who valued skin colors in opposite ways. One child saw social differences as beautiful and told Amin one day: “You are so pretty; it doesn’t really matter how people look as long as they are nice,” while the other girl said, “Your skin looks like poop!” (Amin). Amin encouraged people to rise up and confront their fears about racial injustice, calling people to “look at [them]selves and questions [their] own prejudices.” She advocated for social conversations that explore difficult social concerns to build healthy societies. Amin finished her story saying, “You may even realize that you might have a lot more in common than someone of

your own race. So, what are you going to do about racial injustice? It begins with you!” She left the audience in deep thought about the fact that race matters.

When people have the privilege to perform for an audience, both the artists and the audience benefit. They can interact in ways that underline our innate similarities, foster understanding, and experience the creativity together. There were four youth from Creative Justice who performed *Stories of Self*, a series of creative works developed as a project entitled “Free the Youth Campaign” that explored the damaging effects that youth experienced because of apathetic incarceration. Their series of performance consisted of spoken word, rap, and a film. One youth explored a spoken-word piece on violence and gentrification that showed Black communities oppressed by urban development (Creative Justice). Another youth brought in her personal story to illustrate how bad choices affected her life, and she invited audience members to embrace compassion and humanity with those like her. Using rapping, another youth expressed raw emotions to tackle racism and his experience of living under a justice system polluted by social stigma. The film was a collaborative product originally composed, filmed, and edited by the youth to advocate for the “Free the Youth Campaign;” it expressed that youth such as they are humans, too, and that we all need to actively show more humanity and empathy. These youths’ performances authentically told a crucial message: I am not “the incarcerated.” I am a human just like you.

From an audience perspective, Holly Eckert gave her perspective about the works of Creative Justice’s youth rapping and spoken-word performance:

The passion [of] each child embodied in their delivery clearly showed how much they have enjoyed and benefitted from this opportunity to share the content of

their stories and opinions with others through an art form...[Their] work carried a wisdom in it that speaks to people of many ages.

The youth from Creative Justice invited the audience to “recognize their shared humanity” through “an experience” which they delivered well through performing arts (Eckert). The public stage humanized the youth at Creative Justice as they performed on stage, and the transformative nature of performing arts connected both participants and audience. The youth demonstrated performing arts as an intrinsic part of our social support system, whether as audience members or participants in drama, dance, music, storytelling, reciting poems, and creative expressions. The youth’s fellowship of creativity created social connection where society presented itself to “explore difficult social subjects” and to support humanity by creating “healthier societies” (Eckert). The interchanging social experience in performing arts is indeed crucial for everyone. Stories of resilience such as those at Creative Justice illustrate that performing arts within the context of community development can create transformational social change on a personal and communal level.

Support Resilience Through Healing Emotional Pain: The Resilience-Building Cycle

Resilience-building through collaboration is one of the captivating elements that emerged through performing artists working in community development. My research showed the resilience of various vulnerable communities that collaborated with performing artists. These vulnerable participants included incarcerated youth, human trafficking survivors, immigrant seniors, and trauma survivors. In each field site, the common threads causing resilience were social connectivity, social support, and a positive environment for self-expression (creativity) which creates social bonding regardless of language and cultural barriers.

Resilience is a kind of good toughness, a robust bouncing-back ability. I define resilience as an arduous journey to manage adversity. It is a never-ending learning skill that enhances emotional intelligence. In practice, resilience manages adversities and enables us to deliberately choose to move forward despite setbacks. Examples of well-known, historical, resilient figures that I recognize are Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, and Mother Theresa.

A resilient person, even in a vulnerable state of mind, is able to retain mental and emotional sobriety. A resilient person often uses creativity to promote personal growth and self-motivation to counter setbacks; this person creates turning points rather than being trapped in defeats or failures. Resilient people are resourceful, creative, and good at problem-solving. They are humble enough to seek help and confident enough to cope with adversities and choose to grow stronger through these adversities. However, the most crucial factor is that resilient people have social support available to them and constantly stay socially well-connected (Brown Location 157). For example, this social connection is present at Creative Justice where youths develop trust and are able to approach their mentors for social support.

When performing arts such as movement, music, and individual or collective creativity become part of community development, this practice of *expression* facilitates personal development and empowers people to deal with psychological and emotional adversities, which then fosters personal and community resilience. Artistic connection can be an effective rehabilitation for individuals' mental and emotional well-being including depression, trauma, medical illness, and social difficulties (American Art Therapy Association). The creative process allows us "to explore emotions, reduce anxiety, increase self-esteem, and resolve other psychological conflicts" (Mitchell). This process brings innovative learning through self-reflection and self-examination, and it forges bonds among people.

The Heartbeat of Resilience-Building Towards Sustainable Social Change

It is clear that performing artists have a role in community development. My research helped me to distinguish between the arts as a product (art forms) versus art in action (community arts). I reframed performing artists as facilitators of the collaborative process, those who use performing arts as a vehicle for social connection, which then builds community resilience conducive to sustainable social change across social boundaries. Figure 3 illustrates how performing artists create positive social change through art-based community development. The collaborative process is the heartbeat of resilience-building that leads to sustainable social change.

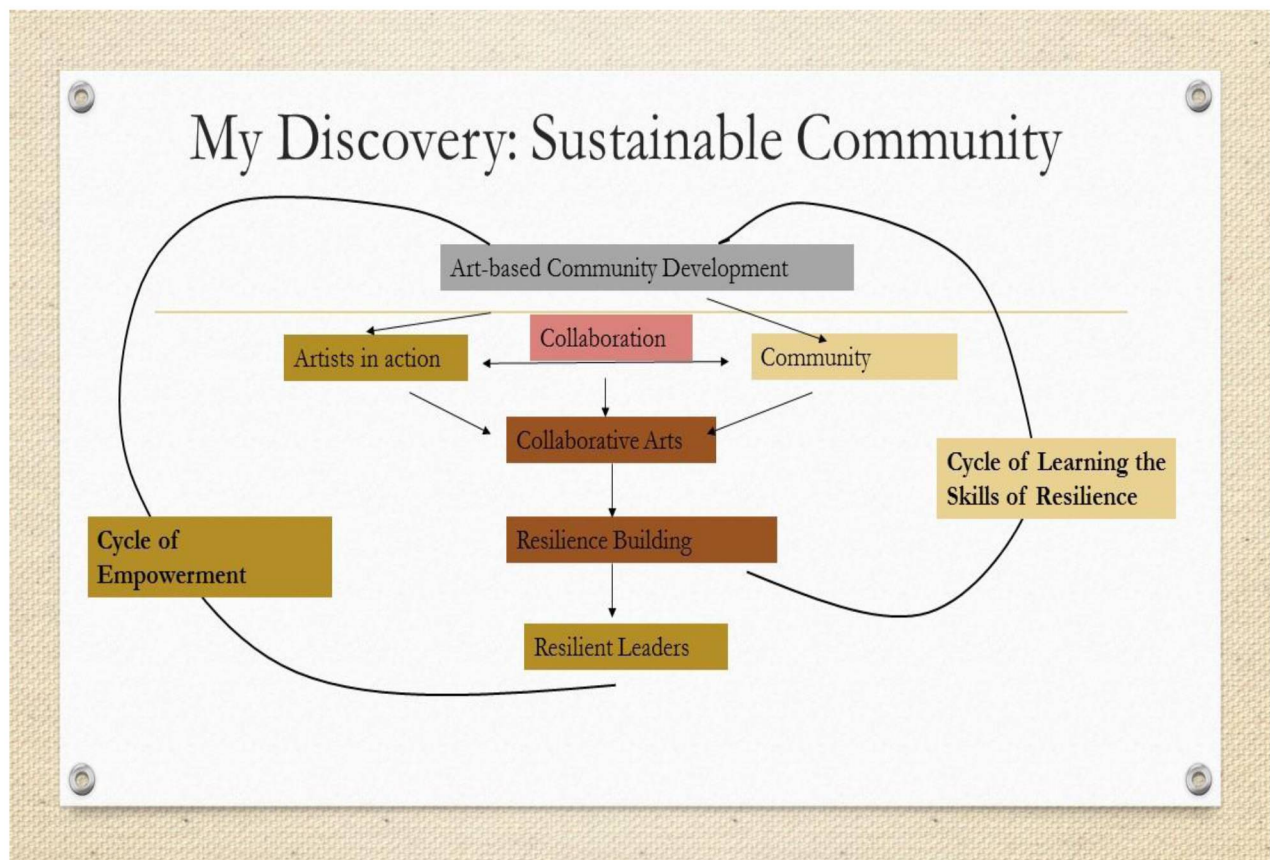


Figure 3. Sustainable Community

Performing Artists: Artists as Catalysts for Change

Figure 3 expressed my discoveries. The artists themselves are the center and catalysts of performing arts in art-based community development. They form social connections among people as they introduce and present performing arts through collaborative action for community development. Collaborative action increases community resilience “by uncovering latent individual or collective intangible assets and using them to build tangible assets which improve people’s livelihood opportunities and living conditions” (Burnell 146). Whether people promote or create performing arts, they participate in a co-related approach to community development. Dance, music, drama, creative writing, and spoken words are tools by which people engage in community development. Because performing arts “evoke emotions... about the human condition” (Faigin and Stein 71), performing arts is an *active expression*, not static which means performing artists are the action figures for sustainable social change.

Cycle of Empowerment

Resilience-building is a process. Before performing artists can become social change agents, they must first recognize, equip, and then use their own resilience skills that enable them to lead art-based community development projects. Then the cycle of empowerment begins. Referring to figure 3, participants in art-based community development may grow in different ways; some may learn to become more resilient, and others may become empowered to lead others. Norman Garmezy spent more than four decades of research contextualizing resiliency as it relates to psychopathology (qtd. in Hanson and Gottesman 363). He explains that a person’s resilience does not imply that one becomes immune to negative life events (qtd. in Hanson and Gottesman 460) because resilience is a process. Hanson and Gottesman define resilience as a “positive process that keeps developmental trajectories on healthy courses even in the face of

repeated adversities” (367). To have the skills of resilience, an individual must gain social and emotional intelligence, positive emotional and psychological support, and develop a positive social support system “whether in school, at work, or church” (Garmezy 464). As everyone faces adversities in life, learning resilience skills can be a game-changer for those who hope to stay robust during stressful events.

Resiliency and Personal Empowerment

Performing artists who work in social justice have developed resiliency through personal empowerment and because of it, they have a great capacity to make the world a better place through their leadership, emotional intelligence, and creative collaboration. They can assist community development by using their resilience and arts to engage communities. Their empathy fosters collaboration that can bring about social bonding across social boundaries. Their life stories often reflect this artistic engagement. For instance, I spoke to Louie Parseuth, a survivor of war trauma and domestic violence, who used music composition, singing, breakdancing, and writing as creative channels to express his emotions. Born in Laos, Parseuth and his parents fled from their homeland during the Vietnam War to survive. At age two, Parseuth lived in a refugee camp in Thailand, but he later grew up in America. His family identity changed from being Laotian farm-owning citizens to being US refugees. He fought daily to survive racism, social exclusion, and material poverty, and he coped with mental stress through breakdancing. According to Parseuth, “Life would suck without arts.” Breakdancing became Parseuth’s survival toolkit and his healing agent as he coped with “dissociation, trauma history, [and] fantasy proneness” (Thomson 73). As Parseuth learned resilience skills, he also crafted his leadership skills so that he now better empathizes with others who live in similar adversities. Parseuth’s self-empowerment motivated him to become a mentor to people in other

communities who identify with his past experiences. He founded the Good Foot Art Collective to educate younger people and advocate for social concerns relevant to the local community. He uses breakdancing to tell the story of domestic violence so that audience members who have suffered similar experiences connect, respond, and seek help. Parseuth is a performing artist who functions as a resilient social change agent to empower others and to promote holistic community well-being.

Another example is from Eckert's personal story as a freelance dance choreographer. She used performing arts to focus on social advocacy. We met as mutual participants during Create Change, an event hosted by the Seattle Public Library that challenged the way we think about advocacy and homelessness. Eckert was confident, tall, and energetic. When she said she was a dancer who advocates for social justice through dance, our conversation naturally turned to sharing our passions in the performing arts. When I asked her how dance influences her life, I never expected to hear the story she told me. As a child, Eckert grew up poor, and during her teenage years, her family became homeless. Dance turned into an ongoing outlet that helped her find joy and hope. In her early thirties, Eckert developed epilepsy, a major adversity for a career-established artist. Since then, she has found a healthy balance to cope with her emotional and mental stress when she suffers random epilepsy episodes; through movement exploration, she practiced resilient self-care, and dance provided her a community of fellow artists. Dance grew into a holistic part of her life and revived her well-being. It motivated and empowered her to accept adversities with courage, positivity, and resiliency. Eckert claims, "I'm enjoying the development of that practice mentally, physically, and spiritually, a pursuit that arose from circumstances created by epilepsy" (170). Despite her life struggles, she lives with purpose. Dance is a multi-faceted tool for her personal well-being as a public activist to speak up for

social concerns, including homelessness, incarceration, and epilepsy, which relate closely to her own life story.

The cycle of empowerment (refer to figure 3) happens when performing arts becomes community arts (action-based) expressed through resilient leader-centered development, or creative people in action. “Responsible artists” refers to resilient individuals who choose to initiate the arts that encourage people to think more deeply about social concerns. They are also the creators and social interactors (social bridge-builders) who use their own artistic practices as a form of self-examination before giving back to community development through the performing arts. When performing artists are catalysts for change, they enable communities to identify with their personal stories of resilience as an exchange support for one another. For instance, Karla Butts shared her experience of watching *Stories of Resilience*:

The largest impact for me was the depth of the story telling through different vehicles, music, dance, spoken word, all paths to healing. While reflecting on each performance, I recall thinking they were not only performing for themselves, but for others who may not be able to tell their stories but might find comfort and encouragement in witnessing the expressions that evening.

Therefore, the backbone of art-based community development in the cycle of empowerment requires responsible artists as resilient leaders who function to help intersect performing arts and community development.

Cycle of Learning the Skills of Resilience: Collaborative Arts and Personal Healing

The cycle of learning resilience skills activates through the collaborative process. As the performing arts builds interpersonal relationships, it simultaneously nurtures an intrapersonal

relationship with oneself, a personal empowerment. Amin framed her personal experience comparing between journaling and performing on stage through story-telling:

The main things that distinguished my healing process by solely journaling versus performing collaboratively is being alone versus being in community.

Journaling...usually done in solitude; nobody else reads my thoughts or knows the depths of my issues. Performing on the other hand, involves a lot of processing beforehand, deciding how/what to present to others... which requires vulnerability...to be exactly clear of my own thoughts and feelings, and what message I wanted others to obtain from my piece.

From Amin's perspective, performing involves a process that requires more than journaling alone. It implies closer attention to self-care leading to personal healing.

Similarly, The Splinter Project (TSP), a group of artists who have collaborated with the Splinter Dance Company for three years in a dance mentorship program demonstrates how collaborative arts interweaves personal healing and community support. I participated in TSP's workshop in which youth performing groups consisted of teenagers who have either witnessed or personally gone through concerns such as low self-esteem, negative body image, and suicidal attempts related to bullying. Dance has been therapeutic for TSP's youth, building resilience and empowering them to advocate real-life social topics with others through their personal stories. TSP's collaborative experience with The Splinter Company cultivates self-esteem and trust through which participants become better in expressing their emotional struggles.

At *Stories of Resilience*, TSP performed a piece entitled *Bully*. Their performance showed that the daily effects of bullying on youth was more than a physical act. They also presented an introductory film that explained why they had created the dance and how the dance had become

a healing process for them. One of the TSP's youth shared that bullying is everywhere and that she did not have the high self-esteem to fight it. Now, because she has great friends with whom she dances to reveal such meaningful social topics as bullying, she has developed self-esteem and is willing to stand up for another person as well as for herself (The Splinter Project). The TSP youths' soundtrack gave their original words to describe their personal struggles and opinions related to bullying. They also stressed that our society can contribute to social solutions against bullying if we have the courage to "stand up for somebody" (The Splinter Project). The youth danced to the words and used theatrical acts to enhance their advocacy. Their message to the audience was full of genuine wisdom that inspired their adult audience, including parents and teachers, to become better educators for children and youth.

Performing arts offers forms of expression for all age groups who come together to use their creativity to express stories that both celebrate life and also reveal personal encounters "that are too deep or painful for words" (Heid). By nurturing human creative ability, people learn creative strategy to cope with challenges that help sustain their positive attitudes. Through their resulting emotional and psychological growth, both children and adults can become better learners.

Performing artists are strongly equipped with soft-skills, which makes them resourceful educators for art-based community development. Whitten describes soft-skills as "more people- and behavior-oriented, such as leading, directing, nurturing, enabling, communicating, negotiating, mitigating... [and they] are so critical for a leader in getting things done through people" (Kindle Location 238). Soft-skills include active listening, team-building, inclusiveness, and empathetic communication. These skills help motivate and inspire people to succeed towards set objectives. Edward Sellman analyzes artists working with vulnerable young people in a

creative educational setting that uses visual arts, multimedia, and performing arts. He argues that artists can create a safe space, flexible structure, and effective support for students to promote freedom and growth (Sellman 60). Dr. Jeremy Delamarter, faculty at Northwest University's College of Education affirmed, "While STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] is important...good educators know that flourishing societies need... a love for the arts, for justice, for language, for beauty, and for truth." With performing arts as a vehicle to help regulate social stress, the general public has "opportunities to see [and learn] what we have in common" (Delamarter) and build resiliency. Dr. Autumn Witt, founder and director of Northwest University's Center for English Language Education (CELE) reinforced Delamarter's statement as she shared her experience after witnessing TSP's performance:

...having the dance space to initiate the conversation gave them all the opportunity to talk about difficulties they might be experiencing. It gave them a common frame of reference and shared vocabulary to talk about those difficult issues. Through dance they would have experienced the signs, symptoms, triggers, solutions to the emotional struggles of bullying, so if any of them did experience real bullying, I think they would be better equipped to come to each other's aid. Having young daughters, I found this especially powerful to observe. I saw my daughter come alive during the dance portions, and now I also see the strong social and mental health benefits of dance as well, and I hope that I can find a similar program for her to participate in.

Witt pointed out the importance of performing arts for the education sector as it fostered deeper understanding between parents and teachers, parents and children, as well as among adults or children. Dance became an inner strength for TSP's youth not only to heal their traumatic pasts,

but also to empower them to influence others positively. Through this process, they found social support and transformed their vulnerability into strength. We can know others more personally through learning from their creativity that re-creates education experiences that teach skills and awareness perhaps not covered as much in more academic programs. The performing arts, however, if also given the opportunity in the education sector, have the capacity to build integral relationships and teach individual and communal resiliency. Essentially, performing arts in community development contributes to the long-term and “sustainability of arts engagement in educational settings” (Sellman 70). Performing arts can deeply enhance participants’ experiences, teach resiliency, and help cultivate a community-based support system for holistic well-being.

Resilience is contagious. A resilient leader can empower others in community development. Everyone, however, needs to find their own ways of learning resilience skills, and as they do, it creates a ripple effect that empowers a larger community, encourages more resilient leaders who then continue the chain reaction for the betterment of our society (see figure 3).

Tackling the Social Concerns of Prejudice and Marginalization

In a world full of exclusion, “We need the sensitivity of the artist to bring to light what has gone unnoticed in our humdrum everyday experience, so that we notice things for the first time” (Perera). Performing artists have a voice and we, the general public, have a responsibility to be active listeners. Prejudice and marginalization, two social concerns, will never cease to create social conflict. To combat this, “The arts and artists must not be muted. Their voices must be unleashed and are more needed and essential today than ever” (Walker). Of course, the performing arts are not the only venues by which the US tackles social concerns, but they are not in the limelight as deal makers, and they can be. We, the public, however, must do our part and

become generous listeners. This willingness is a form of taking action and reimagining the role of performing arts in community development.

Bridging Social Gaps

The performing arts can help build bridges in social gaps. Social gaps are invisible social exclusions, a form of fragmentation that society creates related to our identities and cultures; social gaps appear as certain social groups, financial status, or hierarchy status. Schemas are another reason that social gaps exist. They relate to our cognitive ability to connect to the world around us. The American Educational Research Association explains the concept of a schema as “the development of individuals’ abilities to abstract (schematic) understandings from experience, experience that is both embodied and social” (McVee, Gavelek, Dunsmore 246). We embody and experience the world “through doxa (mental schemata) and habitus (historically accreted bodily compartments) that are issued forth from that very social world and, therefore, make the social order – including its hierarchies – appear natural” (Holmes 157). Consequently, “We misrecognize oppression as natural because it fits our mental and bodily schemata through which we perceive” [‘the other’]...(whether ethnic, gender, cultural or linguistic, etc)” (Holmes 157). Unconsciously, we exert beliefs “through the schemes of perception, appreciation and action that...set up a cognitive relationship that is profoundly obscure to itself”—false beliefs” (Holmes 157). In other words, social concerns such as stereotyping and labeling “the other,” prejudice and misunderstanding, and other forms of social violence and oppression, are closely related to acts “within the process of perception, hidden from the conscious mind” (Holmes 157), which then conform into established beliefs about the world around us. When schemas remain undisruptive, they also prevent us from taking in new information. Thus, social gaps can remain or grow wider apart and create boundaries that prevent people from learning about other cultures or social

topics unless a sudden awareness disrupts their established idea about people and the world.

Social gaps create apathetic attitudes that stem from ignorance or misconception about “the other” and that lead to prejudice and marginalization. Social gaps can also create dehumanizing exclusion when people define “humanity along a divinity dimension” (Beck 122), or a privileged sense of superiority that can fundamentally affect the way people think, treat, embrace, and love “the other.” Awareness of this situation can bridge social gaps and cause people to think empathetically but only if they make room for self-awareness and humility, the act of self-questioning and self-reflection.

Copowerment

Bridging social gaps is the act of creating an awareness of a compound nature; it stimulates people’s natural appetite to empathize and teaches people to value their own and each other’s cultural differences. Performing arts for social justice engages people of diverse backgrounds and personalities in *copowerment*, “a dynamic of mutual exchange through which both sides of a social equation are made stronger and more effective by the other” (Inslee). In contrast, *empowerment* “implies a different and unequal dynamic, in which one party gives strength to the other in a more or less unidirectional process” (Inslee). Inslee explains that to practice copowerment, both parties must learn to view each other as equally able. They empathize with each other’s “ability deficits... [and] confidently [offer/empower] power the other in collaborative interdependence” (Inslee). Through copowerment, the resulting social connectivity can take people a step farther toward practicing active listening and building deeper relationships with others, shaping people’s values and biases, and therefore, tackling social concerns, even those of prejudice and marginalization. Gracia Iraheta-Gutierrez shared her thoughts about Creative Justice and the act of performer/audience copowerment that evening:

I was also deeply touched by the students that have been in juvenile detention. I think sometimes we need ways to channel our negative energies whether from injustices we have gone through or trauma, and the fact they are providing some of these children with ways to channel these emotions or anger or frustration or even the positive feelings can make the difference between them getting back in the prison cycle.

Iraheta-Gutierrez described as “priceless and life giving” to witness how the youth expressed their stories of resilience without feeling shameful about themselves. Creative Justice’s public performance goal is to foster empathy that creates a cultural immersion experience for the audience. The youth that evening presented their work to express their “emotions...in a safe way that does not continue the damaging cycle” of their past (Iraheta-Gutierrez). Copowerment, then, forges the collaborative interdependence between the audience and performer. Picture two dancers collaborating in a partner dance. The audience are the ones following; the performers are the ones leading. To dance well, each partner has a role. In this case, the performers’ role is to tell their stories on stage, and the audience’s role is to watch, listen, and respond through mutual conversation without words. Relating to the partner/dance metaphor, Creative Justice’s work revealed the social gaps between the audience’s racial prejudice and the social stigma against incarcerated youth; the performances sought to bridge those gaps.

Similarly, Faigin and Stein established a community-based theater troupe consisting of adults with psychiatric disabilities as a medium for social activism (148). According to Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, “[t]he term ‘psychiatric disability’ is used when mental illness significantly interferes with the performance of major life activities, such as learning, working, and communicating, among others.” Using drama, Faigin and Stein empowered individuals with

psychiatric disabilities to engage and educate the public community about the social exclusion they face due to being different (148). Drama, in this creative strategy, offered personal growth for actors with psychiatric disabilities and sought to change negative attitudes and misconceptions among audience members (Faigin and Stein 159). The emotional connections between actors and audience allowed meaningful dialogue and constructive feedback that is therapeutic for actors with psychiatric disabilities. Simultaneously, audience members changed their perspectives about psychiatric disability, gaining awareness and empathy. This qualitative research demonstrated performing arts as a “grounded theory” (Faigin and Stein 161) to bring positive impact for social change through bridging the social gaps when conversations or social services seem ineffective or less effective. In this case, copowerment created platforms for dialogues to help divided people negotiate their differences through mutual respect and understanding. Hence, performing arts helped create a respectful disruption that dismantled schemas, thus bridging social gaps through copowerment which replaced apathy with empathy.

Teach Others in a Nonconfrontational Way That Dissolves Apathy

Like timeless storytelling, performing arts is a tool to nurture, inspire, mobilize, heal, educate, and sustain holistic well-being. Whether a participant, collaborator, or audience member of a public performance, individuals in the community can become cognitively “aware of [their] assumptions and sometimes even of [their] prejudices” (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 2). When performing artists participate in social activism, performing arts facilitates creative story-telling of relevant social concerns. This is an effective way to increase understanding and connect people across social boundaries. It “[gives] us perspectives we would never see on our own [which] often can...stretch [us] to new points of view” (Thompson Kindle Locations 3001-3003).

Such elements of the performing arts demonstrate copowerment through stimulating a nonconfrontational learning experience and engaging community development.

Performing Artists as Social Change Agents

Performing arts becomes a powerful medium for humanity as it enables the audience and performing artists “to seek after the truth, to see the truth when confronted by it, and to say the truth out loud without fear” (Volf Kindle Locations 4847-4848). This ability reveals and dissolves social boundaries and enhances social justice. Dance, drama, spoken-word, and music are art-forms that are learned and adopted into one’s lifestyle and passion. The process of learning these art-forms empowers artists to create social change by moving from the vulnerability of the “social concern” to confidently telling their stories relevant for social justice. When performing artists act as social activists through their work, their ability to perform before an audience becomes a strength within their vulnerability, which transmits into resiliency that has the “power to sway people” and call them “to action” (A. Amin). Regarding this fact, Amin had to self-regulate her thoughts and create her work to build an authentic and empathetic relationship with her audience so that her dramatic storytelling portrays “a society present[ing] itself to itself” (Dissanayaka 69). Because performing arts fosters self-awareness, it becomes crucial and necessary to harness community motivation and humanitarian action.

The opportunity to perform is similar to being given the privilege to wield a sword. Performing on stage gives an authority to the performer to be a creative spokesman for social justice that “ensure[s]... sensible ideas take root and change people’s thinking and behavior across a society” (Bornstein and Davis 21) to educate and inform even some “harsh realities of life” (Chand) that people are unaware of. The audience at *Stories of Resilience* learned about social concerns through their artistic expression as it communicates universally across language

and social boundaries in a way that retains its power and integrity. From an audience perspective, Iraheta-Gutierrez shared the following:

The different dancers that performed impacted me in seeing the passion they had as they channeled their various messages; whether that was to bring awareness about serious issues or the pain these issues bring, etc... They were able to do it in such a solemn and respectful way that it didn't take away from what they were trying to have us see, as the audience.

Her perspective agreed that performing artists' creative abilities can act as one of the greatest strategies for social activism and community engagement, one that may seem a small step but able to cultivate long-term social change. "[T]he greatest genuine power of activism may not be its ability to compel action but its capacity to elicit empathy by making injustice and suffering palpable" (Bornstein and Davis 36) across social boundaries. None of the positive social changes at *Stories of Resilience* would be possible if performing artists had not fully immersed themselves cross-culturally and participated as social change agents.

Advocacy "often needs to be imposed" on the public to create positive social change, even though policy change and other "civil rights legislation" are equally as important (Bornstein and Davis 127). Bornstein and Davis argue that "over the long run, the deepest changes in behavior and attitude are rooted not in laws but in feelings" (127). The performing artists' stage presence has an artistic quality that influences a greater social value than do commercial arts for entertainment purposes only. These nonconfrontational social bonds reunite people and help them gain a common ground despite any cultural or social differences. "Like two dancers, one leading and one following" (Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater 221), the audience naturally relates to performers who now have a voice – copowerment. People who first seemed invisible, when

given the role as performing artists, gain ownership and a public voice to penetrate unconscious bias. This ownership that the performer wields humanizes him/her. The audience is willingly drawn in and becomes open to listen beyond a superficial level.

An Invitation: A Sense of Belonging

Performing arts helps people re-navigate their thoughts, perceptions, and emotions that activate our human senses. This process increases sensitivity that allows us to see the world with multiple spectrums. The cause of any person's prejudice and misperception can differ greatly. When performing artists reveal a full story, as did many artists presented in *Stories of Resilience*, a social transformation happens that instills a newfound empathy among people. If it works well, both performers and audience feel a sense of belonging, one to the other. Dissanayaka found "neurological confirmation [for] our subjective feelings of physical and emotional coordination when we move, dance, or... listen to music with others. Such pathways to coordination and commonality are routes to belonging" (70). Her research describes a collective atmosphere where social bonding happens through cognitive and physical senses. KC Cox shared after experiencing *Stories of Resilience*:

I love to see how art can be used in so many ways to be a beacon for change, for education, and for inviting others into the conversations of social and cultural struggles for change. I believe that when you reach people's emotions like this, they are compelled to respond [and] create dialogue for awareness which then leads to change!

Hence, belonging involves developing sensitivity by which we can relate with others; in this relationship, we become present for one another to recognize one another. This relationship promotes social unity.

To experience *Stories of Resilience*, the audience gathered as a community to watch provocative stage performances. The communal environment influences the audience cognitively and physically to recognize others – the performers and themselves – as relational-beings. Dante Brebner described his experience in the following:

The project almost effortlessly appeared to collect and mix seemingly disparate participants in such a way that allowed each one (or each group) to shine individually and express themselves, uninhibited, in a way that demonstrated how different and at the same time how intrinsically connected they all are... the actual stories spanned such a wide array of style, focus and delivery, bound to either delight or potentially upset the unknown spectrum of audience members... Ms. Lay brought a group together to share their stories, some uplifting, some rough, some graphic in nature, and then sits with the audience and asks “watch with open eyes, listen with open ears and hearts... shut nothing out... *We* can all relate.” And *we* did... each is in fact necessary for the collective health and harmony of the whole performance... not a single participant’s piece could have been omitted without adversely affecting the feeling we shared at the end of the show. It was a feeling of community, of shared and honored diversity.

Using the collective “we,” Brebner described social restoration as an arousal of a sense of unity and harmony among diverse individuals (participants and audience). He developed a sensitivity about others which cognitively allowed him to see the world around him in a whole new dimension. Notice that in the next response, Brebner described the show using verbs and adjectives (*italicized*) to illustrate the atmosphere of belonging in action at *Stories of Resilience*:

I think most, if not, all boundaries between the stage and the rows where onlookers sat lost their meaning, at least for a bit...Perhaps some people ordinarily might think poetry is dull...yet we all listened. Maybe some are usually offended by coarse language, yet we remained present. It almost felt like *family therapy*...*giving* each member the stage to play out anything they must, so long as it's their *genuine truth*, and somehow any *collective pain* brought forward was released. We each in turn begin to sense the benefit of *permitting* one another to have a different dance, a different voice, and the *satisfying* feeling of acceptance... with a *continuous* sense of underlying *gratitude* and *collective effort* among friends and strangers...even if understanding isn't fully achieved, *empathy* at least is the only starting point...to be able to share stories that needed to be heard...it was *heartwarming*. It was *grounding*. *Nourishing*... I felt simply *invited* to be present and permit myself to feel human, to consider all sorts of commonalities with people I've never met. It somehow felt like the audience and performers were invisibly *building* something together. I walked away feeling *enriched*.

Brebner's feedback meaningfully packaged the sense of belonging, "a legitimate human need" (Martin). Using performing arts is a creative approach in which our society can achieve a place where social differences do not matter, but rather people recognize the social fabric that we all belong to, altogether as a society.

Future Research Considerations

Anyone can adopt, contextualize and reproduce this project, *Stories of Resilience*, for any audience in any cultural or geographical setting. I created a survey to collect feedbacks from

audience members at *Stories of Resilience*. This survey illustrated performing artists who advocate about social concerns is a rare encounter for the general public, particularly in the King County area. The survey posed two questions: 1) Before today's event, how might you rate your exposure to performing arts that explore social concerns? And 2) After today's event, do you think performing arts helps to empower lives, teach about social concerns, foster resilience, and develop awareness? Figure 4 and 5 (page 37-38) shows the results from a total of thirty-three participants. Ninety-nine percent of the responses were positive and supported performing arts as they work for social justice.

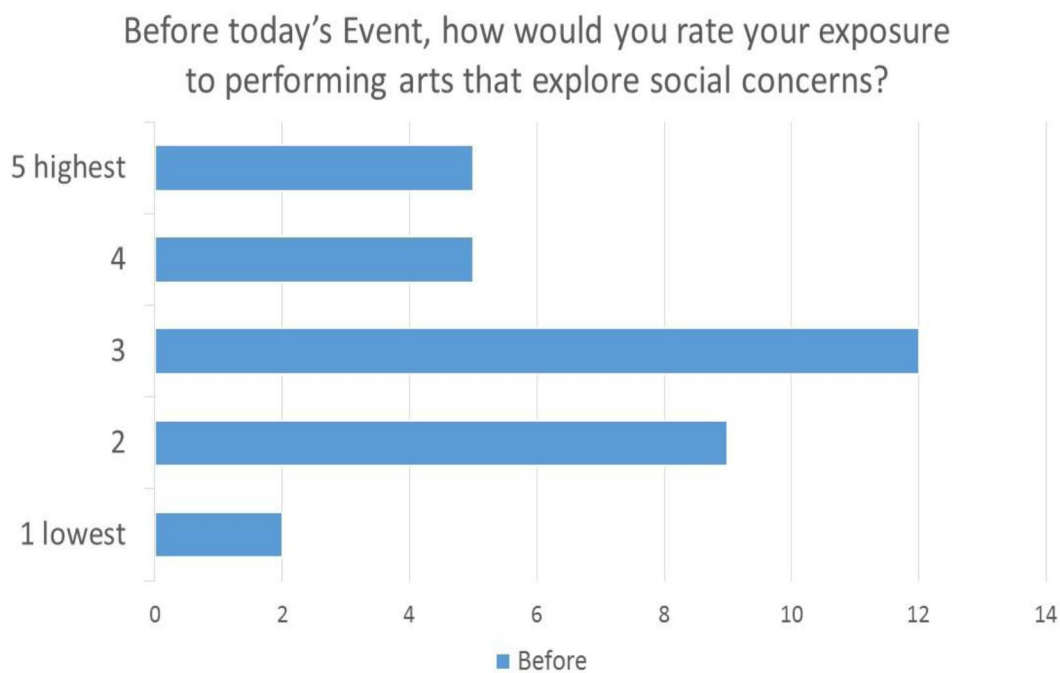


Figure 4. Before Today's Event

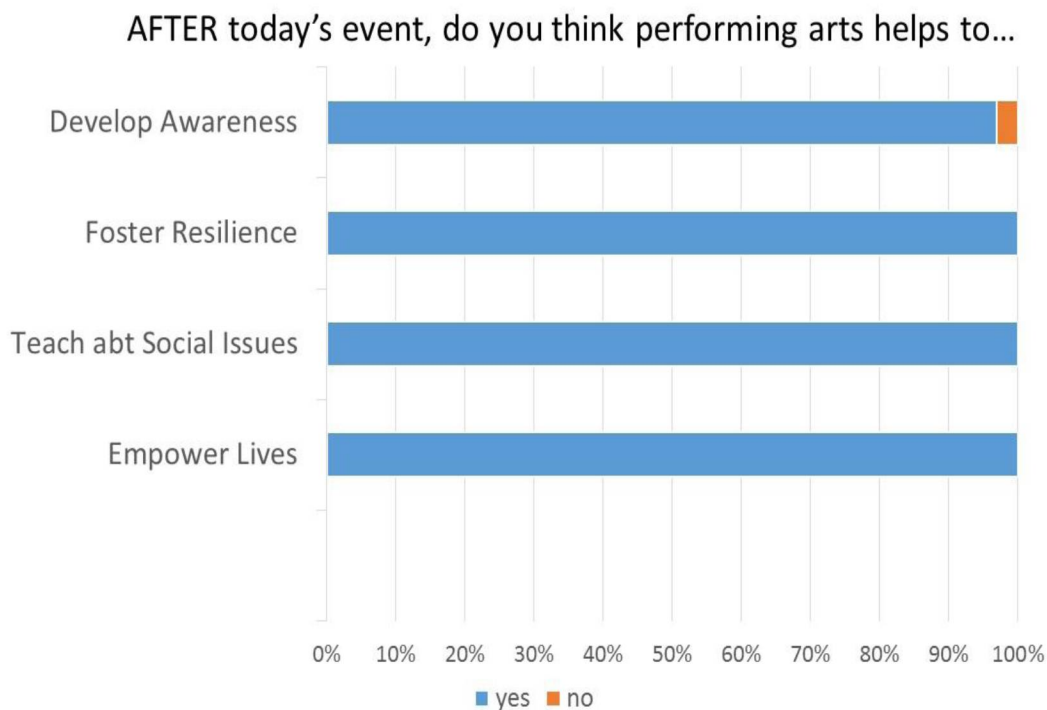


Figure 5. After Today's Event

Holistic Transformational Development

My research is a starting point for further explorations to better integrate performing arts and community development. Part of this future explorations involves social influence in church communities. How might a collaboration project such as *Stories of Resilience* influence church social connections? Would performing arts help church communities progress as social change agents?

My research has caused me to question the cultural norm of the local church communities that often act on their own missions and attend to their own goals. However, from my observation, in general, churches are rarely exposed to performing arts integrated as collaborative arts. One of many audience members from church communities said, “I loved the creativity of showing topics that aren’t typically discussed [through] art” (Dull). This approach

of fusing performing arts and social justice seems like a relatively new experience for church communities, but not so for non-faith based art-based organizations such as those who were active in performing arts for social justice at *Stories of Resilience*. Myers also argues, “Churches too often find it difficult to work in partnership with other churches. This framework of holistic transformation increases the challenge to work with secular institutions, profit-making institutions and even non-Christian faith-based institutions” (67). Perhaps with further exploration, performing arts can address this issue. Al Rodriguez commented positively after attending *Stories of Resilience* that “it was a revelation of how society plays a major role” and the show “was a reminder of God...making us all different with the purpose of building community and growing together.” Myers states that holistic transformational development includes church communities (within the transformational framework) acting along with people sectors as the core of holistic well-being (65). This “dance” partnership resembles the theatrical performer/audience as a duo, yet it expands to suggest church performances/audiences may benefit as well in collaborating with congregants and those from other churches to foster sustainable church community development where social division dissolves. This effort can include people from all backgrounds plus NGOs, non-faith based organizations, churches, congregants, and every individual (everybody). It is a treasure trove for ongoing research into performing arts as method of social inclusion and as a universal language to churches.

Church community partnerships have all the potential to extend their “mercy ministries” (Myers 66), demonstrated by non-faith based people group such as Creative Justice and Splinter Dance Company. Church communities can contextualize their “mercy ministries” (Myers 66) through performing arts and any collaborative means to relate socially beyond the superficial level. However, church communities can also get caught into a narrow mindset of what it truly

means to be social change agents. “Mercy ministries” is not about changing people. Rather, it is about authentically knowing “the other” beyond a superficial level. By genuinely knowing people, we are each empowered to change. Moe Lobeda argues “that loving our neighbor requires far more than personal charity and goodwill; in fact, it requires a fundamental change in our hearts and our society” (Location 49). Reinforcing this fact from the book, *Real Boys’ Voices*, Bart reveals a truth that is worthwhile for church communities to ponder: “People have been trying to change the world for so long, and it’s never gotten us anywhere. They just keep trying to change other people...when truly the problem lies in themselves” (qtd. in Pollack and Shuster 125). If performing arts is closely knitted in humanity for holistic well-being, it means not only the church but also its members must change to gain in this holistic well-being. Would collaborations similar to those in *Stories of Resilience* create copowerment that helps church communities re-identify and reunite their traditional church missions and function “out of the box” to discover what “Kingdom work” should look like? Would collaborating with performing arts for social justice transform church communities and, thus, encourage their members to become more accessible and active in “mercy ministries” (Myers 65) to bridge social gaps? Finally, if church communities offer performing arts platforms to collaborate “side by side with all people of good will toward a better social order,” would that increase “the stewardship of creation and the bringing of fallen structures closer to God’s original purposes” (Myers 65)? These questions, and their answers, can reveal another dimension of performing arts in the community development context to address a deeper sense of unity among diverse cultural norms.

Social Entrepreneurial Approach

Myers well states that church is not the best agent to provide material solutions but that

church should work towards social justice, consider environmental concerns, and foster human well-being (65). It is likely, then, that the church can copower with performing artists for church/community presentations through providing opportunities and giving voice to performing artists such as Creative Justice, TSP and others as they promote social justice and advocacy platforms. The general public needs to do its part, encourage and receive continual exposure to performing arts, work toward social justice, and end community apathy. Therefore, as a possible financial solution, social entrepreneurship might effectively aid and sustain the performing arts sector toward its work in social justice.

A ballroom dancer and social entrepreneurial, Pierre Dulaine, implemented a social enterprise that integrates education, ballroom dancing, and social justice. Dulaine founded the Dancing Classrooms Program in New York City as a non-profit project to teach elementary and middle school students about life skills, a sense of self-respect, and self-esteem (Dancing Classrooms). He enhanced the lives of more than half a million children through his social entrepreneurship, dissolving social and political discrimination. Bullying rates significantly decreased, and each year, more students graduated from high school and were ready for college. Dulaine also implemented Dancing Classrooms in Jaffa, bridging two conflicting cultures. He brought Palestinian Israelite and Jewish children to collaborate as dance partners for a competition and fostered the once seemed “impossible” friendship. By accelerating national and international recognition, Dulaine leveraged social change to dissolve the public apathy and prejudice against the performing arts. His achievement pushed the social sectors to the extent where they could no longer ignore the transformative power of performing arts. Drawing from Dulaine’s example, it would be worthwhile to further research how other social enterprises might

help provide long-term financial sustainability that consistently funds collaborative public performance.

Conclusion

Performing arts is a valuable tool for community development. Our society cannot function like a self-sustaining machine. In order to achieve communal and holistic well-being, people need to learn resiliency in all aspects of their lives. Bornstein and Davis say, “We can bring change in our workplaces, schools, neighborhood, or families, and in ourselves. One simple way to strengthen commitment is to investigate a problem that deepens [our] understanding” that allows us to embrace, respect, and build trust, and create positive social change “with the people whom [we] can help” (127). Performing arts harnesses copowerment, social healing, friendships, education impacts, and creative collaboration, because “art is limitless, universal, and powerful, while remaining personal” (Cox). Artistic expression replaces apathy with empathy. Despite the hardcore messages that *Stories of Resilience* presented, the performing artists reached their audience in a nonconfrontational way to expose their stories and advocate for positive change. *Stories of Resilience* created positive effects through bringing together people of differing ages, cultures, and life experiences to listen to real and sometimes tough life stories told on stage.

The very existence of performing arts is a true gift to humanity. *Stories of Resilience* revealed many old assumptions and asked new questions about performing arts and its importance in community development. Performing artists working in art-based community development are assets to strengthen social connection, to build empathy, and to “remind us that our lives are contingent on others” (Bornstein and Davis 81). When performing arts becomes part of our web of life, our world transforms into a habitat where relationships are satisfying,

rejuvenating, and empowering. *Stories of Resilience* as a collaborative project should not be an end in itself; it must branch out farther to help more diverse communities collectively “build support for a larger structural change” (Bornstein and Davis 81) in community development. Performing arts can make our world a more habitable place, one that empowers each of us, and encourages us to build up one another. We have a beautifully diverse society and much to learn about our different ways. As individuals and as communities, we need to wake up and recognize that performing arts indeed sustains individual and communal holistic well-being, an intrinsic need for us all.

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