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Volume 1 *Summer 2016*

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August 2016

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### Recommended Citation

McManimon, Shannon K. (2016) "Imaginative Acts of Resistance: Dramatic Storytelling in an Elementary School Classroom," *Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*: Vol. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uni.edu/ptoj/vol1/iss1/5>

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*Pedagogy and Theatre of the Oppressed Journal*

*Vol. 1, Issue 1 (Summer 2016)*

## **Imaginative Acts of Resistance:**

### **Dramatic Storytelling in an Elementary School Classroom**

Shannon K. McManimon<sup>1</sup>

*This critical ethnographic project draws upon literature on imagination, critical literacy, and theatre to explore a sixth-grade class's participation in a critical literacy and creative drama program. Through examples from the storytelling practices of the Neighborhood Bridges program, I outline how students and teachers (including a teaching artist) imagined, co-created, and revised storylines in their classroom; this collaboration provides an alternative to the common narrative of the constrained urban public school classroom. The resulting imaginative acts of resistance: 1) encourage and empower urban elementary students to enact relevant, collaborative community in their classrooms; 2) engage meaningful—not just functional—literacies; 3) ask students to question and to push boundaries while acknowledging inherent tensions and contradictions in this process; and 4) build community collaborations.*

Teachers and students constrained by high-stakes testing, the pressures of top-down standardization and scripted curricula, a lack of resources for classrooms with dozens of students from many cultural and economic backgrounds, and urban schools as failures: these themes form the basis for many common narratives about U.S. public schooling (see, e.g., Ambrosio, 2013; Gorlewski & Porfilio,

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2013; Kumashiro, 2008; Ravitch, 2010; Watkins, 2012). Teachers (and administrators) feel constrained by the demands of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) reports—as if adequate were what we should desire for students; students experience school as joyless and unrelated to their lives outside the school walls. In many places, art, recess, and physical education have been marginalized or even removed as nonessential; literacy and math are taught as rote, decontextualized processes with little connection to students' lives.

Imagining a way out of these bleak storylines can be challenging, but it is not impossible—particularly when we draw on the power of story and the arts. Greene (2001) writes that “imagination is the capacity to posit alternative realities . . . . It is imagination that discloses possibilities—personal and social as well as aesthetic. By imagining, we are enabled to look at things, to think about things as if they were otherwise” (p. 65). One example of a program with a vision of an alternative reality for the classroom and for students' lives is Neighborhood Bridges (Bridges). While schools today often “reward and punish students in a system of humiliation in which learning becomes impossible” (personal communication with program cofounder Jack Zipes), Bridges program director Maria Asp suggests that in this program, “every week there is something that resists the narrative, even under those conditions.” Working toward personal, social, and aesthetic transformations, Bridges students and teachers can resist an oppressive narrative of narrow conceptions of learning and prescriptive schooling. Through oral, written, and performed storytelling, Bridges students and teachers imagine and enact new storylines for their classrooms, transform stories and rewrite unjust narratives, and work to become storytellers of their own lives. This work is collaborative, for as Boal asserts (1985), “all must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society” (p. x).

But like any good story, this one contains constraints and tensions; it is no Pollyanna-esque retelling. The storyline of what schools and classrooms are “supposed” to be is deeply ingrained in us, even by elementary school; further, the reality of schools—as in the overcrowded classroom highlighted below,

where many students sat on folding metal chairs for the first months of school—is often troubling. Asking students (and their teachers) to resist, to imagine classrooms that look, feel, and sound different is no easy task. It requires imagination and practice, community and collaboration.

In this essay, I introduce Neighborhood Bridges and my work with the program, then describe four imaginative acts of resistance that position Neighborhood Bridges as an alternative to the common narrative of the urban public school classroom. Drawing on the reality of one sixth-grade classroom and Dewey's (1934) and Greene's (1995, 2001) conceptions of imagination, these four acts tell a story of a critical literacy and creative drama program that 1) encourages and empowers urban elementary students to enact relevant, collaborative community in their classrooms, 2) engages meaningful—not just functional—literacies (e.g., critical literacy and the embodied literacy of theatre), 3) asks students to question and to push boundaries while acknowledging the inherent tensions and contradictions that result, and 4) builds community collaborations.

### **Prologue: Introducing Neighborhood Bridges**

Neighborhood Bridges is a year-long program of Children's Theatre Company, a Tony Award-winning theatre for multigenerational audiences. It pairs a Teaching Artist (TA) with a U.S., urban elementary school classroom and its linguistically, racially, and ethnically diverse low-income students. From September through May, participating classrooms host a weekly two-hour session led by a TA who uses a flexible curriculum organized by story genre (fairy tale, fables, myths, etc.).

A typical class session begins with students writing and sharing their own stories based on prompts related to the focus of the day. This is followed by the TA and/or classroom teacher orally telling two stories, often a canonical tale (such as “Bluebeard” or “The Three Little Pigs”) paired with a counterstory exploring similar themes or ideas. Students question and discuss these stories, encouraged by the adults to answer each other's questions (rather than the adults doing so) and to explore possible meanings and reasonings. Students then warm up their bodies and voices with theatre games (e.g., Boal, 2002) before

meeting in acting groups to rehearse a retelling of one of the stories of the day. The composition of the acting groups remains constant throughout the school year, and students must negotiate and resolve the many conflicts that arise during their short rehearsals. Then, each group performs its retelling for the whole class and gets feedback. If there is time, the session closes with students again writing individually.

In all forms of storytelling and discussion, students are encouraged to change the story or to explore different perspectives. Bridges thus aims to develop children's capacities to analyze and challenge dominant social and cultural storylines and to create new storylines through imaginative retellings. The goal is transformation that responds to the needs of children, schools, and communities; the program recognizes that "there is no one solution to the problems that we confront, but we hope that the curriculum will help us all to create conditions to find a multitude of possibilities for living a better life" ("Introduction to the Curriculum," p. 2). Bridges provides a container (a structure, not rules) of welcome and safety in which students can risk, question, and write and enact alternative stories. This utilizes what Green (2001) refers to as:

the capacity imagination gives us to move into the "as-if"—to move beyond the actual into invented worlds, to do so within our experience. To enter a created world, an invented world, is to find new perspectives opening on our lived worlds, the often taken-for-granted realities of everyday. (p. 82)

In other words, the Bridges storyline is that reality is not finished, so we should work to transform it, both in our lives and in the classroom.

This stance of questioning, challenge, and change is also central to the research methodology that grounded my study with Neighborhood Bridges. Drawing on critical ethnographic methods (e.g., Madison, 2005), for a year I took fieldnotes and wrote analytic and reflective memos (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011), collected student writing and other programmatic documentation, and conducted interviews with adults who work with the program. Inherently political as well as pedagogical, critical ethnography situates

people and research within cultural, historical and social frameworks; it acknowledges that a researcher's positionality is inseparable from data generation and analysis. Like Bridges itself, this critical approach seeks to question and challenge injustice and inequity (see Kincheloe & McLaren, 2005; Weis & Fine, 2012).

I was a participant-observer (which included co-teaching) in each weekly Bridges session in an urban, Title I, sixth-grade public school classroom. “Mrs. Riggs’s”<sup>2</sup> classroom averaged about 36 students who spoke at least six languages at home. About three-quarters of these students were of color, from diverse backgrounds including African-American, American Indian, (south and south-east) Asian-American, Somali, and Latin@. The classroom teacher (Mrs. Riggs), the Teaching Artist (Miss Adrienne), and myself were all white women. I also participated in monthly professional development sessions for Bridges TAs and assisted at public performances and other events. While I used critical ethnographic methods and theories to inform my research practice, the “acts of resistance” featured here coalesced as I reflected on and wrote about data from my time in this sixth-grade classroom (see Richardson, 2003, for more on writing as method).

### **Resistance Act One: Enacting Relevant, Collaborative Community in the Classroom**

Every day, students and teachers hear and repeat storylines contrasting the experiences they are living with “the real world,” as if the classrooms and schools in which they spend thousands of days are somehow a different, not quite real universe. And many students do imagine the day when their lives will no longer be constrained by the structures of schooling—a dream that for many feels unattainable. But as Freire (1998) asserts:

The imagination that takes us to possible and impossible dreams is always necessary. It is necessary to stimulate the learners' imagination, to use it in “blueprinting” the school they

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<sup>2</sup> Names of teachers and students are pseudonyms.

dream of. Why not put into practice right in the classroom the school they dream about?

(p. 51)

Neighborhood Bridges aims to do this, if only for a few hours a week. Bridges is an imaginative act of resistance endeavoring to enact relevant, collaborative communities that incorporate students' lives and interests.

Bridges TAs work to support the learning that classroom teachers dream of for their students. Thus, when Miss Adrienne and I met with Mrs. Riggs before our first session in September, we asked about the classroom culture and community she had been building. She responded that all they had been doing for the first four weeks of school was testing—so the “normal” classroom culture was testing. In the classroom, my heart broke a little as I read one student's posted “hopes and dreams” for the school year: “to pass the SSAs” (the state standardized assessment). This is what an eleven-year-old hopes for from school? Might we not dream, as Freire did, of something more? Might we not make school relevant to the lives of children in ways that bubble tests can never be?

That first day in Mrs. Riggs's classroom, Miss Adrienne asked the students what concerns they had about the world, about school, about the city we lived in. Demonstrating that they did in fact live in the “real world,” the students' most commonly raised concern was shootings in their neighborhood. But their concerns also showed their awareness of and desire to address broader injustices, such as Joseph Kony—“the guy who makes children kill their parents and then fight”—and a recent oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. This question was the beginning of asking students to bring their lives, experiences, and worries into the Bridges classroom, to make their concerns part of the curriculum, to draw connections between self, the world, and themes of stories, an approach similar to what Freire (2000) calls “problem-posing education” in which teachers and students engage together in a “constant unveiling of reality” (p. 81). Rather than being passive recipients of a predetermined curriculum, Bridges students are constantly invited to question and to transform words and thus the world. Such questions also counter the common experience in which:

Schools routinely suppress or deny the experiences of young people—they know terrible things, but they mustn't let the adults know that they know, and the adults are living in deep denial. Student voices are silenced, their insights ignored, their feelings patronized, their integrity undone. (Ayers & Ayers, 2011, p. 72)

Throughout the year, Miss Adrienne asked the students what they desired from school or the worlds around them, pushing them to think bigger when they gave trite answers such as “cotton candy for lunch.” Through questioning, Bridges students and teachers are positioned as “critical co-investigators in dialogue” (Freire, 2000, p. 81) who use imagination to respond to the challenges of the world.

Dewey (1934) suggests that imagination is:

the large and generous blending of interests at the point where the mind comes in contact with the world. When old and familiar things are made new in experience, there is imagination. When the new is created, the far and strange become the most natural inevitable things in the world. There is always some measure of adventure in the meeting of mind and universe, and this adventure is, in its measure, imagination. (p. 278)

Neighborhood Bridges attempts to stimulate students' imaginations by asking them to question, write about, and act out stories that matter to them and that bring in their interests, whether that be zombies or the latest dance movement, or concerns about gun violence or environmental catastrophes. Such imaginative work permits students and teachers “to give credence to alternative realities . . . [and] to break with the taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions” (Greene, 1995, p. 3). Asking students to retell their own stories—whether fictional or of their lives—challenges them to rethink the familiar and to imagine alternatives. Educative processes such as creative writing, playing with words, telling a story from a new perspective or voice, or playing different roles in a play build on students' engagement with ideas that are relevant to them.

For example, about a month into the school year, the oral stories paired the canonical “The Three



Little Pigs” and an unpublished story by Zipes (the program cofounder) in which three city kids are beholden to a local drug dealer for money he lent them to set up dance studios. As the students discussed these stories, one student, Joel, asked, “Why, in all of these stories, like ‘Little Red Riding Hood,’ is the wolf the bad guy?” When it came time to act out the stories, Miss Adrienne asked Joel’s group to tell the story from the perspective of the wolf and to remember the class’s earlier discussion about who the “wolves” were in the students’ lives. The acting group responded with a brilliant retelling featuring Mariah as “Judge Judy, mixing hard law with a TV show” in a trial to determine whether Joel killed the pigs and ate them or whether one of the pigs, played by Dara, had killed her own siblings and brought them to the wolf. After dramatic witness testimony that sent Dara to prison, Joel (now revealed as a wolf) went to “Judge Judy” for a payoff. This retelling, which was produced (as on most days) after about ten minutes of rehearsing, reflected what the students knew—how to play with genres, how to bring popular culture into the classroom, and how to express power—including the reality that corruption often triumphs.

Neighborhood Bridges concretely asks students to build community by bringing their lives and knowledges—the “here and now” (Freire, 2000, p. 85)—into the classroom as part of the curriculum. For instance, one story genre is “family tales.” As homework, students interviewed a family member. In place of the usual stories told by adults, each classroom participant shared their family tale with the class. When Mrs. Riggs shared an illustrated book she had made for her daughter about their family’s immigration story, the students were transfixed. The classroom looked more like a first-grade than a sixth. Sitting at her feet, students asked about her family and told Mrs. Riggs she was a great artist who had made a “real book.” Her family’s story of immigration resonated with the family tales of many of the students who were first, 1.5, or second generation. This imaginative act of resistance both validated classroom members’ personal narratives and fostered greater connection between the classroom teacher and her students.

Bridges students also must build community to be successful in the collective endeavor of theatre. Students had to learn to pay attention to each other, to cover each other’s backs, to negotiate the

classroom space together, and to use democratic problem-solving skills—such as voting or consensus—to make decisions or solve conflict. When an acting group did so poorly, it was evident in their performances, and their peers told them so in feedback.

As they built community, they also invited each other to participate in new ways. A month into Bridges, Natalia, a particularly shy student, had yet to speak in front of the whole class, whether to share her writing, ask a question, or have a speaking line in a play. As her acting group asked for feedback on their performance (in which Natalia had stood silently, her usual small smile on her face), her peers prompted her to ask for feedback: “It’s Natalia’s turn!” they repeated, until she responded by calling on another student. At the request of her acting group, Natalia spoke in front of the whole class. While she continued to struggle through much of the year to take on speaking roles, her peers continued to prompt her participation in different ways. And they praised her when she did. This was a common occurrence: after student-authored performances, students complimented each other on how they worked together and what each student brought to a performance, especially acknowledging the risks that many students, like Natalia, took to get on stage, especially for public performances outside of the classroom. Thus, in the shared responsibility of crafting performance together, students built a collaborative community.

Neighborhood Bridges attempts to enact a relevant, collaborative classroom community that encourages young people to together interpret their real-world experiences, both in and out of the classroom, by providing them “a space infused by the kind of imaginative awareness that enables those involved to imagine alternative possibilities for their own becoming and their group’s becoming” (Greene, 1995, p. 39). Asking students to put their lives and interests into dialogue with other classroom members and to practice living worlds they dream of is an imaginative act of resistance to a common narrative of educational achievement as a solitary endeavor measured by the limited constraints of a standardized test score.

## **Resistance Act Two: Critical and Theatre Literacies Positioning Students as Creators**

Too often, students are positioned as consumers of knowledge—the banking model of education about which Freire (2000) writes. As an alternative reality, Neighborhood Bridges centers critical literacy and theatre-based practices that position students as producers and creators of knowledge.

Being critically literate means disrupting commonplace thinking, interrogating multiple perspectives, unpacking issues sociopolitically, and taking social action to create a more just and equitable world (Vasquez, Tate, & Harste, 2013). Immediately following each oral story in Neighborhood Bridges, these sixth-graders questioned it. They practiced asking who had power or what the story would look like if a different character told it. For instance, following a telling of “Bluebeard,” in which a woman finds out that her husband killed his previous wives and stashed their bodies in his mansion, students asked why his wives didn’t leave him or ask for help or why the new wife’s friends didn’t steal Bluebeard’s riches while he was away. Rather than answering such questions, teachers turned the questions back to the students to elicit their ideas, such as “maybe she didn’t want her friends to get in trouble.” Through critical literacy practices, students questioned the status quo as manifested in stories, in their classroom, and in their lives, and then linked their critical reflection to action in the world they inhabited—most immediately, the world of the classroom.

They did so through imagining and enacting different endings to stories through performance: acting out their knowledges bodily. Rather than dismissing the body, as schooling and Western education have long done, each week Bridges engaged students in embodied storytelling. Weekly theatre games, which transitioned between the written and oral storytelling of the first half of a session and the acting of the second, asked students to make their bodies expressive and to consider how the body sends and receives messages, using variations of Boal’s (2002) games and exercises and a compendium of others built through the years of the program’s existence.

Miss Adrienne frequently asked students to practice the language of theatre by paying attention to

what their bodies were saying and to work on matching their bodies and words in the scenes they were scripting. She reminded students that “sometimes your bodies can figure things out.” One particularly effective tool was asking students to work with scenes of conflict: two students came up with characters experiencing conflict, wrote lines of dialogue, and then performed them for the class. Joel, for instance, cowrote a scene in which he was a father having a fight with his son. But while the dialogue portrayed the son as in control of the situation, the embodied scene did not show this. When Miss Adrienne asked him to “show us you are a bad dad,” Joel’s posture changed: he slumped his shoulders and looked at the ground. With that shift, his “son” was clearly in control of their fight. Another example featured a conversation between a mother and her daughter who had gotten in a fight at school. The class’s feedback was that the scene was just not believable. Sometimes, Miss Adrienne said, “the words that we say are not the same as what we really mean. So how might we say yes if we really mean no?” The students tried this out, practicing with different words how to make their voices and bodies say something different than their words and in the process seeing what it looked like when we don’t effectively use our bodies and our voices when acting out a scene.

Students in Mrs. Riggs’s classroom engaged critical literacy questions in their theatre practices as well, frequently playing, for example, with gender roles—both their own and those of stories’ characters. They practiced acting out different ways of being in the world and in the classroom, arguing, for instance, for gender equality after hearing a folktale about Annie Christmas, which speaks of historical gender and racial inequalities. This discussion must have resonated, as the class—led by girls arguing for “girl power!”—later voted that they would retell this story for their final performance onstage at the professional theatre. The messages they wanted to communicate to the audience through their play were that women and African-Americans have been treated unjustly, that “you shouldn’t take girls for granted,” that “everyone should get treated equally,” that equality “takes a lot of guts and bravery—there can be people like that,” and that you can use power and strength in “a good way.”

The students also demonstrated their knowledge of critical and theatre literacies through their first public performance when they chose to retell a story called “The Servant” by Hermynia Zur Mühlen. Working with this story over several weeks, they explored unequal relationships, such as those between children and adult family members and between workers and bosses. A worker in the play the class created summarized the latter as “the rich man is getting richer, but my paycheck is getting smaller!” Students challenged oppressions not only in the story itself, but in the classroom, such as when a female student challenged a male student who asserted that pizza delivery was “a man’s job.” Additionally, the class collectively transformed the story’s ending to empower the townspeople. In their retelling, the townspeople joined together to declare that “friends, family, and community are more important than money,” taking back their town from the rich, oppressive business owners. In changing this story, in adding a protest rally punctuated by a revised version of “We are Family” by Sister Sledge, the students compellingly argued for the power of community. Their work with this story disrupted commonplace thinking, interrogated multiple perspectives, and gave fictional characters methods for building a more just world. As in Boal’s (2002) *Theatre of the Oppressed*, this changed story presented a version of reality “not only as it is, but also, more importantly, as it could be. Which is what we live for—to become what we have the potential to be” (p. 6).

Such examples from this sixth-grade classroom support Boal’s (1985) contention that any person is capable of utilizing theatre as a language to express the self and to discover new concepts. Boal (1985) argues that theatre can change a spectator from a passive being into a subject—a “spect-actor” who “assumes the protagonic role, changes the dramatic action, tries out solutions, discusses plans for change” (p. 122). Through theatre, people (including students) have the capacity “to observe themselves in action” (Boal, 2002, p. 11), to “learn about ourselves and our times . . . [and to] know the world we live in, the better to change it” (p. 16).

These multimodal theatre practices also center imagination. As Dewey (1934) writes, “an

imaginative experience is what happens when varied materials of sense quality, emotion, and meaning come together in a union that marks a new birth in the world” (p. 279). Imagination, as Dewey conceives of it, involves seeing, hearing, moving, and feeling—in other words, many ways of knowing. Greene (1995) argues for centering the arts in school “because encounters with the arts have a unique power to release imagination. Stories, poems, dance performances, concerts, paintings, films, plays—all have the potential to provide remarkable pleasure for those willing to move out toward them and engage with them” (p. 27). Eisner (2000) concurs, stating that we need to think of the arts not solely as providing pleasure, but as developing abilities to think, understand, and, indeed, to become (p. 42).

Through asking critical literacy questions of the stories they heard and wrote, through theatre games and exercises, and through performed retellings created with collective brainstorming and rehearsal, students examined their selves and stories. They made connections between their lives and knowledges and those of curricular texts, recycling the told and the familiar—canonical storylines from literature, school, and their lives—to make something new and to play a role in re-imagining the classroom. As Miss Adrienne often said, where these connections and stories could lead is “only limited by your imagination.” In this Neighborhood Bridges classroom, theatre became a “space for constant experimentation with the world of objects and for self-experimentation with one's body and mind” (Zipes, 2004, p. 255). Rather than being the object of AYP or the consumers of knowledge, students engaged in imaginative acts of resistance as subjects of their lives and classrooms and as creators of retold stories.

### **Resistance Act Three: Tensions and Contradictions in Pushing the Boundaries**

In their written and performed stories, nearly every week these sixth-grade students questioned and pushed—or looked for permission to do so—boundaries of what “belongs” in school. Their stories were filled with violence and scatological humor—and with knowledges brought in from their own lives. Their version of “The Servant,” for instance, incorporated television commercials and jingles they created, used the framing of a news report to change the narrative sequence, changed the setting of the story to a pizza

business, and referenced popular culture (e.g., television shows) and technology (e.g., Twitter, video games). In retelling the story through their own interests and lenses, they challenged the ways in which “official knowledge” (Apple, 2000) is regulated, in contrast to the many other ways, times, and spaces that students (especially low-income and students of color) are told explicitly and implicitly that their questions, worries, interests, and knowledges must be left outside the school walls. As Apple (2000) writes, “the act of bringing the outside in is one of the most important preconditions . . . for any education worthy of its name” (p. xix). This program is an imaginative act of resistance as it counters a closing down of questions and a limiting notion of what is appropriate knowledge or ways of learning in school.

Yet I would be utterly remiss in my work as a “storyteller-researcher” (Barone, 1997, p. 117) if I let the story stay this neat. The act of resisting “official knowledge” when it was oppressive was not necessarily consistent, imaginative, or motivated by well-intentioned challenges; instead, these processes were marked by tensions and contradictions. While questions, stories, or performances that pushed the boundaries of “school appropriateness” were frequent, so were accusations from students that the stories we teachers told were “not the real story” (as in the Disney version) or assertions that a story “didn’t make sense.” Insisting on “getting the story right” or that it must be “real,” however, can also be read as signs that arts and imagination are sorely lacking in these students’ schooling worlds and minds. Certainly they know that what happens in television programs and video games “doesn’t make sense,” yet in class we frequently didn’t get to critical literacy questions because the students were trying to figure out how an animal could talk or a giant act in a particular way. Somehow, stories told in school have different rules than those in other spaces in their lives.

At other times, students refused or resisted imagination, as they did the day when nearly all the students participated at best lackadaisically in a sound and motion theatre game, refusing to use their bodies and voices. Sometimes, students seemed unable to imagine alternative realities. For instance, in rehearsing for “The Servant,” the students spent a great deal of time improvising scenes demonstrating that

adult family members do not spend enough time with their children because of work, computers, and televisions. But in their play, the townspeople did not want to spend so many hours working because they would rather have been on e-mail or Twitter, watching television, or playing video games—in other words, doing exactly what they had spent literally weeks criticizing the adults in their lives for doing. On the day “Bluebeard” was told, following up on students’ questions about violence (including Bluebeard’s death at the hands of his wife’s brothers) and their concerns about why the wives had not asked for help, Miss Adrienne challenged the acting groups to resolve the conflict in this story without violence. None of the transformed stories did so; all simply recycled other violent storylines.

And despite unending prompts to figure out their own conflicts and to script their own performances in community, students often requested of me: “you be the boss.” In a classroom of nearly 40 students and an always limited amount of time, there was tension between the students generating their own ideas and set dates for public performances. In one instance, the students’ nearly endless improvising meant that a play had no ending until the day before the public performance—and then had to be hastily scripted from ideas in a homework prompt. In a final example, attempts to connect the Bridges curriculum with the district writing curriculum largely failed because a writing curriculum was virtually nonexistent due to the focus on the tested subjects of reading and math.

These resistances to imagination likely stem from multiple sources, including self-consciousness and fear (these were, after all, students on the verge of adolescence) and lack of practice. By sixth grade, students have spent half of their lives learning certain ways of understanding and framing learning—the purposes of schooling—that don’t include play, moving the body, or imagining different possibilities. Stories and texts are fixed—answers designated by a letter and corresponding bubble on a multiple choice form. To ask students to *be* differently in the classroom for two hours a week is a difficult challenge, one which students often actively resisted. At the same time, we must remember that imagination is a process, pointing us toward an unknowable and never complete future, guiding us in processes of furthering our



humanity (Freire, 2000). To be in process implies that these acts are ongoing and incomplete.

#### **Resistance Act Four: Building Community Bridges that Advocate for Liberatory Education**

On the whole, Bridges TAs (and classroom teachers) imagine education as something other than the constricted, neoliberal schooling models shaped by No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and other forms of accountability. And yet, they work within the reality that exists, not the alternative realities they might imagine. One way the program resists a narrow storyline of education is by building community bridges into and out of the classroom through fostering relationships and ongoing professional development.

Bridges fosters long-term relationships between TAs and schools by placing a TA in the same school for multiple years. TAs are known in school buildings, greeted with enthusiasm and hugs; they come to know whole families of children. Twice a year, classroom teachers also go to the theatre company to learn more about the program, to share experiences, and to engage in professional development.

TAs themselves participate in extensive orientation and training on the program's goals, philosophies, and practices, including ongoing, monthly (and often more frequent) professional development and sharing. They visit each other's classrooms to see the many ways of enacting the philosophies. They study and analyze data collected in their classrooms; they read about instructional practices and about stories and theatre. As they study their own teaching practices as well as larger educational contexts, they become more deeply aware of how critical their work—collaborating with students in imaginative acts of resistance—is in challenging oppressive policies and practices in classrooms and schools.

As a researcher, I fostered reciprocity with the Teaching Artists by sharing my knowledge as a curriculum and educational scholar. The TAs hungered to understand the current contexts—from a systems perspective—of the schools in which they taught. Ongoing professional development on such issues empowered their classroom work by enabling them to make sense of the buildings they entered. One

month, for instance, I planned a 15-minute presentation on “tests, statistics, and standards” as an overview of some of the national forces shaping education today. Fifteen minutes turned into 95—filled with both laughter and outrage. As I spoke about competition and deregulation (e.g., Kumashiro, 2012; Watkins, 2012), one TA, pounding his fist on the table, succinctly encapsulated the narrow narrative of education by comparing it to a corporate strategy: “if I’m asking all the children of America to run their education like someone who is selling Xanax, that’s a horrible misapprehension about what education is.” He had been working in public schools without understanding how and where the pressures on students and teachers came from; our conversations gave him new understandings as well as an increased commitment to the arts-based—not test or market-based—practices of Neighborhood Bridges. Or, as another TA asked, “When did educators get pushed out of education?”

Such professional development work encouraged TAs to empathize with and advocate for the educators who were spending all day, every day in constrained classrooms; it created a different kind of solidarity between the two types of teachers. As Greene (1995) writes:

[There is] another way to imagine imagining: it is becoming a friend to someone else's mind, with the wonderful power to return to that person a sense of wholeness. Often, imagination *can* bring severed parts together, can integrate into the right order, can create wholes. (p. 38)

Under pressure from administration and unsure if she could continue to teach in a repressive environment, a classroom teacher received support from TAs who reminded her of her significance to her students. In recent years, Teaching Artists and classroom teachers have collaborated on street theatre projects to expose the privatization of public education and to advocate for multicultural, anti-oppressive pedagogical practices. In moments such as these, they have become friends to each other's minds.

In addition to building bridges between TAs, classroom teachers, and schools, Bridges incorporates families, such as in the family tale interviews or inviting them to participate in set-building and

costume design in preparation for year-end performances. Students also perform publicly twice: family members and the school community are invited to their school in the winter and to the professional theatre in the spring. Each classroom chooses a story to retell and stage—which includes building their own props, set, backdrop, and costumes—and performs to the cheers and applause of friends and family. In between the plays from classrooms from different schools, students share stories or poems they have written. For many students, performing on a professional stage under the bright lights is a highlight of the Bridges experience.

Neighborhood Bridges works to model collaboration not only between schools and a nonprofit organization, but between adults as teachers and learners as well as between schools and families. Its imaginative act of resistance is its advocacy for liberatory educational practices for all students and teachers as it builds these community bridges.

### **Resolution?: Possibilities for Imaginative Acts of Resistance**

The ongoing work of Neighborhood Bridges demonstrates the power of educational partnership and collaboration: between a community theatre company and local schools, between classroom teachers and artists, between canonical and rewritten stories, between classroom members, between families and educational institutions. In a time when urban, public school teachers feel constrained by high-stakes testing and preparation and hence disconnected from curriculum as well as their students, the partnerships created in this program foster connections between students and teachers and between students and their learning.

The partnership opens spaces for literacy by engaging students' minds, bodies, knowledges, and imaginations and positioning them as creators; it encourages students to make connections between their lives, between texts, and between academic constructs and to see themselves as powerful actors who can create different endings, complicate and contest stories, sit with ambiguity, and ask critical questions.

Neighborhood Bridges positions students as storytellers of their own lives who simultaneously dialogue with

and reconstruct both personal and societal storylines. This arts-based program has transformative power as students use their bodies and imaginations as scaffolding to play their ways into literacy learning while becoming critical thinkers and storytellers, engaging in creative collaboration, and communicating in and with complex narratives (e.g., Holloway & LeCompte, 2001; Rolling, 2013; Vygotsky, 1925). Despite challenges, it is an imaginative act of resistance unabashed about conceiving of classrooms as powerful spaces of learning and exploring anti-oppressive practices and beliefs (Kumashiro, 2000)—spaces in which both teachers and students, individually and collectively, can engage in multimodal processes of making connections and changing tired tropes and unimaginative storylines.

At the end of the year that I spent in Mrs. Riggs's sixth-grade classroom, TAs and classroom teachers from many schools gathered to reflect on the year. They talked about how Bridges showed them strengths they hadn't before seen in their students, about coming to understand how deeply students cared for each other, and about students becoming classroom leaders. These stories reflect the world of school as it is—or as it can be, its imagined possibilities. I don't often hear teachers use words like “magical” and “amazing” when talking about their classrooms—especially when talking about overcrowded, under-resourced urban, public elementary school classrooms. But I did this day, and to echo one TA's words about an interaction he had with a student, “it left me speechless.” This is imagination at work: writing new narratives and enacting alternative realities of teaching and learning.

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