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Cover Page Footnote

The author wishes to thank Flock Theatre, the Connecticut Office of the Arts, and the classroom teachers for welcoming her into this project and for the opportunity to learn from their expertise.



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Leveraging Standardized Testing to Transform Curriculum Through Arts Integration: Effects of Shadow Puppet Theater on Reading Fluency Among Elementary School Students

Nancy B. Parent¹

This paper presents findings from a reading fluency study conducted by Flock Theatre (Connecticut Higher Order Thinking Schools Teaching Artists) on the effects of a shadow puppet theater program in an elementary school setting. Data collected in this study show an increase in fluency scores among students who perform as narrators in the program. This paper highlights the role of teaching artists in leveraging standardized assessments to transform curricula and student learning through arts integration. Positionality of teaching artists, classroom teachers, and my role as a social scientist in this context is considered, as well as a discussion of the ways in which these programs model critical pedagogy and decolonizing methodologies in education and ethnography.

Introduction

Flock Theatre is a professional 501(c)3 dedicated to developing arts integration programming in urban and rural school districts in Connecticut for over 25 years. Flock's performative work includes Shakespeare, Classics, Puppetry, and Street Theatre, including the "Annual Burning of Benedict Arnold" reenactment. Flock's work in formal school settings ranges from theater productions to utilizing theatrical techniques and dramatic play to engage student learning. Additionally, Flock provides professional development for teachers in arts integration across the state. Flock Theatre's founding director and Master

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Teaching Artist, Derron Wood, and his associates teach undergraduate theater courses at Mitchell College and direct multiple productions on campus and in the region each year. Mitchell College is an ability-based institution that serves to empower and support diverse learners, and where the performing arts are transformative to the academic and social/emotional success of many of its students.

Flock Theatre has extensive experience providing arts integration programming in schools throughout Connecticut that improve student learning outcomes. One such program took place at an urban, arts magnet school in southeastern Connecticut where Flock Theatre provided two 10-week enrichment programs to fourth graders in 2018 and 2019, measuring the effects of shadow plays on lower-level reading fluency rates. Using Connecticut's standardized DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) assessment (CSDE 2021), students who prepared for and narrated a live performance in plays focusing on local history increased in their fluency rates over students who did not narrate. Narration is defined here as the reading of any scripted text during a shadow presentation (Flock Theatre 2018). Fluency refers to a child's ability to read a text with speed and accuracy and is a measure of recognized and empirically validated skills related to general reading outcomes (DIBELS 2021). By using theater, Flock was able to facilitate and activate student learning, employing Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (Gardner 2001) where student ability, particularly of lower performing students, is unlocked through the arts.

Flock Theatre teaching artists have been engaging in de-centering and democratic praxis in public schools for decades, all the while navigating intersecting forces of nation-state curriculum mandates and standardized testing norms. The significance of the Flock Theatre Fluency Study is the ways in which teaching artists and classroom teachers effectively employ standardized assessments to capture the impact of arts integration on low-level reading fluency. In so doing, their programs provide evidence for the power of the arts in activating student learning and engagement and emphasize the critical role the arts play in student identity formation and sense of belonging as learners. Teaching artists are modeling best

practices in interdisciplinary teaching and learning whereby children make connections across the curriculum rather than in siloed blocks of knowledge. Collaboration is foundational to these programs and contributes to decolonizing methodologies in education and ethnography. Students are empowered as learners and the arts function as a vehicle through which transformative education takes place.

Positionality

The opportunity to serve as a research consultant to this project came across my desk in fall 2018 during my first semester as a full-time faculty member providing a fresh breath of air to leave my building and immerse myself in the creativity of teaching artists engaging fourth graders at a neighboring elementary school. My dissertation research in anthropology focused on informal science learning in Native American communities with an analysis of the ways in which practitioners and community members collaborated while creatively leveraging grant funding to develop new pathways for culturally responsive education (Parent 2012). My theoretical framework for analyzing this project was grounded in critical and indigenous pedagogies and has informed my work teaching college courses in race, ethnicity, gender, and culture.

The Flock Theatre Fluency Study called upon my early influences in scholarship such as Smith (1999; 2005), Freire (1970; 1978; 2002), and McClaren and Kichenloe (2007), while challenging me to expand my interdisciplinary literature review to include arts integration (Vincent-Lancrin, et al. 2013; DeMoss and Morris 2002; Catterall 2009; Corcoran 2005), Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1985; Rohd 1998) and how drama activates learning (Anderson & Dunn 2013). This project has shifted my focus toward applied anthropology which is participatory and community-based, with an emphasis on arts advocacy grounded in empirical research (Parent 2019; Pollack and Levinson 2016). The reflexive nature of this work has a 360° effect of theory-practice-theory-praxis (Cruz 2015), learning from practitioners in the field to improve upon my own teaching methods in the college classroom while employing critical ethnography

(Dennis 2009). Collaboration and relationality are central to these partnerships as is an understanding of intersectionality and power differentials implicated in these spaces. I am also a musician and songwriter, and value multiple modalities of expression and learning that cultivate agency and artistic freedom.

Background of Flock Fluency Studies

Flock Theatre Fluency Studies using shadow puppetry began approximately 10 years ago with a pilot project at a suburban elementary school in western Connecticut. Although this school's administration confirmed the success of the program, Flock was not given access to the standardized assessments that reflected increased fluency scores. In 2013, Flock conducted a fluency study at an intermediate school in eastern Connecticut, funded by the Parent-Teacher Organization. Flock teaching artists were given access to all data from this project that showed increased fluency scores (Flock Theatre 2013). These earlier programs led to a grant from the Connecticut State Department of Economic and Community Development, Office of the Arts, to fund a Flock Theatre Fluency Study at an urban, arts magnet elementary school in southeastern Connecticut. This grant supported two residencies in 2018 and 2019 where Flock teaching artists were empowered to collaborate with classroom teachers to develop the program's curriculum and research design. At the outset, this partnership was embraced by the school administration and their vested interest in the arts, and a key teacher whose dedication to the program was significant to its progress and insights gleaned through this research.

Methodology

Data collection for this project was conducted by classroom teachers in collaboration with Flock Theatre teaching artists using the DIBELS (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills) universal screening assessment (DIBELS 2011). Using both a pre-test and post-test, the student is asked to read a pre-selected paragraph with the teacher for one-minute. The child's fluency score is determined by the

number of words read correctly minus the number of words that were incorrect. Lower-level scores are within the range of 60-130 which was the focus of these residencies.² During the 2018 residency, two out of three fourth grade classes participated in the Flock Theatre program. The third class that did not participate (due to the teacher's lack of interest) served as a control group. During the 2019 residency, all three fourth grade classes participated. Both residencies highlight the impact the program had on student narrators before and after the play. My role was to observe the program and conduct secondary research to situate the work of Flock Theatre teaching artists within arts integration scholarship. Field notes were collected through on-site observations during the 2019 residency, informal conversations with classroom teachers, and meetings with Flock Theatre teaching artists from 2018-present.³

The Project

From 2018-2019, Flock's Fluency Study took place at an urban, arts magnet elementary school where teaching artists engaged fourth grade classes in shadow puppet theater representations of "Connecticut Tales: Historical Legends" written by Higher Order Thinking (HOT) Schools' teachers (Falcone, et al. 1990). Established in 1994, the HOT Schools program in Connecticut focuses on strong arts, arts integration, and democratic practice where arts are viewed as part of the academic rigor in schools emphasizing collaboration and interdisciplinary learning (HOT Schools 2021). The objective of the Flock Theatre Fluency Study was to conduct a formal study of the effect of a HOT approach with a focus on low-level fluency students narrating a shadow-puppetry play. A HOT approach employed by Flock Theatre

² The DIBELS assessments are aligned with the Common Core State Standards in Reading, and "measure recognized and empirically validated skills related to reading outcomes" (DIBELS 2021). DIBELS reading assessments are mandated in Connecticut for grades K-3 and periodically used for children in grade four and five who struggle with reading. Flock's Fluency Study utilized the DIBELS assessment given during "essentials" classes (art, music, and dance) as a pre-test to measure the impact of the program on fourth grade children with lower-level reading fluency scores. DIBELS is constructed to assess children's phonological awareness, alphabetic principle and phonics, accuracy and fluency comprehension, and vocabulary and oral language (DIBELS 2021).

³ Flock Theatre was awarded a grant through the Connecticut Office of the Arts to conduct their fluency study in the school. This required permission from the school's administration and teachers. My role as a research consultant was to observe the program and conduct a literature review to support their study.

emphasizes learning for *transfer* that is “meaningful learning” (Brookhart 2010 cites Anderson and Krathwohl 2001). This approach is counter to the standardized banking methods (criticized in Freire 1970) of “teaching to the test” and focuses on developing students’ ability to apply knowledge and skills across disciplines. Similarly, Flock Theatre’s programs engage students in critical and reflective thinking about the characters in their plays, as well as problem solving where children are challenged to work together and creatively find solutions to problems as they arise in the activity (Brookhart 2010; Freire 1978).

Negotiating High Stakes Testing

Effective July 7, 2010, the Connecticut State Board of Education adopted the Common Core State Standards, now called the Connecticut Core Standards, in English language arts and mathematics (CCSSI 2021). These standards establish “what Connecticut’s students should know and be able to do as they progress through Grades K-12” (CSDE 2021). Fourth grade Core Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy Reading Standards Foundational Skills (K–5) are articulated as follows:

These standards are directed toward fostering students’ understanding and working knowledge of concepts of print, the alphabetic principle, and other basic conventions of the English writing system. These foundational skills are not an end in and of themselves; rather, they are necessary and important components of an effective, comprehensive reading program designed to develop proficient readers with the capacity to comprehend texts across a range of types and disciplines. Instruction should be differentiated: good readers will need much less practice with these concepts than struggling readers will. The point is to teach students what they need to learn and not what they already know—to discern when particular children or activities warrant more or less attention (CCSI, 2021, para. 1).

The Common Core Reading Standards defines fluency as being able to “read with sufficient accuracy and fluency to support comprehension” (CCSSI, 2021, para. 6). Criteria include, a) Read grade-level text with purpose and understanding; b) Read grade-level prose and poetry orally with accuracy, appropriate rate, and expression on successive readings; and c) Use context to confirm or self-correct word recognition and understanding, rereading as necessary (CCSSI 2021).

The Flock Theatre Fluency Study effectively bridges state mandates with critical pedagogy and arts integration beginning with the DIBELS universal screening assessment. According to the University of Oregon DIBELS website, “These research-based measures are ... predictive of later reading proficiency” (DIBELS 2021). Drawing from their previous programs, the authors of this study forwarded the following hypothesis:

Lower level fluency Grade 4 students who narrate a live performance shadow play will increase their fluency rates in comparison to lower level students who did not narrate (Flock Theatre 2019).

Children whose fluency scored lowest on the pre-test were selected as narrators. Students who did not narrate each held an operative role in the performance manipulating shadow puppets, acting (non-voice, embodied), controlling the light on the shadow screen using overhead projectors, or providing music and sound effects to support the story. “By using the principals of performance such as volume, clarity (diction and speed), textual-analysis (key words, punctuation, word-choice, coloring of words, textual specificity),” Flock teaching artists rehearsed the scripts with selected narrators (Flock Theatre 2019).

Connecticut History Shadow Plays and Flock Theatre Arts Integration

Shadow plays during these residences are intended to engage children in elements of local history, character development, reflection, and social development. The scripts have elements of indigenous storytelling and pedagogy intersecting with dominant narratives of colonial New England history.

The first day of the Flock Theatre residency begins with a fourth-grade class eagerly gathering in a room adjacent to their normal classroom. The school’s emphasis on the arts is integrated throughout their day through dance, movement, and music classes; however, to the children this experience is special.

Flock Theatre teaching artists provide enrichment beyond the usual curriculum. It is evident that many of the children are familiar with Flock teaching artists from having witnessed other classes' performances and are excited to now have their turn.

Flock begins with brief storytelling of the Frog Bridge in Willimantic, Connecticut, and the giant spools that symbolize the history of the city's wooden spool mills in the 19th century as context for the shadow play, "The Windham Frog Wars." Next, the teaching artists model the use of the various theatrical tools the children will be using including overhead projectors and cardboard cutouts of puppets attached to sticks. The cardboard cutouts made by Flock teaching artists are intricate in design and effectively utilize negative space for filtering light. The teacher artist explains and models to the children the use of light that is essential for a shadow play to work stating, "You need light, you need to block light, and you need to catch light." Eight foot tall screens serve as both a backdrop and canvas for manipulating puppets and telling a story.

The teaching artists go over the roles for the shadow play (assigned by the classroom teachers) and explain that narrators are encouraged to use "cartoon voices" where anyone can be a cartoon voice and gender is not relevant. The narrators are given copies of the script and are reminded that "mistakes are the best way to learn." Students are not allowed to correct each other, only teachers. Moving through the script the teaching artists explain words such as "destruction," "amphibians," and "inconsiderate." During the read-through they encourage the narrators to practice their cartoon voices as ways to express emotions in their characters. Additional instruction includes teaching the children how to use appropriate inflections in their voices.

During the second class's reading of the play, "The Charter Oak," one narrator stumbles over the word "sachem" and the teaching artists gives context clues relating to the Northeast Native peoples. A child speaks up, "I'm Native American!" The teaching artist inquires about their tribal background to which the

child states, “I’m Mashantucket Pequot!” The teaching artist discusses matrilineal and matrifocal sachems in the Northeast and the narrators continue reading with fluency corrections made by the teaching artist.



Figure 1. Flock Theatre teaching artist facilitating rehearsal.

During day two of the residency, children are introduced to hand signals used by the director that are “similar to the movies,” such as waving (sound), flat hand (signaling the overhead projector lighting up/down) and pointing (voice cued). Each child is then assigned a specific role for the play: music, overhead projectors, live shadow actors, puppet actors, and narrators.

With a total of nine rehearsals, the narrators read the script repetitively and improve their overall fluency and confidence in their reading. This methodology contrasts to a traditional theater experience of memorizing lines and the anxiety of performing on stage in front of peers. The teaching artists explain that shadow and shadow symbolism has been used as a vehicle for centuries in a range of cultures and settings such as Turkey, Indonesia, and in plays by Shakespeare.



Figure 2. Students rehearsing shadow puppet theater.

The effectiveness of the shadow puppetry on student engagement and learning is evident. The classroom teachers remarked that ELL students “soar above” other students “because they value it.” Another teacher stated that students with attention disorders are noticeably focused in this program. Similarly, a teacher remarks that children narrators are excited and want to read in this program and “the context of their learning is everything.” In one class, children narrators were noticeably louder and more confident moving past their fluency errors with help and were eager to work on expression of the words and their meaning.

Shadow puppet theater’s success is based on each student’s unique contribution to the performance. The repurposing of old technology (overhead projectors) into something new (lighting affects) is a creative and powerful element of shadow puppetry and is further evidence of the resourcefulness of teaching artists who maximize small budgets. The children learn about effects they can create such as cross fade using cardboard in front of the projector, as well as color film paper that creates an evening affect. Additional add-ins include sound effects such as clapping (e.g. sounds of a horse) and music from a CD boom box as a sound bed for the plays.

Children learn a range of theatrical techniques and storytelling skills through shadow puppetry that connect to their science, social studies, and language arts curricula. Similarly, children experience

performative freedom and a sense of agency in their respective roles that ignite their interest and engagement, and where learning happens secondarily to the theatrical experience. The shadow effects create a mysterious and anonymous element to the stage experience. Narrators can safely focus on reading their script behind the screen alleviating any pressure to memorize lines and perform directly in front of an audience. These dynamics allow for meaning making, shape shifting, and self-determination, all the while participating in a group-centered pedagogy where individual merit is set aside, and democratic, transformative education is realized (see Figures 3-4).

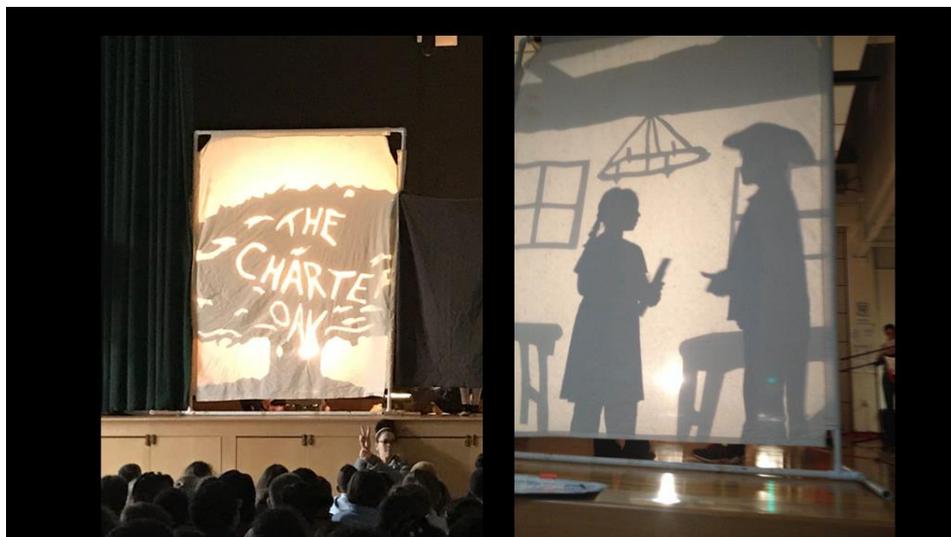


Figure 3. Shadow puppet theater performance at school assembly.



Figure 4. Fourth graders performing "The Charter Oak"

Reading Fluency Pre-Test and Post-Test

First Residency – 10-days—Spring 2018

Data resulting from the first residency show that those students who narrated in the plays had an average increase of 15.5 DIBELS points (Figure 1); whereas those students in the control group who did not participate in the program had an average increase of only 8.4 points (Figure 5). All of the children who participated as narrators (14 total) had a minimum increase of 10 points, whereas more than half of the control group had an increase of less than 10 points. The lowest difference was by a student in the control group who started with 92 points and went down two points. As Figure 6 shows, ending scores of students who participated as narrators in the program improved significantly in their fluency scores versus non-participating students (Flock Theatre 2018).

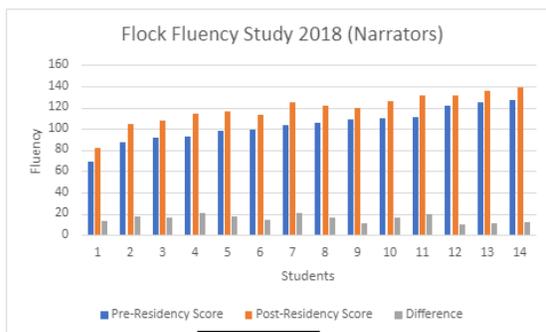


Figure 5

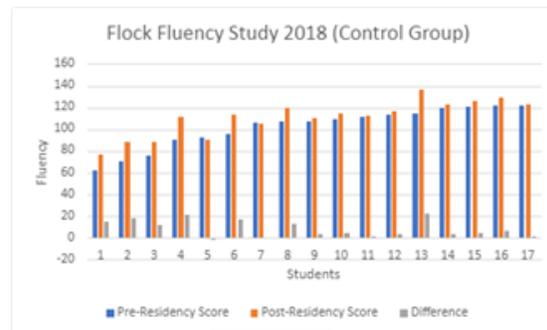


Figure 6

Second Residency – 10-days—Spring 2019

During the 2019 Flock Theatre Fluency Study, all three fourth grade classes participated in the program. Students who participated as narrators (28 total) had an average increase of 21.96 DIBELS up from 15.5 (Figure 7). The effects of narration on fluency are noted for an English Language Learner with an increase of 45 points, over twice the grade’s average. Additionally, all but one of the 40 or more-point increases occurred with starting levels below 100, with one outlier who showed a dramatic increase of 74

points over three times the grade’s average. (Flock Theatre 2019). Flock Theatre’s summative reports provide convincing correlations between narration of a live performance shadow play and increase in fluency, stating,

We have concluded that this type of artistic collaboration to support and enhance curriculum is exceedingly beneficial to the students who participate. By using theater, we were able to help the students learn in a way that supports Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences (Gardner 2001[1983]). Each and every student learns in a different way and the arts unlock these multiple intelligences. Due to this, it is not only beneficial to students but to schools everywhere to include more arts-based activities in their curriculum...we are confident in reaffirming our belief that arts are crucial to education and we encourage more research to support it (Flock Theatre 2019).

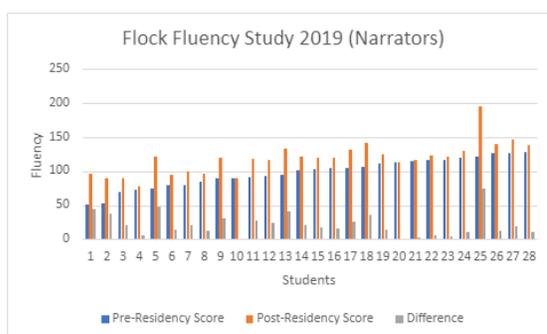


Figure 7

Leveraging Standardized Assessments to Transform Curriculum and Pedagogy

The Flock Theatre Fluency Study focuses specifically on fluency among narrators and improvements to reading fluency among students who scored the lowest on DIBELS standardized tests. This preliminary work prompts further inquiry into the effects of theater arts and shadow puppetry on student learning, more broadly. Areas of inquiry that could be further researched include the ways in which such a program impacts students’ identity as learners, student engagement in school, student interest in reading, language arts, and social studies, as well as teacher training in arts integration across the curriculum. While this

study did not capture the fluency of non-narrating participants, teacher testimonies and observations about student engagement provokes further inquiry into how these programs impact student learning outcomes.

Studies of effectiveness of arts integration on learning cover a broad expanse of research including cognitive and social/psychological development studies, linguistic and literacy studies, participatory and engaged pedagogies, and identity formation and development studies (see Anderson & Dunn 2013; Young, et al. 2016; Wissman, et al. 2015; Levinson & Pollack 2016; Verhoeven, et. al. 2019; Schroeter 2013). This project has prompted deeper inquiry into the effectiveness of theater arts and play as pedagogical tools for learning across disciplines, alternative assessments to measure student learning, the impacts of arts integration (specifically theater) on learning, student identity formation and belonging in schools, and possibilities for alternative evaluative measures that capture intersectional identities and contexts. The creative power of these programs lies within collaboration and creativity that effectively leverages funding needed to support arts integration in public schools. The role of social science research in these contexts is significant toward expanding interdisciplinary research, theory, and practice.

Leading scholar Henry Giroux asserts “Critical pedagogy opens up a space where students should be able to come to terms with their own power as critical agents...critical pedagogy must be envisioned as “part of a broader ethical and political project wedded to” furthering social and economic justice and making multicultural democracy operationalized (Giroux 2007, 1). Arts integration and collaboration between teaching artists and classroom teachers is pivoting the center away from nation-state curriculum mandates toward transformative pedagogies that ignite student interest in their learning, provide opportunities for the transfer of knowledge and skills to other disciplines (while simultaneously bridging disciplines), and deepen inquiry and critical thinking skills through creative, embodied, interactive, human-centered learning. Teaching artists as both practitioners and researchers are engaging in critical pedagogy and decolonizing methodologies whereby classroom teachers and academic researchers are situated as learners.

Expanding research to include teaching artists and classroom teachers in research design and data collection shifts traditional paradigms in ethnography. Collaboration among practitioners, artists, academics, and activists can break down colonial legacies in education and de-compartmentalize knowledge systems through a shared and reciprocating model of best practices in pedagogy and arts integration.

Arts integration and critical pedagogy empower learners through dialogic inquiry, critical thinking, and what Paulo Freire termed “Conscientization ” (Freire 1978) where banking methods of knowledge imposition are upended and learning is embodied through character development, narrative, performance, and a sense of autonomy. When children are given the opportunity to tap into their bodily-kinesthetic, musical, and linguistic intelligences they experience learning that draws on their strengths and abilities (Gardner 2001[1983]). Similarly, they develop a sense of identity as learners and a sense of belonging in school. “To belong is to be recognized as a full participant in the practices that shape knowledge, identities, and action” (Quintero 2011, 203). Children participating as narrators in the Flock Theatre shadow plays take on historic roles of power, such as that of George Washington and his colleagues in “George Washington’s Horse,” where student agency and self-determination as characters in a story becomes transformed into a living history. In this shadow play students identified inequity and power relations embedded in treaty negotiations of the past that are implicated with lived experiences in the present.

Critical pedagogy emerges in these spaces where children are provided a space to ask questions, challenge storylines, name injustices, and engage in a dialogue that empowers their understanding of both the construction of histories and the critical questions that dominant narratives provoke (Freire 1978). Social studies curricula that emphasize local histories are engaging students to think about colonial histories of land acquisition, human rights, land rights, environmental justice and colonial domination that are inherent in these stories. These programs contribute to culturally-responsive approaches to learning

across the curriculum and spark student interest in learning that is interdependent and validating to their sense of identity as learners. Partnerships between public schools, teaching artists, and colleges/universities build capacity and contribute toward discourse and scholarship across multiple disciplines.

Today's curricula, Peter McLaren argues, is caught in an obsession with "excellence", "achievement" and "accountability" – removing students and communities' capability of making decisions about their own destiny and destiny of society as a whole" (McLaren 2007). By contrast, critical pedagogy is praxiological – it brings theoretical frameworks to bear on the context of peoples living real world struggles. To quote Donaldo Macedo, "Critical pedagogy is a state of becoming, a way of being in the world and with the world – a never-ending process that involves struggle and pain, but also hope and joy shaped and maintained by a humanizing pedagogy..." (Freire and Macedo 2002, 394). In a critically engaged model of teaching and learning the focus is socially oriented. Students are encouraged and trained to challenge existing relations of power and domination in terms of a transformative epistemology. The curriculum is viewed as an instrument of empowerment (Emeagwali 2003). Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith states, "The insulation of disciplines, the culture of the institution which supports disciplines, and the systems of management and governance all work in ways which protect the privileges already in place" (Smith 1999, 133). Critical pedagogy integrates a problem-oriented approach where there is reflexivity on the part of students, educators, and researchers, alike.

Arts integration provides multiple modalities of expression for each child to draw upon their strengths and build confidence as learners. Interdisciplinarity becomes a way of knowing and being both in and outside the classroom where students make connections across the curriculum and begin to see its relevance to their communities and sense of place in the world. Freire's (1978) notion of Conscientization and the development of social awareness can become part of the curriculum mission and planning in these

spaces where teaching artists are leading the way as practitioners in arts integration and critical pedagogy. Building community-based partnerships that creatively negotiate state-wide mandates is a potential pathway toward educational transformation and renewal, while challenging researchers to decolonize their own methodologies in both the field and in their classrooms. Continual consideration is needed regarding alternative measures for assessing student learning that capture more complex elements of student identity formation, development, and interest in learning across disciplines.

For critical pedagogy to be more fully realized within K-16 institutions, research in education and the social sciences needs to effectively bridge language, theory, and praxis among academics, practitioners, and educators. The impacts of theater arts programs and arts integration, in general, on student development as global citizens is clear (McManimon 2016; Silva and Menezes 2016; Sheehan 2013). Creatively leveraging funding and assessment mandates through community-based partnerships is part of a broader movement toward a pedagogy of hope (Freire 2014; hooks 2003) that empowers learners, transforms curricula, and develops an ethos of life-long, human-centered learning among all stakeholders.

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