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The Story of Drama Club: A Contemporary Counternarrative of a Transformative Culture of Teaching and Learning for Disenfranchised Black Youth in the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Abstract

This study explored a contemporary counternarrative of Drama Club, a transformative culture of teaching and learning for disenfranchised Black youth who had been systematically funneled out of classrooms and into the school-to-prison pipeline. Auto/biographical and auto/ethnographical data were collected and assembled as a metaphor of the teachers' and students' experiences in Drama Club and their understanding of the teaching and learning process and of themselves within it. The collective story of Drama Club was analyzed through the lens of culturally responsive pedagogy theory and critical race theory in education. Implications for future research and teacher education that set out to impact disenfranchised students are included.

Keywords: disenfranchised students, school-to-prison pipeline, critical multicultural pedagogy, transformative culture of teaching and learning

La Historia del Drama Club: Una Contranarrativa Contemporánea de una Cultura Transformadora de la Enseñanza y Aprendizaje para Jóvenes Negros en la Vía de la Escuela a la Cárcel

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Resumen

Este estudio exploró un contranarrativa contemporánea del Drama Club, una cultura transformadora de enseñanza y el aprendizaje con jóvenes negros excluidos conducidos sistemáticamente fuera del aula y a la vía de la escuela a la cárcel. Se recogieron y ensamblaron datos auto/biográficos y auto/etnográficos, como una metáfora de las experiencias de maestros y estudiantes en el Drama Club y de su comprensión del proceso de enseñanza y aprendizaje y de sí mismos. La historia colectiva del Drama Club se analizó desde el foco de la pedagogía culturalmente sensible y la teoría crítica de la raza en educación. Se incluyen implicaciones para la investigación futura y para la formación del profesorado que persigan impactar en los estudiantes excluidos.

Palabras clave: estudiantes privados de sus derechos, vía de la escuela a la cárcel, pedagogía multicultural crítica, cultura transformadora de la enseñanza y el aprendizaje



The historic African American philosophy of education—literacy for freedom and freedom for literacy—was “forged out of [narratives from] African Americans’ early encounters with literacy and their struggles over time to acquire literacy and education in America” (Perry, 2003, p. 11). These narratives are central to the identity formation of African Americans as intellectual capable people but are not reflected in the traditional theory of education master narrative of schooling for African American students, especially those who are systematically funneled out of classrooms and into prison—the school-to-prison pipeline (Alexander, 2010; Pane & Rocco, 2014).

The traditional master narrative in America negates questions at the heart of the dilemma of schooling for Black and other students of color who wonder why make the effort to excel in school when there is no “predictable relationship between effort and reward in the social, education, or economic spheres” (Perry, 2003, p. 11) and why focus on learning in school if it does not have the capacity to change “one’s self-perception or one’s status as a member of an oppressed group” (p. 11). The traditional master narrative also denies teachers the infrastructure, experience, and freedom to create a contemporary counternarrative about teaching and learning that aligns with the African American philosophy of education, which (a) takes seriously the social, historical, cultural, racial, political, and economic context of schooling for Black and other students of color, and (b) illuminates teachers’ and students’ agency and understanding of the teaching and learning process and of themselves within their culture of teaching and learning (Kincheloe, 2005).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore a contemporary counternarrative of a culture of teaching and learning for a group of disenfranchised Black youth who had been funneled out of classrooms and into the school-to-prison pipeline. This study seeks to illuminate teachers’ and students’ understanding of the teaching and learning process and of themselves within it. The ultimate goal of this study is to problematize and transform

the traditional master narrative of the culture of schooling for disenfranchised Black and other students of color.

The research questions for this study are, “Who is the self that teaches and learns?” and “How does who we are as teachers and learners impact the particular culture of teaching and learning in which we find ourselves?” This paper is organized as follows. First, the conceptual framework, method, data collection, and data analysis are presented. Then, the context and participants are presented, followed by the story, discussion, and conclusion with implications.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study integrates culturally responsive pedagogy theory and critical race pedagogy theory (Noddings, 2007; West, 1994; Winn, 2011).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Theory

Culturally responsive pedagogy theory is a successful framework used by effective teachers of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 1994), grounded in the (a) belief that all students are capable of academic success, (b) development of a community of learners, (c) notion that knowledge is about doing; and (d) acknowledgement of the effect of students’ cultural heritages on their “dispositions, attitudes, and approaches to learning” (Gay, 2000, p. 29). Culturally responsive teachers’ are purposefully responsiveness to students’ cultures, learning styles, knowledge, and histories (Ware, 2006). Culturally responsive teachers warmly demand student engagement and participation in academic learning to increase their social and political awareness inside and outside of the classroom (Monroe, 2006).

Culturally responsive teachers have also been referred to as warm demanders (Monroe, 2006) who conceive of caring as accepting nothing less than high academic achievement rather than gently nurturing African American students to learn at their own pace. Having a culturally responsive frame of mind empowers the teacher to intuitively enact a classroom culture based upon judgments that foster student resilience (Bondy, Ross, Galligane & Hambacher, 2007). By developing caring relationships

(Noddings, 2007), setting clear high academic and social expectations and providing meaningful learning opportunities, culturally responsive teachers become “critical protective factors for fostering resilience” (p. 330). Moreover, culturally responsive teachers also feel it is their duty to provide an equitable, socially just classroom culture as a microcosm of an equitable, socially just global society.

Critical Race Theory in Education

Critical race theory in education provides a forum for distinguishing, discussing, and dismantling how “race, power, language, gender, identity, class, and social structure in relation to the opportunities and legal rights of individuals and groups” (Nasir & Hand, 2006, p. 455) are deeply ingrained in American schools. The application of critical race theory to education means that (a) societal racism has deleterious effects on African American students; (b) critiques of education can no longer be race neutral or color-blind (Alexander, 2010) (c) the “wisdom of practice” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 133) dialogue can no longer omit issues of race and ethnicity; and (d) counterstorytelling challenges dominant discourse that perpetuates racial stereotypes (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004). Critical race pedagogy, grounded in critical race theory in education, goes beyond a simple distinction between race and culture in the classroom. Instead, critical race pedagogues reconceptualize their classroom practices as hopeful struggle toward dismantling structural inequities that funnel disenfranchised youth into the school-to-prison pipeline.

Critical race pedagogues, or educators, are fully aware of their own ethnocentrism and value students’ racial and ethnic backgrounds and sociocultural lives outside of school as they develop a critically conscious culture of teaching and learning with their students (Freire, 1998). They have an understanding of the broader historical, social, cultural, racial, economic, and political context of schooling and learning. They have the ability, willingness, and commitment to build caring multicultural classrooms. Critical race pedagogues have critically conscious mindsets and get beyond simply knowing how to develop traditional interdisciplinary units to knowing *who they and their students are* and how to share what it

means to experience education as an empowering force (Freire, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1997; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2004; Pane & Rocco, 2014). They espouse culturally responsive teaching as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory for their students (Gay, 2000). They understand concepts of power, caring, communication, and cultural congruity to support culturally and ethnically diverse students' classroom achievement.

Method

Two methods of qualitative inquiry were used in this study. Both auto/biography and auto/ethnography are self-study research (Pereira, Settellemeier & Taylor, 2005) “genres that blend ethnographic interests with life writing and tell about a culture at the same time it tells about a life” (Roth, 2005, p. 4).

Auto/biography

Auto/biographical inquiry provides insight into the rarely asked question, “Who is the self that teaches [or learns]?” (Palmer, 1998, p. 4). Auto/biography is always a biography, a pattern of life history—either of one's self or of another (Roth, 2005). Augmented by critical social theory (Freire, 2000; Pereira et al., 2005), auto/biography is a transformative tool that teachers and students as researchers can use to critically examine how *who we are* (as teachers and students) impacts our decision making in the particular culture of teaching and learning in which we find ourselves. Auto/biography uses narrative and story to generate and increase the contextual and practical knowledge teachers and students need to critically reflect on and grow from their daily actions in the culture of teaching and learning (Brookfield, 1995; Pane, 2010).

Auto/ethnography

Auto/ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) is always ethnography, the exploration of culture in general—either one's own or someone else's (Roth, 2005). In auto/ethnography, the personal knowledge gained from the

auto/biographical process dialectically extends to the social context with a moral practicality for the transformation of the teacher's (and student's) self as well as her or his praxis for her or his social world of roles and relationships with others. Auto/ethnography is "research, writing, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social... [and] usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection" (Ellis, 2004, p. xix).

Auto/ethnographical inquiry is a tool for exploring the culture of teaching and learning as viewed and experienced by the participants for possible transformation of those views and practices in a democracy. Auto/ethnography "reveals concretely realized patterns in one's own actions rather than the actions of others... because it inquires the concretely realized action possibilities that exist at the collective level" (Pereira et al., 2005, p. 4). In other words, investigating our selves and our actions "gives us access to the ways in which culture is concretely realized" (Roth, 2005, p. 19). However, auto/biography is auto/ethnography and comes to life only through the eyes and ears of the audience, who will recognize having shared some of the same historically- and socioculturally-constructed practices and prejudices. In an attempt to come to terms with perennial questions of who are our teaching and learning selves, the use of auto/biography and auto/ethnography asks participants to critically reflect on themselves and their teaching and learning culture (Kincheloe, 2005). In essence, participants become aware of their own and others' perspectives of lived experiences in a specific cultural site that offers social interaction and critical dialogue (Langellier & Peterson, 2004).

Data Collection

Personal narratives collected as auto/biographical and auto/ethnographical data for this study include: (a) teachers' stories and critical reflections of the culture of teaching and learning experience and themselves within it; and (b) students' journaling, essay writing, notetaking, articles, and opinions written for the *TROY Gazette*, a student-constructed monthly school newspaper that documented the teaching and learning experience and themselves within it.

TROY Gazette (TG) volume, issue, and page numbers are cited respectively (e.g., TG, 9(5), p. 3).

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved metaphor, a technique or vehicle for “putting the stories into a meaningful whole” (Muncey, 2005, p. 6) in an attempt to explain and connect experiences of the participants. Metaphor is a collaborative celebration of individual stories. Metaphor allows disjoint stories to be told collectively, denying one truth, denying one deviant case, and accepting the possible viability and success of alternative paradigms of teaching and learning even though they do not conform to traditional wisdom. Personal narratives were assembled to provide a critically reflective metaphor of the lived experiences of the teachers and students in their culture of the teaching and learning experience, henceforth referred to as the Drama Club. The collective story of teachers and learners in Drama Club is told through (a) the lens of critical culturally responsive teaching as validating, comprehensive, multidimensional, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory (Gay, 2000) and (b) critical culturally responsive teachers’ understanding of the concepts of power, caring, communication, and cultural congruity to disenfranchised Black students’ academic and social achievement.

Context and Participants

A team of three White teachers from an urban educational alternative outreach school in a large multicultural public school district in southeastern United States attended a 3-day summer “Arts for Learning” Curriculum Institute to prepare for the upcoming school year. Students who attended this school were disproportionately Black adolescents who resided in several of the school district’s poorest communities. They had been expelled from their mainstream urban schools for disruptive behavior, severe truancy, serious school failure, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. That is, they had been systematically funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline (Pane & Rocco, 2014).

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Danny (pseudonyms are used for all participants) was the Language Arts, Math, and Journalism teacher; Jan was the Art, Science, and Math teacher; and Don was an artist, community activist, and after-school teacher. Prior to the workshop, Danny had initiated and developed the *TROY Gazette* as a critical literacy- and community-building project to encompass students' cultural backgrounds and passions to write about their own lives (Stevens & Bean, 2007). Jan had instituted wreath-making, African mask-making, and other cultural art projects students could sell to community members. Don had organized after-school field trips to the local historical restoration site.

Working “around the topic of ‘Why bother about history?’” (TG, 9, p. 3) at the workshop, the three teachers problematized the recurrent absenteeism problem, how to empower students to connect more in school, and how to create students' personal and meaningful reasons for being there (Freire & Macedo, 1987; Shor, 1992). The teachers' ultimate goal for the year was to give students access to an experiential, meaningful, critical multicultural teaching and learning opportunity in which they pursued, experienced, and developed more confident and empowered identities (McLaren, 2003). Based on students' cultural histories in their own communities, Drama Club would also address the problems of engaging, empowering, and retaining students during the upcoming school year (Lee, 2005).

Don, who was involved in the local history restoration project, brought up the story of William Wagner. He thought the students would connect to Wagner's life experiences. Wagner was a little known White settler in the 1850's who befriended everyone in the local community no matter their race. He married a Black woman in an era when it was unheard of to do so. The Seminole Indians helped Wagner's family survive many hardships because he treated them fairly. Two original buildings from Wagner's story had been preserved and relocated to The Park near The River downtown near students' own communities. Don would draft a basic story for the play.

From Don's initial draft, Danny would draw up a script that she and students would develop into a full-length play about Wagner. She would create the interdisciplinary lesson plans, including rubrics and other materials that met the district's curricular mandates and benchmarks. Jan would integrate hands-on science, art, and math learning experiences into set construction and costume creation.

The teachers agreed to embark on a year-long Drama Club when school started. The “purpose of this project [was] to expose students to the rich history of pioneer life on The River as an integral part of [the local community’s] development into a city” (TG, 9, p. 3). Drama Club would also be an experiential learning opportunity that related to students’ lives and communities while engaging them in a teaching and learning culture of literacy and other academic and social learning.

The year-long Drama Club would guide students through the process of researching local history and co-writing and producing a full-length drama around Wagner’s story, later referred to as the “Love & Slavery” project. *TROY Gazette* headlined the workshop, “Grant Funds Summer Planning: Team of Staff Members Work on Local History Project.”

The teachers’ goals and high expectations for students in the Drama Club teaching and learning experience aligned with African American philosophy of education and, thus, denied the traditional master narrative of teaching and learning for Black students who had been funneled out of classrooms and into the school-to-prison pipeline (Pane & Rocco, 2014). It would give teachers the chance to create and students to participate in a contemporary counternarrative to traditional education theory and practice. The teachers were aware of the importance of working together as a community of learners not only to encourage academic achievement but also equalize power relationships. This project would give teachers the chance to incorporate authentic opportunities for developing positive social interactions.

The Story of Drama Club

To begin Drama Club, teachers asked students to sign up for the team they preferred—drama or art. The drama team would be responsible for writing and acting. The art team would be responsible for constructing sets and costumes. However, teams merged periodically for whole group play rehearsals during the year to evaluate their progress and set new goals. Throughout the year, teachers and students also solved social interaction problems as they arose. For example, Jan often problem solved with students at length to figure out why they periodically said they wanted to

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quit the play and to reenergize students, build their confidence, and develop their stamina. Their collaborative solutions remained one of the lasting memories for the whole group as they became more committed to the play over time.

Danny used a transformative discipline approach for students when they became too loud, off focus, or boisterous during a rehearsal session. She would *warmly demand* students to “please start over,” asking them to return with a one-page letter to share with the drama team. The entire process from beginning to end was painstaking at times but, eventually, students’ roles transformed as they became more cognizant through conscientization (Freire, 2000), or realization of their own and other students’ roles within the whole project. Socially inappropriate interruptions were markedly reduced to almost none during the year. Stephini critiqued students’ thinking and progress:

Today was the first performance of the year ... The [dancers] were very good, but they need to practice a lot more. Why? Because they got so nervous that they started to mess up ... I believe that they wouldn’t be so worried about messing up if they knew the whole dance by heart. Why? Because they’ll have a little more trust in themselves about not messing up in front of a lot of people. Otherwise, they were great. (TG, 8(6), p. 5)

Tadra, the main actor who wanted to quit the play, wrote of overcoming his obstacles:

As time goes by... I’m now listening to Ms. Danny say that everyone is coming into character and I also agree. I just took up the part of Mr. Lewis and I think I did pretty well. Now I think the play is going to be a success. Before I was becoming angry and upset, but it’s turning out to be happily ever after. I am feeling great to be in this class because I want to succeed in the future and pursue a career as an actor. THANKS A LOT!! (TG, 9(5), p. 5)

Validating

Drama Club was validating for disenfranchised Black students to discover the real story of someone's life from their own social, historical, racial, and cultural backgrounds. Understanding real people's stories validated the concepts of history, tolerance, and community in the characters' and their own lives. To initiate the inquiry, Danny asked students in Drama Club what they already knew about somebody named William Wagner who used to live near where they live now. As students' curiosity piqued, they prepared to research primary documents about Wagner at the library. The whole group brainstormed what they wanted to know and developed a list of questions to take to the library with them.

Don was familiar with both the historical journal room in the Main Library and Wagner's story, but the teachers had planned to guide students through the process of researching rather rely on banking education (Freire, 2000) practice of telling them information ahead of time. At the library, the students actively searched for Wagner's story after being instructed in how to use the historical journal room. "Journal articles from the *Tequesta*, a South Florida Historical Museum publication, [were] read, as well as newspaper articles about the middle 19th century" (TG, 9, p. 3). Students searched the hand-signed census reports for names of those people found in the journal stories. Armed with clipboards, students took notes on what they found. Since Danny was cognizant of students' fear of incorrect spelling, she stressed continually that taking notes means to jot information quickly and that spelling does not count during note taking. During this and subsequent library trips, Jan guided students toward art history books to refer to when designing and constructing period costumes for the play.

Throughout the writing process, Danny and the drama team worked together to develop a story, then a script, and finally an entire play with scenes blocked. Writing the play took many months but students became engaged in dialoguing, writing, and revising the scripts. Students critiqued and revised their play writing, which experientially validated their place in real-world writing. By the end of the year, the sequence of events around Wagner's life that led to the growth of an early multicultural community was crafted into a full-length play and enacted many times for the community.

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The year-long project was documented in monthly *TROY Gazette* issues. Student staff conducted interviews, wrote articles, prepared each page for publication, delivered issues to a nearby community newspaper stand for distribution, and mailed issues to people and businesses on *TROY Gazette*'s mailing list.

Comprehensive

Drama Club was a comprehensive in-depth multidisciplinary study of early days of the local community. For example, Jan merged the study of colors, lines, patterns, and music in relation to the story in the play. During the aesthetic process, Jan and the student art team designed, built, revised, and repaired the set. The notion of repairing a set they had already built or wearing a period costume augmented students' identity development during authentic real-life work. Nathan evaluated the stage crew's work in his journal: "The chickee hut was brought in yesterday and it was a great creation. And also three days before, the schooner and now today, the Wagner background house, a painting of fine art... the crew is very talented." The *TROY Gazette* staff took photographs and interviewed students to document the stage crew's progress. Tracia wrote:

What I observed while the stage crew was painting was... teamwork. They never got off task that day. The painting job was awesome. If you want something completed, you have to have teamwork and show ownership towards yourself and others. (TG, 8(6), p. 5)

Students evaluated set blocking and rehearsals regularly on prepared sheets that illustrated each scene. For instance, Marita gave each scene a grade and provided reasons that usually focused on the actors' performance. She graded Scene One / Reunion a B+. She felt that the "beginning of the play was kind of straight" that it could be better. She added that there was no need for stage props because "we were in front of the curtain so it's all good." She gave Scene 4 / Day at Homestead an A+, saying that May-May came in and did his part good and was really [a] actor. She wrote that he "should look into it in the real world." She added that "Deonn and the other boy is really acting this part out great, they are cutting the wood and acting

very good.” However, she also evaluated Scene 6 / Blockade with a D+. Her reasoning included how it took too long to put up the fire, that they shouldn’t do that part, and that this part of the play is frustrating because “we have to keep doing it over and over it seems like we never is going to get this part right.”

Jan and the art team worked together making costumes and stage sets while Danny and the drama team discovered, selected, and evaluated music from the early days of the local community to use in the play. For example, Tanadius’s music evaluations noted that Beethoven #8 brought emotion to the scene when the little boy got killed, that the Indian Music woke the audience up so that they were wondering what’s next, and that the music when Lewis went to jail was good because it was kind of sad.

Evellence commented that the reunion scene was played with a lot of power, and she was very glad to say that she gave it an A+. Shanriqua evaluated the music according to how it made her feel. She commented that using “Yesterday” for the reunion scene was a good song to play because it reminded her of something good that happened to her. For the three songs played during the arrival scene, she commented, “Now that song I like it a lil bit. Especially the “Ocean Waves,” and “Birds Near Shore” it reminds me and makes me think I’m at the beach. But Beethoven it’s [kinder] straight.”

Comprehensive aesthetic study was validating as teams collaborated to listen to music from the period being studied or to shop downtown for material or props. The students saw parts of their local community that they did not know existed as they walked down streets to find fabric stores and theatrical thrift shops. Being immersed in culturally relevant theater through the senses, students lived vicariously in another era while learning about people in their own history. Students talked about their characters and reenacted their parts during breaks outside the classroom doors. Their conversations had changed since participating in Drama Club. Nick wrote:

I think the play is coming along to be very excellent. Deep down inside I think the play is going to be a real success. For one, the students are becoming better and better everyday. We are trying to become focused and worry about what’s more important. Lately, I have been observing how we are all becoming relaxed with the characters we have been roleplaying. Everyone is coming together as

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a group and are supporting one another. Another reason why the play is going to work out really great is because of our directors. Deme, Shirika, and Mario are doing a good job at directing and trying to manage our play on a level of being directors and still being our peers. (TG, 9(3), p. 7)

Mariah commented about how students were taking responsibility for their actions in the play now after months of working at it. She wrote, “Everyone is serious. They want to act and as I sit and watch, everyone who gets up there and practices is serious. They really get mad if someone gets up there and plays” (TG, 9(3), p. 7).

Multidimensional

Drama Club was a multidimensional learning experience that provided students access to the decision making process—how to create and calculate measurements for stage props, develop various costumes, and change sets between scenes based on blocking directions in the script. Students also calculated the years that had gone by since the characters lived, the generations since, and the cost of living at the time compared to today. In this inquiry-based culture of teaching and learning, students collaborated over authentic problems and questions, such as

how much material is needed to make the Seminole skirts? How many feet of wood are necessary to make a ship that will fit in a particular amount of space on stage? What size do the signs need to be for the audience to be able to read them? In-depth conversations were needed to figure out the answers to these problems in order to reach the mutually agreed-upon final products. (Pane & Salmon, 2009, p. 18)

When the scripts, sets, and costumes were in final phase of construction, teams often combined so that all students obtained hands-on understanding of the multidimensional context of the dramatic rehearsals. *TROY Gazette* headlines read: “Practice, Practice, Practice makes Perfect, Perfect, Perfect!” Captions underneath stage crew photos as they worked included, “Henry and Krisma work papier-mâché over chicken wire structure for mosquitoes,”

“Angel cuts chicken wire,” “Lattorio finishes rifles for soldiers,” “Kris, Landy, Richie, and Henry with Home Depot truck,” “Ms. Jan guides demo on stretching canvas for painting,” and “Mr. Don demonstrates how to trim wood at Home Depot.”

One stage crew member elaborated on how they set up the costumes, “We get prepared by separating everyone’s costumes so that they are right at hand... then we won’t be taking so long changing between scenes and we get done faster” (TG, 8(7), p. 4). Sheenia wrote in her journal about the importance of Geometry and Algebra in theatrical work:

area you have to make the building fit. You always have to use some math and in this situation... it is also good to learn Algebra because when it’s time to try to put pieces together such as measuring you have to know Algebra because [it] is like a mystery and you have to think about what to do before solving the problem. (TG, 8(7), p. 4)

Transformative

Drama Club was transformative by providing students authentic opportunities to discuss philosophical meanings of their experiences. Before the project was initiated, Don spoke to students about why we bother to preserve history. *TROY Gazette* headlined his discussion: “Local History Buff and MLK ask, ‘Why bother?’” (TG, 9, p. 7). The article began:

Local community activist and history buff, Mr. Don . . . has joined forces with TROY to teach students and the community about the importance of preserving local Miami history. He recently spoke to students about why we bother to preserve history. He is passionate about his beliefs, as was Martin Luther King, Jr. (TG, 9, p. 7)

Students, who were reading some of Martin Luther King’s work in Danny’s class, were asked to think about why we should bother to preserve history. Rachel wrote, “I think history should not be forgotten, because even though our country and its many people endured a lot of struggling and pain, history lets us know how far we’ve come” (TG, 9, p. 7). Another student

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commented on slavery, “It is a sad sight to be living a life like that... we hope and pray as we grow up it won’t affect our lives” (TG, 8(7), p. 4).

Given the freedom to critically reflect about Black history and other readings from Black authors (e.g., “Miseducation of the Negro,” “Roots”) and to simultaneously think about their own struggling together to create a play on a daily basis, transformative goals prospered among students’ identities. One student wrote, “I really loved seeing those slaves help each other... I wish our culture these days would help each other... I hope that during the play those who are supposed to play this act will be serious because... there is a time to play and a time to be serious” (TG, 8(7), p. 4). Through Drama Club’s transformative goals, students were involved in arduous negotiations about ethnic and cultural diversity, which led them to reflect on the positive effects of respecting each other and coming up with a product together.

The transformative production process allowed students to constantly collaborate about why working together and being tolerant was important to them as a group and, ultimately, to society. They wrestled with who the real villain in a scene was,

why settlers settled near a river, why and how multiple cultures can work and live together, why and how settlers lived and suffered through disease and pestilence, why they ate meats like possum, and why and how people from different races can marry successfully in a time of turmoil and intolerance. (Pane & Salmon, 2009, p. 19)

By working together for extended periods with the teachers and each other to get the play ready to show their audiences, unplanned learning and critical reflections occurred.

Deonn wrote:

Ever since I joined the Drama Club, every time a little 30-minute show comes on, I always look at it as this is a play. And at the end, when they show the bloopers and deleted scenes, I really thought about it why? It takes them so long to create or put a movie together. But I see why you have to rehearse the whole movie and that’s a lot of

practice and hard work. But at the end, you have something to remember.

May-May critically reflected on how people look at them as bad kids but they really don't anything about them. She shared, "What about the good things we do? We go every year and do plays for some people who think that way. We don't have to do it, but that shows we are good people." Student and teacher empathy, a necessary trait for reducing stereotypical and prejudicial attitudes when developing critically conscious culture of teaching and learning, increased (Greene, 1995).

Emancipatory

Drama Club was emancipatory by liberating students and teachers to create and experience meaningful play rehearsals and final productions that took place in two original buildings on the historically-designated park grounds by The River in the local community where Wagner's story actually took place. It was like living "back in the day," students said, when they stepped into the original buildings dressed as characters from the past. Imaginations grew as students experienced stepping back into time right in their own community.

The teachers informally assessed what the students learned, both academically and socially, during Drama Club all year. Student attendance was notably improved; 50 students participated almost daily all year and knew their own (and often others') speaking, blocking, and stage crew parts by heart during the final productions. Even though the process had been hard, pitfalls were put into perspective when students reflected on them with fondness. Evellence wrote, "The reason why I can't stop talking is because our outfits are funny looking and I just can't hold it in. Another reason is because I'm so happy [to be a part] and proud of this play." During journal writing, students often critiqued their own attitudes. Rachel wrote:

Many things and many people that make me want to portray the angry side of me. For example, we are doing a very excellent play, and there are times when characters who have the most important [have to

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start over] By me doing a great job, I honestly . . . get caught in the character, which means I start to take interest and enjoy my part.

During essay writing, students were given prompts, addressing social interaction issues that had come up during some aspect of Drama Club or in school. Shanika explained the need to focus:

[To focus means] you must be a quiet audience and you must hear the director, hear the producer, be a concentrated actor and when it's break time you talk in a low tone of voice... For example, we, the students, right [know] we are focusing. Because we are doing this William Wagner play. And so far we are doing a great job. When the play first got introduced to us, I thought it was going to be wack, but now that we are doing [it] and I added my own part and do it how I like it, to do all that it took focus.

The amount of time and work students spent together amicably grew throughout the year. Nathan wrote about changes he had noticed:

We move fast and more experienced now. Our skills have improved to a beginner level. But before the real play starts, we'll be experts. Not master. But professional levels of okay. We've experienced it, the hard work and fun of being a playmaker and actors... low budget, but great to work on a play and be a responsible member. I think if we continue on rehearsing the way we are doing right on positive basics, we'll succeed.

From an emancipatory perspective, students experienced a venue for learning in which they made personal connections with their heritage as well as both current and historical events. Being involved in the theatrical production process elevated the students' confidence and desire for learning and performing. Ennocence wrote in her journal, "I am really proud of myself and the whole class." *TROY Gazette* headlined: "Rising Student Director Takes Note,"

Some people do not think before they do things. They just do it then it becomes a problem. Bad things begin to happen. Me, I'm starting to

[think] before I do things because sometimes I do things I have no business doing. At the beginning of the play, I was not going to do it... but I had to keep think if I keep running from my problem, it would not help me in the long run... so I did not run and look at me. I am the Director and I think I am doing a very good job... What I'm trying to say is to think before you do something—think, think, think. Think about it!

Within this Drama Club culture of teaching and learning, teachers and students gained a new perspective on *who they are* as teachers and learners together—an emancipatory aspect that coincides with the notion of humans as social and cultural learners (Freire, 1998) and the continuing reconstruction of experience (Dewey, 1938/1997).

Discussion

Culturally responsive teachers developed critical multicultural pedagogy in Drama Club from an understanding of the concepts of power, caring, communication, and cultural congruity to support culturally and ethnically disenfranchised students' social and academic achievement in the classroom. By bringing the students' dialogue and cultural backgrounds to the forefront of Drama Club, the students felt valued and cared for; and positive teacher-student relationships and communication developed in a critical culturally responsive culture of teaching and learning.

Each student felt needed because he or she had an explicit role to play and were held to high expectations. Eziel wrote, "Today in class, I feel like I have focused better. I have learned more. I focused on my director, as well as my producer. I also have been focusing on talking in a low voice when it is break time. If I was to disregard any of this thinking, my first step would be... out the door with a one-page letter" (TG, 9(5), p. 7).

The mandated district academic competencies and benchmarks, which were written into the yearly lesson plans for this project during the summer planning periods, were exceeded. Anticipation guides, rubrics, assessments, and other pedagogical tools were developed from the multidisciplinary content knowledge and concepts covered during Drama Club. Teachers guided students in learning how to probe their background knowledge;

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question what they wanted to learn; search for answers from texts, experiences, and others; and critique and elaborate on new knowledge, both academic and social. Rachel wrote that her participation in the Wagner play taught her to “focus for serious change through drama with the help of listening. Listening is one of the many and most important aspects when dealing with drama... [it] helps you gain knowledge” (TG, 9(5), p. 1).

Drama Club gave a group of Black disenfranchised students access to a collaborative, meaningful, and positive purpose for going to school. Daily, they talked about what would happen tomorrow, what they did yesterday, and what they learned. Operaline recounted:

I want to do the play but sometimes I get a little frustrated... Ms. Danny puts our class into a college theme. To me it is very good because it is preparing us to focus and listen in a way we would have to when we do go to college. (TG, 9(5), p. 4)

Some days were tough, but the inclusive and supportive backdrop of the project encouraged collaborative dialogue, problem solving, and decision making. Students began coming to school daily, working together, and seeing the final product unfold in front of their eyes. After a year of hard work and rehearsing each scene “a billion times” as one student wrote, transformations showed in the final dramatic production—the end product of an emancipatory process involving continual and empowering social interactions among teachers and students.

Conclusion and Implications

Drama Club was more than just an interdisciplinary unit. It was a team effort in critical multicultural pedagogy to develop a transformative culture of teaching and learning for disenfranchised Black students. Drama Club was an infrastructure for emancipating teachers and students to co-create the critical culturally relevant project that transformed their understanding of the learning process and of themselves within it (Rodríguez, 2008). By developing positive teacher-student-student relationships, recognizing and valuing students’ backgrounds, and transforming the culture of teaching and learning in the Drama Club, teachers gave students explicit and implicit

messages that they cared about them, and that their social, cultural, and intellectual strengths were valued. In effect, teachers were cultural workers in the classroom and community (Freire, 1998; Giroux, 2005).

During Drama Club, students were viewed as whole persons who develop not only academically, but also emotionally, socially, and morally during pitfalls and progress (Kozol, 2005). Students were free to critique, critically reflect, and offer suggestions for change in an appropriate manner. Students were encouraged to develop critical consciousness about their own social interactions toward being a valued Drama Club team member and, ultimately, a valued member of society (Rodríguez, 2008). Drama Club was an infrastructure for disenfranchised students to reveal their thinking, feelings, and learning about the world. This atypical counternarrative for developing a culture of teaching and learning invited disenfranchised students on a journey of academic and social success. Drama Club was learning in action with unexpected possibilities and transformations (Greene, 1995).

Many successes occurred during the problem solving, the process, and the final production stages of Drama Club. However, there were struggles that have implications for future research and practice. Working as a team was highly important for the three teachers to remain vigilant and critically cognizant during struggles involved developing a transformative teaching and learning culture with disenfranchised youth. The Drama Club an infrastructure that (a) sustained teacher stamina and participation, (b) validated collaboration on interdisciplinary projects grounded in critical culturally responsive pedagogy, and (c) encouraged the importance of teachers making personal connections with each other, the students, and the community that the school served. Drama Club gave teachers the opportunity to reconceptualize

a space for learning about students' cultural backgrounds and histories, seeing them as assets and resources for whom teachers could learn. From there, teachers might see their own practice as responsive and accountable to the communities that they served. In that context . . . training in culturally relevant teaching practices would make sense. Taken together, these practices would lead more schools to engage in authentic care. (Shiller, 2009, p. 482)

Future research that sets out to impact the schooling of disenfranchised Black and other students of color who have been funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline is needed and should necessarily explore how to develop (a) transformative teacher mindsets for a sustainable teacher work force; (b) exemplary critical multicultural and critical race pedagogical models for teachers to study and experience; (c) proactive empowering teaching and learning cultures; (d) teachers' and students' critical consciousness; and (e) effective, empowering, and transformative teacher education and praxis that no longer omit systemic issues of race and ethnicity.

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