Theater of the oppressed in an after-school program: Middle school students' perspectives on bullying and prevention

This article examines students' participation in Boalian Theater activities to role-play, rehearse, and develop strategies to use when bullied or witnessing bullying.

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Introduction

Bullying is a form of aggression where there is systematic use and abuse of power (AERA, 2013). It is now considered a prevalent and often neglected problem in schools both within and outside the United States (NEA, 2003). Bullying occurs in all grades across gender, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. This paper is relevant to middle school teachers and administrators as it examines the role of Theater of the Oppressed activities as a tool for engaging middle school students in talking about their experiences with bullying and rehearsing possible actions when being bullied or witnessing acts of bullying, with the goal of creating a more humane environment.

Early adolescence is a time of rapid growth and change during which these 10- to 15-year-olds form their adult personalities, dispositions, values, and attitudes (NMSA, 2010). Adolescents need experiences that help increase self-efficacy and a positive ethnic identity. At the same time, they need experiences that help them to understand racial, ethnic, and/or sexual differences by engaging in perspective-taking and empathy.

Many times, middle school students respond to racial, ethnic, and/or sexual differences in their peers by bullying. About 28 percent of 12- to 18-year-olds have reported being bullied at school during any school year (DeVoe & Bauer, 2011; Robers, Zhang, Truman, & Snyder, 2012). Bullying occurs with greater frequency among middle school-aged youth than high school-aged youth (Nansel et al., 2001). Research findings on bullying show that bullying is often aimed at specific groups. For example, students with disabilities (Rose & Espelage, 2012), African American youth (Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Shattuck, & Omrod, 2011), and LGBTQ youth (Espelage, Green, & Polanin 2012; Poteat & Rivers, 2010) are vulnerable groups to bullying, harassment, and victimization.

Middle school students learn best in safe environments that are characterized by active student engagement; where students have opportunities to share, reflect, and imagine possibilities; and where their oral, written, and artistic voices are heard (NMSA, 2010). One such learning environment is created with the use of Boalian Theater.

Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (TO) is grounded in the work of Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) and is a safe aesthetic and a democratic space for young adolescents to come together to rehearse for reality and restore dialogue among human beings (Bhukhanwala, 2007; Boal, 2003, 2006; Cahnmann-Taylor & Souto-Manning, 2010; Harman & French, 2004). For Greene (1995), aesthetic spaces allow students and teachers to imagine. Imagination is a way of engaging in empathy and perspective-taking: "It is becoming a friend of someone else's mind" (p. 38). With this approach, theater is seen as a reflection of daily activities and serves the function of bringing a student

community together for celebration, entertainment, and dialogue (Blanco, 2000), as well as for problem-posing and generating multiple possibilities. Jackson (1991) says, "Victims of the oppression under consideration are able to offer alternative solutions because they themselves are personally acquainted with oppression" (p. xxiv).

Bullying is an action that is repeated over time and involves an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). In more recent times, this definition has broadened to include varied forms of aggression such as verbal, physical, sexual, or digital media-based (for example, text messages, social media, and websites); or it may include being threatened, having things forcefully taken, or being socially excluded (Espelage, 2012; Vaillancourt et al., 2008).

There are no simple explanations for bullying; rather, it is a complex phenomenon with many causal factors and consequences. There is consensus among researchers that being a victim of bullying can have serious socio-emotional and academic consequences. Children and youth who have been targets of bullying behaviors have reported low self-esteem (O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001), as well as psychological complaints such as depression, loneliness, and anxiety (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007; Espelage & De La Rue, 2011; Gini & Pozzoli, 2009; Limber, 2002). Students who are bullied may avoid taking the school bus, using the bathroom at school, going to school altogether, or may take steps to harm or end their life (NEA, 2003). Furthermore, bullied students may become less engaged in school, their grades and test scores may decline (Cornell, Gregory, Huang, & Fan, 2013; Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011), and they are at a higher risk for poor school adjustment and delinquency (Farrington & Ttofi, 2011). It is noted that cyberbullied students experience negative outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, and poor academic performance, similar to those experienced by their traditional counterparts (Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012; Wade & Beran, 2011).

Bullying creates a climate of fear and disrespect in middle schools and has a negative impact on student engagement and learning (Mehta, Cornell, & Gregory, 2013; NEA, 2003). Orpinas, Horne, & Staniszewski (2003) argue that middle school teachers and other adults should stop bullying behaviors because of their serious socio-emotional and academic consequences yet also because they are unfair and deny students their basic human right to a safe environment.

Though teacher monitoring can be an especially important intervention, middle school personnel including classroom teachers do not respond adequately to student reports of bullying (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007; Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004). There are a variety of reasons for this lack of intervention, including failure to recognize bullying behaviors, failure to understand the importance of intervening, and lack of knowledge about how to intervene effectively (Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001; Limber, 2002). It is therefore important for middle school teachers to participate in professional development experiences that instruct them in bullying prevention and intervention.

However, it is equally important to prepare middle school students themselves, and to rehearse with them actions they can perform to intervene in bullying situations and help foster a more humane environment. There are a variety of reasons for empowering students with bullying intervention skills. To begin, bullying often occurs when a teacher is not present (i.e., on the playground or bus, in the bathroom, at lunch, or even off school grounds), and as a result students cannot always count on a teacher or other adult to be there. Consequently, we need to create learning opportunities so that students will be confident and know how to intervene in a humane way when bullying situations arise. Also, if bullying leads to depression and low self-esteem, one way to counteract these negative consequences is to create intentional spaces where middle school students have opportunities to use tools and develop dispositions that could help them address bullying behaviors. When young adolescents develop abilities to help themselves they may be likely to restore their self-confidence and sense of security.

The question this issue raised for me was how I could facilitate Theater of the Oppressed activities to help middle school students make sense of bullying. I hoped these activities would engage students in perspective-taking and empathy as a way to address the issue of bullying and as a way to work toward building a more humane environment. This article explores the potential of the aesthetic space offered by the Boalian approach to engage middle school students in negotiating their experiences with bullying in school. In this way, I seek to help them go beyond imagined limitations and engage in what Maxine Greene (1995) calls "social imagination"— the ability to imagine new possibilities and believe that they can make a difference in home and school life.

Theater of the oppressed

Critical Performance Pedagogy (CPP) acknowledges that all learning is influenced by cultural differences and by the context in which it takes place (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 2004), and that we need to attend to that which is expressed and to the voices that are silenced. In other words, we need to study the socio-cultural-historical-political frame within which knowledge is constructed, in addition to studying the content itself. My work with CPP in teaching and teacher education is informed by Boal's Theater of the Oppressed (TO).

Influenced by Paulo Freire's views on democratic education, Augusto Boal developed TO to offer a theatrical space for people to come together to rehearse for reality, engage in a critical dialogue, and build a more humane environment (Boal, 2003, 2006). In a Boalian approach, it is in the aesthetic space in which active engagement and imagination can be realized. For Greene (1995), aesthetic spaces allow students and teachers to imagine. The task of the participants then is to find openings and possibilities that can become a stepping stone onto different ways of thinking and acting (Popen, 2006). Within aesthetic spaces, we dramatize our fears, give shape to our thoughts/perceptions and rehearse our actions for the future in a relatively safe space, as well as engage in empathy and perspective-taking: "It is becoming a friend of someone else's mind" (Greene, p. 38). These aesthetic spaces "make possible imaginative geographies, in which opportunities for transitive knowing are freed up" (Popen, 2006, p. 126) and transformative learning can occur.

Boal (1995) argues that one of the properties of the knowledge—enhancing power of the arts is self-reflectivity—has the capacity to allow us to observe ourselves in action, imagine ourselves as actors and agents of change. Theater of the Oppressed is a "mirror which we can penetrate to modify our image" (Boal 1995, p. 29), and a space where we can rehearse possibilities to change the image we carry of ourselves and those we have constructed of the world we live in. During the process of self-reflection and imagination, participants examine and express their feelings of oppression, constraint, and powerlessness, and recognize their agency in addressing these complex feelings and power imbalances.

Of the many theatrical pedagogies Boal created, I was most interested in adapting Image and Forum Theater to create a theatrical space for students first to share their experiences in school and then to participate in theatrical conversations regarding bullying. Bullying is one type of oppression that many students experience as it involves an imbalance of power relations (Espelage, 2012; Olweus, 1993; Vaillancourt et al., 2008). Furthermore, it creates a climate of fear (NEA, 2003), and bullying behaviors are unfair and deny students their basic human right to a safe environment (UN General Assembly, 1948). In Boalian Theater, students participate in transforming their experiences with bullying by rehearsing interventions they could make in the future to prevent bullying that they may personally experience or may witness. One intention was for students to respond and to engage in perspective-taking and empathy as one of the ways of responding to bullying experiences and making sense of the differences they experienced. Boal (2003) argues that when participants empathize, they begin to bridge the distance between self and others. They also begin to experience the "other" as human—as human as themselves. Thus, empathy for the actor may motivate the audience members to intervene in the events on the stage. For Boal (1995), the movement towards intervention in the enacted scenario is an outcome of empathy that may result in the liberation of members of the audience from oppressive barriers to action.

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Participation in theater has been shown to promote student growth in self-understanding, empathy, understanding of human emotions (Crawford, 2004; Grover, 1994), and perspective-taking, i.e., imagining what other people may be thinking and feeling (Moskowitz, 2005). Perspective-taking skills can help reduce bias and, as a result, promote feelings of connectedness and mutual understanding between individuals (Moskowitz, 2005). The two processes of developing empathy and perspective-taking that are at

the heart of Boalian approaches are dispositions called for in responding to bullying in schools. Furthermore, it has been noted that these skills can promote effective ways to handle difficult social situations (Eisenberg, Murphy, & Shepard, 1997).

After-school program as the context of the study

Early adolescence is an important and often fragile period characterized by physical and socio-emotional growth, increased independence, making sense of differences, and facing new choices (Berk, 2012). For many youth, this is a time marked by tensions and challenges. The National Middle School Association (NMSA, 2010) asserted that one key to successfully educating young adolescents is creating a school environment they perceive as being inviting, safe, inclusive, and supportive of all students. Miller (2003) argued that after-school programs could help create such an environment by providing middle school students with personal attention from adults, a positive peer group, activities that could hold their interests, opportunities that promote student engagement in learning, and tools to improve their academic performance and promote healthy development. The research project discussed in this article was situated in an after-school program in a middle school in the southeastern United States.

Research context, methods, and data analysis

The participants in this study were members of the Theater Club offered in an after-school program in a middle school in the southeastern United States. The school was identified as a Title I school. At the time of data generation the school had not made Adequate Yearly Progress and was on a "needs improvement" list.

The gifted services collaborator and the school counselor both suggested names of those sixth- and seventh-grade students who had an interest in joining an after-school Theater Club. In addition to student interest, these professionals also took into consideration student vulnerability and their experiences with bullying. We (the collaborator, counselor, and I) met with the students to provide an overview of the after-school Theater Club. An information letter and consent form were sent home for parental/guardian approval. Students and their parent/

guardian consent were requirements for participation. Thirteen students agreed to join the Theater Club. Student vulnerability and experiences with bullying were not criteria used for inclusion. The participating students were linguistically, culturally, and ethnically diverse. For example, one student identified herself as Gothic (she preferred to dress in black, listen to Gothic music), one student was a recent immigrant to the U.S. from India who attended the ESL program, and one male student was more effeminate than the typical middle school male stereotype. Many of them had some form of experience with bullying—with being a bully, being a victim, or being a bystander.

The Theater Club met once per week for a period of 90 minutes. In total, the group met for 10 sessions over the course of the spring semester. The theater activities were facilitated by Robert Smith (pseudonym) a graduate student pursuing his doctoral degree in education at a nearby university. Robert, who was an elementary school teacher prior to beginning his doctoral program, had experience working with Freire's problem-posing approach to education and had some familiarity with facilitating Boalian Theater activities. Prior to this research, I participated in Theater of the Oppressed workshops, and we read articles and books to further familiarize ourselves with the pedagogy. Robert and I co-planned the Boalian activities. He took the lead in facilitating the activities with the students. I collected and analyzed the data for this project.

Each session began with warm-up activities, theater games, and Image Theater. In Image Theater the participants are given a prompt and invited to create a frozen image by molding their body as if they were clay. The participants are then invited to name their image and reflect on the images created (Boal, 2003). In our context, we invited the students to form images to convey their perceptions of school. The prompts we used were as follows:

- "Create an image of a good day in school."

- "Create an image of a bad day in school."

- "Create an image of what you do at _____ (time) in school (for example, 9 am)."

- "Create an image of what you do at ____ (place) in school (for example, the hallway)."

In response to the prompt, "Create an image of what you do in the hallway," Marsha walked towards the wall in the classroom where there were lockers. She stood there with her back to the lockers, her hands and feet extended, as

though she was being pushed into the locker. Later she named her image as *"Pushed against a Locker."* On the other hand, Tamara created an image by dropping her shoulders, bending slightly forward, and positioning her hands to show that she was carrying a heavy object. Later she explained that one of the things she often does in the hallway is carry heavy books as she moves between classes.

Robert facilitated a combination of Theater Games and Image Theater activities during the first six session. The various images the students created in Image Theater and the discussions thereafter in these sessions indicated that students perceived bullying as a major concern in their school and were motivated to talk about this issue.

At this point, Robert and I used another Boalian activity called Forum Theater. In Forum Theater the students used dilemmas they faced in their school with bullying and enacted the situations in a role-play format. After the role-play is initially enacted, the *spectators* (other students in the audience) are invited to enter into the role-play to try out possible interventions and become *spect-actors*. Boal (2003) used the term spect-actors to refer to the active spectators who use this aesthetic theatrical space to rehearse interventions that they could consider using later in their real life (Boal, 2003). Robert played the role of *Joker* (facilitator), who after each role-play invited the spect-actors (the students) to enter the role-play and enact their strategy. After each enactment, Robert engaged the students in a conversation by asking questions such as: What happened in the drama? What are the power relations among the characters? What type of relationship does the protagonist establish with the antagonist in the scene? What could be the protagonist's thoughts and feelings? What could be the antagonist's thoughts and feelings? How does the scene end? What other strategies could possibly lead to a different outcome—an outcome that could be more humane, democratic, and would establish an open channel of communication? The purpose of Forum Theater is to generate many possible solutions and engage the participants in critical thinking (Boal, 2003). The process is supposed to be dialectical, where multiple perspectives are considered.

During the next three sessions, the students and Robert collaborated to produce a short play, bringing out various situations in which bullying occurred. During the last session, we organized a Forum Theater where the students presented their play to a sixth grade class and

invited them to participate in a theatrical discussion that examined the issues of bullying. Together the students generated possibilities and rehearsed actions that could help create a more humane environment.

The data collected included field notes, two transcribed in-depth interviews with students, and photographs and/or videotaped sessions. One of the interviews, facilitated towards the end of the project, was a photo-elicited recall in which participants were shown photographs of their participation and the images they created in the sessions as well as the images created by their peers. The participants were asked to reflect on what they noticed in the photos; what they or their peer(s) were doing in the images; and what they learned about themselves, their peers, bullying, and the purpose of the TO activity. When looking at the pictures of "Columbian Hypnosis," a theater game, participants talked about their insights and the value of the activity from their perspective. For example, Sam said:

> You need to follow people and be aware of them, see them in order to move. It is hard to keep up. Marsha was moving too fast. Later she began to slow down, so it was easier then. I preferred to lead.

While Tamara shared:

> [The Columbian Hypnosis activity] helps to trust people – to know that they are not going to let you fall and you need to trust them. It is pretty much that you are following their hand, so you need to be able to trust them. I liked to follow, if I could trust."

Thus, photo-elicitation helped participants to reflect, remember, and elaborate on specific moments in the sessions that seemed poignant and critical for them.

The constant comparative method was used to analyze data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I used line-by-line coding to create properties, categories, and themes. Further analysis was done by creating axial codes. Axial coding helped to specify the properties and dimensions of the categories that were constructed through line-by-line coding. Furthermore, axial coding allowed me to sort, synthesize, and organize data that could be used in explaining the relationships between categories more fully.

Findings and discussion

This portion of the article is divided into four sections. In the first section, I discuss the participants' responses to the various Image Theater activities facilitated. The

second section describes the participants' perspectives and their experiences with using Forum Theater activities to understand bullying. The third section throws light on what students revealed about their bullying experiences through Forum Theater. The last section includes the participants' insights about ways to address bullying in their school.

Participants' expressions in image theater

A Theater of the Oppressed activity we initiated in our meetings was Image Theater. In Image Theater, participants were given a prompt and invited to create an image by molding their body as if they were made of clay. The students were then invited to name their image and later were asked to reflect on the image. During our meetings, we asked the students to sculpt images of a good day in school and a bad day in school.

Images of a good day in school. In general, images of a good day included open, expansive postures, maintaining eye contact, and smiles. In their reflections, students attributed their happiness to their experiences in school, which could be categorized as academic, social, and/or disciplinary experiences. Academically, doing well meant "getting good grades," "completing homework," "not messing up in band practice," and "focusing and being awake in class." Students also reported that they had a good day in school when their social needs were met. For example, some felt happy when they were able to "help someone," "spend time with friends," "make new friends," or "have good relations with my teachers." For others, a good day in school meant having a day without any disciplinary problems. Participants expressed this as "staying out of trouble," "going through routines without any trouble," "not being sent to the office," and "being allowed to go out and play/have a recess."

Images of a bad day in school. When asked to sculpt images of a bad day in school, in contrast, participants created images that were constrictive and stiff, with their hands drawn in toward their body, their heads looking down or away, their eyes averted, and little or no smile. Participants reported that a bad day in school made them feel unhappy, embarrassed, and unmotivated, and made them dislike school. The reasons students listed for having a bad day in school included poor physical health, trouble with being bullied, inability to meet academic expectations, and disciplinary problems.

Participants who attributed their bad day in school to the bullying situations they experienced labeled their images as "being beaten up," "being cut in line in the cafeteria," "being pushed against a locker," "getting in trouble while using lockers in between classes," "difficulty in passing through busy hallways between classes," "being cursed at," "being labeled," "being forced by peers to engage in a daring act," and "other students boosting a fight."

Participants who attributed their bad day to academic factors labeled their images as "getting punished for not doing homework," "difficulty with math," "disliking writing," "computers freezing in between work," "flunking a test," "getting poor grades," and "teachers giving too much work." In addition, bad days also resulted from students getting in trouble with teachers for behavioral reasons or being called to the office for getting in trouble.

The visual images they created enabled the students to convey their day-to-day experiences of a good day and a bad day in school. The students created the images by reaching into their embodied experiences in school, bringing to life their tacit thoughts and feelings. Boal (2003) argues that oppression is embodied; an oppression like bullying is experienced intellectually, physically, and emotionally. Therefore, in working with bullying it is necessary to create embodied experiences. Edgar (2004) argues that images are a mediator between the unconscious and the conscious levels and help in releasing the embodied thoughts and feelings held. In this case, the images become vehicles for communicating significant human experiences and actively involving the students in naming school experiences that evoke positive and negative feelings.

Participants' perspectives on their experiences with using forum theater to understand bullying

In the context of this study, the students agreed that bullying was a common concern, and all the participants reported that they had had some experience with bullying. The close personal connection with the topic helped in two ways. First, it helped the students identify with the issue and take ownership of it. Second, because students constructed the play from their personal experiences, they felt they could play a major role in generating the content, rather than relying only on an adult to tell them what to do.

***What Forum Theater revealed about the students'
experiences with bullying.*** On the day of the Forum
Theater enactment, the participants presented their
role-play to a sixth grade class. Two participants
played the role of the Joker during the Forum Theater.
Fundamental to Augusto Boal's theatrical process, the
Joker is a facilitator, someone who keeps things moving
(Schutzman, 2006). Just like the Joker in a deck of cards,
a Theater of the Oppressed Joker can also assume a
role as needed, "sometimes director, sometimes referee,
sometimes facilitator, sometimes leader" (Linds, 2006, p.
122), and sometimes spect-actor, engaging in a discourse
of posing questions, examining social structures, and
generating possibilities (Boal 2003; Schutzman, 2006). In
this role, the two students invited the audience members
to view the play and then to problem-solve, and they also
participated in generating possibilities.

The students reported that their participation in
Forum Theater increased their awareness of their own
roles as bullies, their experiences of being bullied,
and the issue of bullying in school more broadly. The
participants stated that they became aware of the various
causes that triggered a fight, such as name-calling,
pushing, gossiping, cursing, judging others, or lacking
in empathy. They reported that bullying can lead to a
fighting spectacle, and they became aware of their own
style of responding to a bullying situation. For example,
Sam realized that when pushed in the hallway, he walked
away, saying to himself, "[so and so] must have had a
bad day. I do not need to waste my time. I need to move
on." Carl learned that he typically walked away while
apologizing. Tamara, on the other hand, realized that
in a fighting situation she ran away as fast as she could,
but was often caught in the end. Sam, Carl, and Tamara
reflected on their ways of approaching when confronted
with a bullying situation. Because of their participation,
students also learned other ways of approaching a
bullying situation. The alternative responses the spect-
actors suggested during Forum Theater included
apologizing, talking things over, avoiding the situation by
taking a different route, and becoming more aggressive.
Some of the responses were humane, while some
responses were not. In their interviews, students critically
thought about these responses and talked about why
some responses were humane and why some were not.

Students also noted how bullying often escalated
in the presence of observers. For example, Marsha came
to understand how a group of people watching a fight

can motivate those involved to continue fighting. In her
interview she observed:

> People get entertained. It is like watching a TV
> show; everybody wants to see it. It is like watching
> *American Idol*. Everybody wants to see it. It is so
> cool and then you can say – he cannot fight. It
> is like you fight or you cannot fight. You just get
> humiliated. So people don't have much choice.

Students continue to fight, Marsha noted, not
because they want to fight but because they fear
humiliation. Peer pressure and peer acceptance are
important influences for middle school students. A few
participants became aware of the ways in which their
actions added fuel to a fight. This self-awareness helped
them to see that if their actions could initiate or maintain
a fight, their actions could also prevent or stop a fight.

Furthermore, I noticed that the students often
portrayed the teacher as passive or as ignoring the
bullying situation during their enactments. In presenting
alternatives, some students expressed a desire to have
more teacher intervention to prevent bullying. Thus
students enacted solutions that involved action being
taken by their teachers as well as by themselves.

In addition to generating strategies for intervention,
some students also became aware of the negative
consequences of bullying. Carl, who perceived bullying
to be a possible reason that students drop out of school,
said: "Sometimes in school there are lots of bullies.
People will try to bully you around. You don't want to
come back to school because of the fights. This means
that grades drop and students drop out of school."

Role-play and simulation have been used as learning
techniques in education (Crawford, 2004). Cambridge
Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Cambridge Dictionaries
Online, 2011), defines role-play as "pretending to be
someone else, especially as part of learning a new skill."
Role-play has been used within teaching, training, and
therapeutic settings. It is used to teach and learn a
variety of skills and competencies including the ability
to empathize with the feelings and beliefs of others
(Poorman, 2002). As noted here, the Boalian Theater
approach takes the role-play experience a step further.
In this approach, the audience is invited to interrupt
and intervene in the role-play to influence the outcomes
(Boal, 2003). Here, spect-actors have opportunities to
imagine what it is like to be in someone else's shoes. By
empathizing or being someone else, the spect-actors
learn to engage in perspective-taking and at the same

time learn about self—one's habits of mind and how one interprets the world.

Boal (2003), Greene (1995), and Oldfather et al. (1999) note that when students are engaged in a dialogic exchange they are more likely to take ownership and actively participate in interrogating the taken-for-granted; they are also more likely to create different visions of their social, cognitive, and physical life worlds. We saw this process start to take place in our group. By engaging in perspective-taking and empathy, the participants came to understand their responses to bullying, the negative consequences of their actions, and their felt powerlessness, while at the same time learning that through their actions they could take steps towards building a more humane world.

For example, Desiree noted that her attitude changed as a result of her participation in Forum Theater. Her feeling of transformation and empowerment came with the insight that she could make friends by talking to others and helping others with their problems. Desiree described the effects of her participation in Boalian Theater:

> [It] helped me to solve my problems with other people. It helped me to make new friends. I learned to get along with people. [I learned to] get along with others by helping them and becoming their friend. When I understood how fights take place and learned that I can stop fights, I learned to say sorry and prevent a fight from taking place. I learned to apologize. First I did not have any friends; now I have some.

Participants' insights about solutions in the school. When asked how they would like the issue of bullying to be addressed in their school and how to build safe environments, participants suggested increasing the number of police officers on campus, creating awareness about the consequences of bullying, creating awareness that bullying does not solve problems, and encouraging teachers to intervene more frequently. Research findings have shown that bullying tends to affect far more children at school than educators or parents realize (Suddermann, Schieck, & Jaffe, 1996), and therefore educators and administrators must be proactive in addressing issues of bullying in order to prevent its negative consequences.

Listening to and honoring students' voices in matters that concern them at school may engage students in thinking critically and empathically (Lincoln, 1995).

Further, inviting students to examine why bullying occurs and to consider possible interventions may help students perceive themselves as having agency. As seen in this research study, young adolescents may begin to see themselves as capable of making a difference in their world and of taking steps to prevent bullying and protect themselves from being bullied.

Implications

The middle school students in this study were actively engaged in making sense of their experiences with bullying, understanding the roots of conflicts with peers by engaging in perspective-taking, becoming sensitized to feelings, and generating possibilities for addressing conflict situations. Including space in the after-school program for students to participate in theatrical conversations about issues that matter to them could provide valuable support for middle school students and opportunities for them to reflect and learn together.

Boal's work is primarily concerned with oppression, which he regards as fundamentally unjust. He asserts that oppression is embodied. It is experienced with our mind and body—that is, intellectually, physically, and emotionally. Therefore, the struggle to overcome oppression must also include approaches that engage the participants with the embodied. Art forms along with theatrical experiences have the capacity to do this (Boal, 2006). Therefore, while there are many programs available for bully prevention and intervention, a Boalian approach provides a relatively safe aesthetic space where students can dramatize their fears, give shape to their thoughts/perceptions, and rehearse their actions.

By exploring empathy and perspective-taking through Boalian theater activities, the middle school students in this study examined the tensions and conflicts they experienced in their school that often resulted in seeing others as being "different." Boalian theater offered a safe space for students to share their experiences, rehearse responses to the day-to-day dilemmas they grappled with, and reflect on their role as bystanders with the ability to create a more humane learning environment. The challenges these students explored during Boalian Theater were grounded in their lives and contextualized within their everyday school experiences.

Furthermore, in a Boalian approach, the process of student engagement is more dialogic, where students participate in critical conversations around issues that

matter the most to them, and where they learn through reflection and taking embodied actions rather than being "told" or being expected to conform to the school norms under strict disciplinary policies and police surveillance.

Educators who value humane learning environments are more likely to model care and empathy for their students (for example, Charney, 2002; Noddings, 1992). By incorporating Boalian Theater as an ongoing component of the classroom experience, educators can engage students in a theatrical conversation that promotes empathy and perspective-taking, helping them make sense of differences and address issues of bullying. During these dramatic experiences, human interactions provide an outlet for expression that allows participants to gain knowledge of themselves, their peers, and their environment (Bhukhanwala, 2007; Boal, 2003, 2006; Schutzman, 2006). A humane community begins to exist (Bhukhanwala, 2012) where members are more likely to express concern, solidarity, and support and are less likely to engage in bullying behaviors (Blum, 1999).

All names used in this manuscript are pseudonyms.

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