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Things Go Wrong. Life Goes On. How Do We Stay Strong?

**The Path of Resilience: Processing Trauma through Learning,
Social Emotional Support, and Empowerment**

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Senior Thesis

Educational Studies & Peace and Conflict Studies Special Major

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Abstract

In this thesis I research how educators and communities can respect the feelings and realities of those experiencing trauma. I look at the ways we can frame learning experiences so that they empower people; allowing them to process their trauma safely and develop resilience. I describe three experiences I have participated in over my time attending Swarthmore College. These separate excerpts are interconnected in the ways that participants entered into an opportunity to constructively process their trauma, with the social emotional support of community members, and were therefore able to become agents of self-advocacy and change.

Introduction

In this thesis I investigate how to educate for empowerment: how to respect experiences of trauma and use the learning process to fuel resilience for individuals and communities. I look at the actions individuals take in different contexts to process their trauma in an empowering way. Key to this process are the ways in which communities support those members who are somewhere in the middle of this progression and therefore bring them to the center of the community rather than isolating them. It is true that educational structures can be isolating for marginalized students (Lee 325). For this reason I focus my research with the understanding that as humans we are always learning, whether or not that is in a classroom. With this understanding, my question is how do we create and support structures for empowering learning?

I begin with an in-the-classroom excerpt from my time observing and supporting Philadelphia classrooms to supplement my own education coursework. I describe how one fourth grade student's recent trauma was triggered in the classroom. Through the support in his class he was able to process that experience and enter the lesson confident in his expertise and contribution in the communal learning process. What was unique about this excerpt was the way the student challenged social dynamics. His layers of marginalization marked him as different, making it easy for his classmates to disrespect him, but because of the class activity he was an active participant in re-defining the respect he deserved. This experience was powerful for me, as a supportive educator to the student, and through this thesis I will continue to look at the impactful processes of empowerment, how it materializes in different contexts, and what that tells us about how to create an environment where this can happen more often for more individuals.

I look at how empowerment develops in activist settings, specifically the South Philadelphia Latino Immigrant Community Organization, Juntos. This excerpt stands out in that it looks at how immigrants work to ultimately pressure the structures of government to improve and enforce the laws to protect immigrants. I then expand to look at how in Northern Ireland the Theater of Witness [ToW] artistic process has brought marginalized and dominant narratives together to facilitate individual empowerment and community creation. That bringing together of various contexts of trauma in a single theater production differentiated the work of ToW. In this excerpt the cast was empowered through their relationships and pressured the government and Catholic Church to take responsibility for harms, discussed in the piece, working to make things right. Although these contexts are very different, each of the experiences are united by the interconnected ways that participants enter an opportunity to constructively process their trauma, with the social emotional support of other community members, and are therefore able to become agents of self-advocacy and change.

My thesis focuses on resilience. But resilience is hard to track; it depends on the individual, the contextual experiences of hardships and the society around them (Boyden 18). For this reason I will carefully analyze how communities can support people wherever they are in that process. In the following chapters I will look at the ways we can create safe and supportive structures that allow people to meaningfully engage with their histories. What does it take to be empowered through confronting trauma and learning? What does that process look like and how do we create it? In this thesis I will explore how educators and communities can respect and honor the feelings and realities that come with trauma in a way that empower individuals and communities in the truth,

validity, and therefore power of their experiences. My research leads me to highlight the necessity for community support and the power of storytelling in these interactions.

Chapter 1: Triggered in the Classroom, Tamir's Resilience

During the fall of 2014 I spent the semester observing and providing learning support in Dr. Richardson's fourth grade classroom. Dr. Richardson is a tall Swarthmore College alumnus and teaches fourth grade at a school in Philadelphia. His class is brimming with colorful and well-worn materials, and student work. The class population is majority black with some white and some Asian students. Through working in this classroom I began to gain an intimate understanding of the impact trauma has on the way students learn and understand their own power. During this placement I spent most of my time working closely with one student, Tamir. Like most of his classmates, Tamir was a young black boy with energy and a desire to succeed in school. What set him apart from the other students was that he was the most "difficult" child in the classroom. He had been diagnosed with ADHD and sporadically took his medication in such a way that his mood and energy level varied wildly from day to day. His reading level was 2.5 years below his classmates, causing him to struggle to accomplish tasks that other students found to be easy. In this class, I worked to support his learning and our continual interactions facilitated a slow process of gaining mutual trust. Working closely with him allowed me to gain rich insight into how he learns and how teachers can support him as a learner. The central influence on this thesis is that in Dr. Richardson's classroom I was able to see the impact of past traumas on Tamir's learning.

Over the semester, I very clearly saw that Tamir was more capable than the limited version of himself that he had learned to see in the school environment based off of comparisons to classmates and standards of success. I saw personal empowerment as the biggest key to academic success for Tamir. My understanding of empowerment is

connected to Foucault's concept of power. Power is already present in all people and situations but individuals must identify and channel that power in order to enact it (McLaren 72). Socially constructed hierarchies of power make it difficult for individuals to access their inherent power. Empowerment is when, despite these difficulties, individuals identify with their power and are able to act on it. I am focusing on the way learning supports communities, who are oppressed and marginalized by power structures, to access power outside of that structure. In relation to empowerment, the kind of learning I am focusing on occurs when people are able to understand the way things are and what it takes to change that current state for their benefit. Rinaldi's role for the teacher is intrinsically linked with student learning and empowerment. In Rinaldi's work she explained that teachers must seek to, "help students find meaning of what they do, encounter, and experience" (79). When learners understand where they are situated in society and their proximity to structural power, they can begin to develop more effective methods of identifying and acting upon their power. This can be seen through Tamir's empowerment as a student and citizen of this world. Feeling secure in the significance of his own life and identity was essential for him to see what connects him to his education. During my time with Tamir, I witnessed the fruits of empowerment emerge when he confronted his trauma. Supporting him through this process allowed him to emerge as a dynamic and unstoppable learner.

One day during class, I helped Tamir with the task of choosing to write about pollution, crime, animal abuse, abuse, disease, or homelessness. I could see Tamir was feeling down and I didn't want this activity to further depress him. Earlier in the year, he wrote about how his dog bit his mom, leading their neighbor to adopt, beat, and then kill

the dog. Thinking and talking about that memory depressed him, and I did not want to fall into a similar situation. I explained, “for this activity, you can pick something you know a lot about so you have important things to write about, or if you don’t want to share things that are personal you can pick something that happened to a friend or that you don’t know a lot about.”

With that introduction his eyes lit up and he checked the homelessness box. He pulled his notebook closer, started writing, and passed me a sticky note that read, “I was homelessness.” I really didn’t know what to do at all, “Thank you for sharing Tamir. If you want to write about this, you’ll have a lot to share I’m sure. If this might make you sad and you want to pick something else that’s ok too.” But he was already shutting down and physically sinking. While the other students went to the front of the room for further instruction, Tamir was completely folded in his chair, and I was sitting there unable to do anything except physically stay present; be there for him. Eventually when I prodded him to find a partner as the activity required, Tamir said, “I don’t want anybody to know my business.” I explained the situation to Dr. Richardson and he gave Tamir the option of picking another topic and finding a new group.

Tamir was not ok. This classroom activity forced him to confront the layered trauma he had already experienced at ten years old. I define trauma as the stress and exposure to developmental threats and risks that individuals experience over their lifetime (Charney 35). As a young black boy who had been homeless and diagnosed with ADHD, Tamir had a lot of structures that were working against his healthy development. Triggering that reality created very real physical and emotional consequences. In light of that, we went into the hall and sat at the available desk. He was extremely down and said,

“I don’t want to do any of this.” The one-on-one time in a different environment slowly eased the overwhelming feelings that isolated him from his classmates and the activity. He gained a little life and spun around in the hallway. As time went by I allowed myself to be distracted by the art on the walls. On the opposite wall was a bulletin board of paper leaves with brief explanations of what students were thankful for. I said, “Oh this is nice!” and began reading them one by one, Tamir read the students’ names and I read what they were thankful for. The one that drew me in and gave me hope for soothing Tamir was, “I am thankful for my mom, I am alive because she had me...” And indeed, the examples of gratitude were soothing for him. We both felt better after looking at each paper leaf. Tamir soon began asking, “Where’s my sister’s work?” Re-centering Tamir on the things that like the rest of the students at the school, he could also be grateful for, allowed him to see things through a more empowered lens. He was able to remember the ways in which he was valid and important. He had the responsibility of taking care of his younger siblings! Further down the hallway we found a story that his little sister wrote and HE read it to me. I complimented her work; “Wow she wrote a lot!” and he, in true big brother fashion, pointed to another student’s work that was a few sentences longer.

After taking this time to re-center, we returned to the classroom. And instead of changing topics as Dr. Richardson and I had suggested, Tamir went straight to the homelessness group and began researching his chosen topic online with the rest of his group-members. His group members welcomed him back carefully, eyeing him over and trying to gauge Tamir’s mood and the cause of his depressed state earlier in the day. They caught him up explaining, “We learned that some homeless people are really smart, they’ve just had bad luck.” Tamir heard this and was immediately energized to work with

the intention that bell hooks would recognize as subversive to the existing narratives (hooks 138). Wasting no time listening to what they wanted to do he plodded his own path on the internet search engines and called on his group members when he had something to share.

Tamir got to work finding videos. He immediately found a video that humanized the homeless. It showed different homeless people holding signs that explained some of their achievements and struggles. He played it over and over and had me write down everything the signs said. He also looked up the shelter he used to live at and he found a video about it. He pointed out all the people and places he recognized. He played the video over and over for other teachers and friends in the room. He would make comments to group members making it clear that he knew what they researched in a personal way. They were quiet; listening and watching him with serious respect. These are the dynamics the class was able to create as they entered into serious topics within a safe and supportive environment. The support Tamir had in Dr. Richardson's class allowed him to share his expertise, built from personal experience, with his classmates.

The day continued to progress in this way and Tamir's mood picked up completely. He was proud of how much information he had found, he looked at how much other students had written down and noted, "I have the most!" After taking the crucial time to process the extreme emotions triggered by the class material, Tamir was able to come alive in the classroom and be a self-motivated learner and contribute to the learning of others.

Renninger noted that when students are presented with opportunities to develop their interest and supported to inquire and reflect through this process, they will have a,

“Higher level of self-efficacy and be more able to sustain attention, set goals, and use strategies in discipline” (Renninger 108). In Dr Richardson’s classroom we were able to provide that opportunity and support for Tamir. In the thick of interest, students are, “likely to seek and make use of feedback,” therefore deepening interest, “act and think with curiosity,” thereby exploring and stretching their understanding while developing an ownership and a value of their knowledge and interest, and able to develop the, “belief that they can be successful” (Renninger 108). We can see this in the way that Tamir was able to identify the ways his engagement and expertise compared with other students.

This unlocked the capacity for Tamir to enter into difficult topics with confidence. As Sylvester studied, this process powerfully attested to the way that, “Education can challenge social structures rather than replicate them” (309). The following week Tamir had the option of writing about pollution, abuse, or crime. He chose pollution, reflected, put pencil to paper, and labored continuously word by word, sentence by sentence until he had a paragraph without any outside assistance. He sounded out words very quietly to himself, I continuously nodded, said “good,” and “mmhmm” as he wrote line after line. He looked up at the board and to past work to help him spell words like “pollution” and “garbage can.” Other than that he bravely spelled out how new words sounded to him, like, “plashk.” This work ethic set him up to work at a steady pace that kept him up with the other students the entire day.

Through this experience I saw the transformative experience that people can engage in during learning. Confronting trauma can be damaging. But in a safe and supportive structure, it can be a powerful step forward. In Dr. Richardson’s class, Tamir had an opportunity to constructively process his trauma when they engaged in tough

social issues. He had the social emotional support of me as an educator and his classmate community members. When I refer to social emotional support, I am talking about the supportive actions and demonstrations of the community; “understanding, expressions of love, caring, empathy, concern,” concrete actions, “such as running errands, lifting heavy furniture, and lending money [or] guidance or advice” (Helgeson 310). With the supportive time and space for processing trauma, Tamir was able to become an agent of self-advocacy in class. He approached the task confident in his expertise and his capacity to expand the limited construction of what it means to be homeless.

How did we as educators create a safe and supportive learning environment? Dr. Richardson’s approach in curriculum development and my approach in interpersonal interaction reflected the findings and wisdom of education researchers Rogoff, Rinaldi, and Sylvester. Both Rogoff and Rinaldi consider that students cannot be separated from their cultural background. “People develop as participants in cultural communities. Their development can be understood only in light of cultural practices and circumstances of community which also change” (Rogoff 2). With this in mind, the researchers consider culture an asset to the classroom, and central to the way students understand information. School is a place where values are transmitted, discussed & constructed (Rinaldi 38). For this reason Rinaldi saw school as the opportune time and place for young people to encounter difference; working to understand it rather than eliminate it.

These researchers concluded that because learning is embedded within the cultures that students bring to the classroom, we need to create open education systems that establish new patterns without the kinds of boundaries that continue to limit accessibility and marginalize communities. The activity in Dr. Richardson’s class worked

to practice the envisioned open educational structure where teachers intensely but safely facilitate students to bring their life experience to the lesson. Sylvester looked at the way in which education can challenge the social structure rather than replicate it. He noted that in order to do that, class lessons should provide opportunities for students to work to identify problems and be part of the solution because change requires that we imagine different options and follow through with that flexibility to pursue the different options. Part of this improved class dynamic also requires that teachers be aware of how their disciplinarian actions and interactions might continue patterns of racism and marginalization.

Tamir's transformation in the classroom demonstrated a powerful resilience. Werner sees resilience, "As an end product of buffering processes that do not eliminate risk and stress but that allow the individual to deal with them effectively" (Werner 116). Students demonstrate resilience when they work to rise to the challenges that inhibit their development and grow in strength and endurance because of that struggle. Tamir demonstrated resilience when he engaged with his stress and trauma during the classroom activity; instead of shutting down completely he opened up to me and his classmates. I want to underscore how essential it was for Tamir to belong to a community of mentors and fellow students who respected his experience and offered him social emotional support. In order to learn about resilience, Werner studied the way children react to situations of severe stress. Despite the stress factors in the lives of the children in her study, Werner noted that, "Most children identified as resilient have had the opportunity to establish a close bond with at least one person who provided them with stable care and from whom they received adequate and appropriate attention during the first year of life"

(Werner 123). This is telling of the needs of children during infancy, but also the way children grow.

Children need close and strong relationships with adults in order to thrive. Aness studied the way that teachers can provide a key contribution as an adult supporter of children as they grow and learn. Based on Aness' conversations with students, "Caring relationships may be the single most powerful variable in turning around those who have not succeeded," in school (Aness 63). In Dr. Richardson's classroom, he worked to structure a caring community of students and, as teachers and mentors; we worked to build caring and nurturing relationships with students. As a teacher, in the program in Aness' study, explained, "Every kid is grabbed by some adult. No one is unconnected" (Aness 64). We can see the benefits of establishing strong connections between adults and students in the way Tamir trusted my support and together we developed ways to re-center when information was overwhelming and triggering.

Fergus et al researched the impact of interventions specified to support Black and Latino young men in school. Establishing social emotional support and a sense of trust between and among teachers and students was a foundation for student growth in their studies. It presents an open-ness like that which allowed Tamir to enter the classroom lesson empowered.

When students express their personal struggles and allow themselves to be vulnerable with their peers, [it] can be quite powerful. [These moments] create a context for offering young men tools to cope with the negative challenges they face and an occasion for using positive peer support to reinforce the values and norms the schools are trying to instill... [and] offer an exceptional opportunity for developing resilience (Fergus 123).

Tamir shared, with me, that he had been homeless. This enacted a powerful learning opportunity. With his peers, Tamir was more subtle about his past, but he provided

information about the details and every-day nature of experiencing homelessness that the other students would never have known were it not for his open-ness. It is clear that the support in the classroom was the foundation for Tamir's vulnerability and resulting resilience.

It is also important to note that the topic of the class lesson also greatly influenced Tamir's process of learning. It forced him to bring his identity to the classroom in an unavoidable way. Kumashiro has studied the way that students learn through internal crisis and learning about oppression is very likely to create that internal crisis.

For my students, learning about oppression exceeded the realm of the level of intellectual and detached conversation and debate... rather they seemed to be confronting their own emotions and life experiences and, in the process, entering a form of 'crisis' They became upset, saying they felt 'bad' or 'guilt' as they recounted times when they stereotyped others and were themselves stereotyped and yet had not been aware that this was happening because they had not considered such occurrences to be abnormal (Kumashiro 2008, 114)

In the context of Tamir's experience, he was looking deeply at the injustices in his own life and as educators we can expect that to be deeply troubling. "Learning is not a comforting process that merely repeats or affirms what students have already learned.

Learning is a disarming process that raises questions about what was already learned and what has yet to be learned" (Kumashiro 2004, 30). This is a personal process and needs to be facilitated by caring and supportive teachers and mentors. Kumashiro emphasizes that it is irresponsible for educators to leave students in that state of crisis without a path past the crisis. The question then becomes, how do we create a path past crisis? In the scenarios and literature I explore in this project I begin to connect how engaging in learning allows for empowerment that creates that path past crisis.

Dr. Richardson's facilitation of learning in the classroom reflects this relationship, informed by research and theories developed around education and society. Paulo Freire's problem-posing education in the "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" adds theoretical insight into the way that Dr. Richardson addressed social issues. "Problem-posing education bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality, thereby... affirms, men as beings in the process of becoming" (Freire 2009, 59). Tamir underwent this exact process when he recognized his voice was a valuable contribution to the knowledge of the classroom and that he could influence the way people valued him. He had the opportunity to consider his reality not as static and determined by those who have power over him, but as an experience of his own interpretation and explanation.

I must emphasize that this was very difficult for Tamir. In "Confronting Class in the Classroom" bell hooks looks at the way that classrooms in the U.S. are structured to make discussions like this highly uncomfortable. "Most students are not comfortable exercising," their right to free speech she states, "especially if it means they must give voice to thoughts, ideas, feelings that go against the grain, that are unpopular" (hooks 136). For this reason I will continue to look at and research the ways to create safe and supportive structures that allow people to meaningfully engage with their histories. My guiding question is: what does it take to be empowered to learn through confronting trauma, what does that process look like and how can we create it? In this thesis I will examine how educators and communities can respect and honor the feelings and realities that come with trauma in a way that empower individuals and communities in their truth and validity.

Exploring these questions and themes, I will first define the terms I am using, and then continue to draw on expanding scenarios that inform the way the terms interact. In chapter two I look at how theorists and researchers have defined trauma, resilience, empowerment, learning, and social-emotional support. I will refer back to Tamir's scenario as a frame of reference. In the chapters that follow I will continue to look at how other contexts and experiences add insight to the relationship between the terms I define. In chapter three I look at how empowerment develops in activist settings, specifically Juntos' South Philadelphia Latino Immigrant community. In chapter four I expand my scope to look at how the Northern Ireland Theater of Witness artistic process brought marginalized and dominant narratives together to facilitate individual empowerment and community creation. In chapter five I draw connections between these expanding scenarios, pointing out the common themes and insights gained from the comparisons.

Chapter 2- Defining Terms: Empowerment, Trauma, Resilience, Learning, and Social Emotional Support

In order to fully explore the significance of what Tamir and I experienced during Dr. Richardson's lesson on social issues, as well as how this connects to the work of Juntos and Theatre of Witness, I am going to define the terms empowerment, trauma, resilience, learning, and social-emotional support based on the work of theorists and researchers. I will continue to reflect back on how these concepts interact in real life experiences and what we can learn from these overlapping approaches.

Empowerment

Empowerment is generally defined as the action of enabling, permitting and giving power or authority. In McLaren's critical pedagogy his assessment of theory developed groundwork understandings to answer my thesis question. Dewey understood power as, "the sum of conditions available for bringing the desirable end into existence" (McLaren 72). Foucault understood power as always already there and coming from everywhere (McLaren 72). I appreciate Foucault's method of opening up the capacity for power, and I want to emphasize, that this capacity is highly dependent on the way an individual identifies with that power and sees it in connection to herself and others. In this thesis I look at empowerment as the experience or process during which an individual knows and believes in their control and capacity to take action in their lives and create the experience they want.

Not everyone has an easy path to empowerment. Grassroots organizer, Stout drew on her expertise in the field to explain how we can think about the concepts I am investigating. Stout recognized in her work that people in poverty had a hard time imagining themselves with the power to answer the question; what would you, “like to change in our society?” She explained, “We changed the question to, ‘If you were president of the United States, what would you change’ in order to get answers? (Stout 113). Stout and the community organizers had to scaffold their community to see themselves with the power to have a say in the way their society functions; to take control over their lives and demand the respect they deserve as human beings.

Trauma

What happens when, as Tamir experienced, the circumstances are really quite bad? When an individual has experienced systematic abuse, their relationship with power is likely to be painful, reflecting the rippling effect of trauma’s impact. Because of these impeding factors on the health of a person’s sense of self and experience in society, access to empowerment is greatly inhibited by traumatic experiences.

Drawing on a variety of case studies in, “Psychobiological Mechanisms of Resilience to Stress,” Charney, Feder, Nestler, and Westphal discuss trauma in terms of the stress that individuals experience over their lifetime (35). Trauma is exposure to risks or threats to their function. Building on Charney et al’s definition with the insight of other psychologists, Masten specified that, “Risks include traumatic experiences and adversities of many kinds that have shown the potential to derail development or interfere substantially in adaptive function” (Masten 220). These definitions help contextualize the

consequences of the oppressive structures that effect the people and scenarios in this thesis and what it takes to survive and thrive despite the consequences.

I am going to focus on the trauma of living under the constraints of systematic racial, economic marginalization and exploitation and the violent ways that is manifested. In terms of how the violence shows up in interpersonal relationships, it, “Not only bypasses mutuality and reciprocity and undermines the best interest of others, but it includes behaviors that hurt others psychologically and emotionally and often physically as well” (Abrams 58). Abrams organized the recent findings of researchers in her essay, “Gendered Adaptations, Resilience, and the Perpetration of Violence.” Her work clarifies the way in which systems of oppression create power inequalities between people and the violence in those relationships are both structured by oppression and in such a way make a more harmful impact on the individuals.

Throughout my work I look at how people continue to push through these kinds of physical and emotional pains, envision an alternative more empowering than the reality in which they are situated, and act towards creating that vision.

Resilience

This persistence is referred to as resilience. Resilience can be seen when people achieve, “Good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development.” (Masten 215). A way to understand the power of resilience is that, it does not simply convey a return to the baseline experience that someone might live if they had not been impacted by trauma, but it entails, “Growth past the point before trauma” (Helgeson 310). Helgeson researched the way people deal with sudden traumas such as illness and war. Her work adds insight into the intricacies of resilience.

Below are some ways to think about resilience that are specific to my contextual excerpts and structure the research of this thesis. Hernandez, in her research, focused on the counter-narratives of thriving through hardship and Werner devoted decades to intensely study resilience in various contexts of trauma and locations in life.

Post-Traumatic Growth [PTG] refers to a growth process experienced by survivors of trauma, whereby pain is transformed in a positive manner beyond survival. These positive changes do not exclude trauma survivors' experiences of distress and struggling in the trauma's aftermath (Hernandez 233).

Resilience has been characterized as the ability to: "bounce back and cope effectively in the face of difficulties... bend, but not break under extreme stress... rebound from adversities... handle setbacks, persevere and adapt even when things go awry... and maintain equilibrium following highly aversive events." (Werner 116)

These definitions help us to understand the phenomenon of resilience not as something mystical, but as something documentable and attainable. As mentioned earlier resilience builds from the moment we are born. Werner called attention to the importance of strong bonds during early childhood that are essential to survival and manifest over our lifetimes in that it gives a foundation for building resilience in the future (Werner 123). Expanding upon the academic research and findings organized in this thesis, I would like to continue to question how educators and communities can build on the capacities of those individuals who are demonstrating resilience.

I emphasize that in this research I am interested in the way that the emotions of anger and sadness can be constructive in fueling a desire to fight and change things. I want to know about how in respecting these lowest points of depression and resentment, educators and communities can re-center their relationship with members experiencing trauma. With this respect these communities can grow together, empowered towards the actions that can facilitate healing and growth. As shown in the experience of Tamir, I am

interested in the way people can experience the emotions of trauma during learning without becoming trapped in a depressed and disempowered reality. I am interested in the way that anger and sadness can be constructive and fuel a desire to fight and change things.

In her book, *Knowing victims: Feminism, agency and victim politics in neoliberal times*, Stringer challenges the neoliberal and capitalist focus on a victim's resilience because it places the responsibility of recovery and normalcy on the victim experiencing trauma. Stringer argues that the way academics approach resilience is often based on looking at how victims can normalize and become active and productive participants in society again without making people who do not experience their trauma uncomfortable (Stringer 9).

Stringer calls to our attention a very important corruption of the way we look at resilience. I think that a key way to avoid using resilience to create an image of an ideal victim and blame those victims who do not achieve those requirements, is to look at how resilience develops and what the community around the victim must do in order to create that supportive environment for those experiencing trauma. Stringer reminds us that a victim's anger can make other people uncomfortable, but it is actually extremely valuable in that it can fuel a desire to fight and change the harmful aspects of a community (Stringer 11). It is essential that just as we meet each student where they are we meet each community member where they are, valuing their emotions and experiences. My thesis looks at how communities have been able to support each other so that experiences of trauma and the emotions that emerge do not divide and exclude people, but instead bring them in as integral members of the community.

This is not to say that the community itself can accomplish all of the healing and empowerment for traumatized members. In activist Stout's book *Bridging the Class Divide*, she reflects that, "If individuals don't have a secure sense of their own personal power, the power they gain through the organization will not hold up under pressure or opposition" (113). The individual within the group must believe in themselves and the group they belong to. This is where I see learning as a key component for empowerment of individuals and communities.

Learning

Learning is often understood as the acquisition of knowledge. But what happens during that process of acquisition? Like Dewey, Vygotsky, and Paulo Freire among other theorists, I understand learning as a process that is deeply embedded in cultural context and life experiences. As a Russian Psychologist, Vygotsky, "sought to develop a Marxist theory of human intellectual functioning," with his research (1). His social emphasis is essential to my thesis and I focus on the connections Vygotsky made in looking at the relationship between learning and psychological development.

Learning is not developmental; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental process that would be impossible apart from learning. Thus, learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human, psychological functions (Vygotsky 90).

Vygotsky sees that development and learning are deeply related, but not quite in sync. He sees the outside impacts on an individual as contributing to and affected by learning and development. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory looks at the dynamics of society as more impactful to an individual's learning than their separated cognition. "A key aspect of sociocultural theory is the positioning of the social, rather than the individual,

processes as primary in the development of higher mental functions” (Valenzuela 282). With this in mind, I also see the process of learning as deeply connected to culture and community. Learning can be seen as an abstract mental process, but in the context of lived experience it is very real and fixed in the physical and social interactions of an individual. Learning occurs when an individual or community develops an understanding of why things are the way they are and what it takes to make them the way they want things to be.

In this thesis I look at how learning experiences tailored to an individual or community’s social situation can be empowering. I will look at how people engage in the learning process and work through the disempowering influences in their lives to re-envision how they can impact their future and their world. Although the context is traumatic, I will indicate the ways learning provides alternatives beyond disempowerment.

Oakes and Rogers describes the kind of learning I am interested in as disruptive knowledge. They expanded on Dewey’s ideas of democratic power building through monitoring the work of marginalized youth, parents, teachers, and community in their fight to improve their schools.

Disruptive knowledge challenges the facts that people hold... overturns complacency and makes it more likely that the listener will be moved to moral action. Participants also forge a shared theory of change and a common ‘end in view.’ Through inquiry, they can create a ‘vision of a new world and some comprehension of the means by which it may be achieved’ (Oakes 41).

Disruptive knowledge is a powerful and exciting method of learning. But this kind of learning also works in continuous relationship with a person’s insecurities. In working to understand and change the injustices we have had to live with, a person must build

understandings in relationship to experiences of hardship and disempowerment. I am going to focus on the way that learning works in this relationship and how people make sense of their experience, their access to power, and imagine ways to utilize power. In this way I will focus on the way people learn through traumatic contextual experiences

Social Emotional Support

Much of what I discuss; learning, processing trauma, and gaining empowerment, requires that the individuals trust that they are safe and supported in these processes. I understand that trust and safety can be established when the social emotional support of the community around them is demonstrated clearly. When I discuss social emotional support, I am talking about the essential contributions communities make to support those with trauma to be resilient and empowered. In “Social Support and Growth Following Adversity,” social environment is seen as deeply related to individual resilience. The researchers describe the ways in which individuals can draw support from their social environment with the following categories: Emotional support is a demonstration of, “understanding, expressions of love, caring, empathy, concern. Instrumental support reflects concrete actions that network members may perform, such as running errands, lifting heavy furniture, and lending money. Informative support reflects guidance or advice” (Helgeson 310). When I discuss social emotional support in this essay I am referring to any of the above actions and relationships between traumatized individuals and their communities.

In each example that I provide from my own life experience we will see how community support is essential for individual growth. In connection to the in-school example with Tamir, we see the way in which learning requires a supportive group of

classmates and teachers. Tamir struggled with reading, and that in combination with his experiences outside of the classroom, isolated him from the class and made it difficult for him to feel safe and secure participating in activities. Contextualizing Tamir's scenario, research has found a relationship between academic growth and social interactions in the classroom. Morgan's findings concluded that when students struggle with reading early on in school it had a negative impact on the rest of their experiences in school. "Being a poor reader in first grade increases the likelihood of behavior problems in third grade" (Morgan 417). Academic frustrations can create long lasting consequences for students, calling attention to the impact of the relationship between students' reading level and the way they interact in the classroom. Academic frustrations can be communicated and released through emotional and behavioral outbursts. This make it difficult for children to enjoy healthy interactions with peers and mentors. Considering this reality, in order to fully support struggling students, "The most effective types of interventions target both reading and behavior problems simultaneously" (Morgan 430). In order to best facilitate student learning, it is evident that teachers must support the student academically and emotionally. The relationship between learning and sense of self within a community is so interrelated that students need teachers to focus their energy on not only academic improvement, but also the social environment that facilitates that improvement. Throughout my work I will continue to explore what it looks like for communities to support individuals to learn and grow from difficult experiences like in Tamir's scenario.

In the following chapters I will continue to explore terms defined in this chapter and how they interact. In Chapter one I discussed how trauma and learning interacted on a personal level for Tamir. My experience with Tamir was an in-the-classroom excerpt

that informs the way educators can support their students to become empowered in the process of learning. It also provided insight into how we see and understand the way the factors of trauma, learning, resilience, and empowerment interact. Chapter 3 will expand that personal level to the community level with an excerpt on my experience at the Latino Immigrant Community Organization Juntos. In broadening the context, I hope to better understand the way communities can exercise their resilience as they remember trauma and experience empowerment in learning.

Chapter 3: Activist Empowerment

Juntos: South Philadelphia Immigrants' Rights Community Organization

People in underserved communities typically lack 'conventional' resources for developing or buying power - access to leadership positions, research, media, and networking expertise. Movement organizing strategies counter these putative disadvantages by developing collective leadership, constantly involving new people in leadership roles, convening community meetings that involve as many people as possible in decision-making, and creating a collective vision. They build their collective power through their relationships with one another and through strategic alliances with those whose expertise, resources, and access to power can provide them with the political clout to advance their goals (Oakes 109).

In the above excerpt, Oakes and Rogers underscores the way community building and organizing channels and creates power. In this chapter I seek to better understand how this empowerment develops in communities, and how people support each other to be resilient in the face trauma. I expand on their description of learning with additional researchers and contextual real-life examples. In this chapter I explore how out of school, social action experiences facilitate learning that empowers people. I explore the ways that learning is facilitated and how trauma impacts this process.

This chapter is especially connected to my experience as an active participant in the current immigrants' rights movement. Through my work with Juntos, the South Philadelphia Latino Immigrant Community Organization, I have found my own empowerment. I am a mixed race Latina, white and New Mexican. Although my Latino ancestors have been in the USA for centuries, I have continually seen how my family's ethnic and racial identities mark us as second-class citizens.



The experiences associated with my identity inspired me to seek ways to connect to my history, relate to people who overlap with my identities, and work to prevent the continued oppression and divisions of my people.

Juntos supports Latinos to unite despite differences. We come together to support those who are most violently targeted by the deportation machine. In sharing our experiences with each other, we are able to better understand the needs in our community. Coming together and developing goals and plans of action activates the power in our community. Freire explains the relationships of power which demands that oppressed communities find and sustain commonalities that allow them to unite against their oppressors. In “The Pedagogy of the Oppressed,” Freire asserts that unity is necessary for liberation. He states that, “dominators are compelled by necessity to divide the oppressed,” in order to, “preserve the state of oppression” (Freire 1970, 153). In order to fight that dominant power, “Leaders must dedicate themselves to an untiring effort for unity among the oppressed - and unity of the leaders with the oppressed- in order to achieve liberation” (Freire 1970, 153). At Juntos we develop unity by learning about the reality that undocumented Latinos face and how that affects the larger Latino community in the US. We learn that we are deeply connected and must stand together in order to change the way we are treated and regain power over our lives in the face of

marginalization and exploitation. This is an example of supporting each other so that we can channel the anger and sadness that results from trauma into action.

Being able to actively participate in this ground-up learning has given me the opportunity to feel the support of Latinos, and to support other Latinos as together we learn, take action, and work towards our empowerment. Based on my experiences with Juntos, I can see the logic of Oakes and Rogers' conclusion that meaningful social actions depend on face-to-face relationship building (Oakes 95).

During the summer of 2014 and the spring semester of 2015 I had the opportunity to intern with Juntos. My main role there has been to organize and support the community to take their own lead and vocalize their story to larger society in order to fight for their rights and enact change. Juntos is a Latino Immigrant Community Organization. With three staff members, an ever-shifting group of interns, and a solid community base, Juntos builds up the Latino immigrant population of South Philly. We work to support the needs and rights of the community. We empower each other to fight the deportation machine created by the US government. We support undocumented immigrants to protect their rights and fight for the change they would like to see in their community and country.

The young adults who grew up with the support of Juntos often reflect on the way they were once very shy but through activism and community development in Juntos, they learned about their history, and what they can do to fight the systematically perpetuated injustices. Through this learning they felt empowered to step up, speak in front of others, and lead the community. The empowerment of the Juntos members supports the realization based on other community organizing campaigns; "the answer to

the problems facing society lie in the experiences of ordinary people. Those experiences, so often belittled and denigrated in our society, are the keys to grassroots power.” (Oakes 104). In addition to her understanding that relationships and social emotional support create non-traditional power for marginalized communities, Oakes asserts that claiming and voicing experience is a key component in creating that non-traditional power source. In this chapter's opening quote, Oakes emphasizes the way that relationship building strengthens a community. When a community works to share stories and affirm each other, they are working to build supportive relationships and the resulting non-traditional power source.

I have seen this transformative power of social action in the way that immigrant women step up in the toughest of situations. It is not rare for immigrant women to come home from work only to realize, as hours past the usual time that their husband returns from work, that he has disappeared. Undocumented immigrants can be detained unexpectedly and those they leave behind are left to piece together the story of what happened and what to do about it. Women in these situations are left to take care of the kids and make ends meet on their own. They come to Juntos seeking help, and we explain what they can do- the work they can do to get their husband out of detention and prevent deportation.

I have seen these women completely overwhelmed with the situation that they face. Dewey and Oakes & Rogers explain that in order to achieve social change, we cannot sink into bewilderment at the powers of oppression and control (Oakes 73). Times of hardship and trauma like the disappearance, detainment, and impending deportation of a husband could easily cause a downward spiral for families. But because of the

structured support of Juntos, the women left behind can work through their trauma induced emotions and channel that energy into taking action based on their options, raising awareness of their situation and what the community can do to pressure the government to release their husbands. In her analysis, hooks adds insight into the collaborative efforts of the work and empowerment of women at Juntos. “Those of us in the academy from working class backgrounds are empowered when we recognize our own agency, our capacity to be active participants in the pedagogical process,” and work to, “to subvert and challenge the existing structure” (hooks 138). Although hooks focuses on how the academic work of her colleagues fights classism, the community organizing of the undocumented Latina women at Juntos also shed light on the relationship between work and empowerment. In leaning on the community to process trauma, the women are supported to demonstrate resilience and take action. Through this progression and work, the women grow in their empowerment.

Asking these women to take action is not a simple request. There is nothing comfortable or safe about the scenario that Juntos women are in. Their reality is soaked in the trauma of living the consequences of oppression - facing the need to immigrate and the inability to find security in the US. When scholars and psychologists discuss trauma, they refer to, “an emotional wound or shock resulting from exposure to an event or situation that causes substantial, lasting damage to the psychological development of a person, often leading to neurosis,” or posttraumatic stress disorder [PTSD] (Boyden 13). We can see this impact on the Juntos members in that they left their home country due to poverty and violence. But on top of the structural violence, the social repercussions continue to impact the condition of immigrants.

Sometimes the most devastating situations are those involving insidious hardships and deprivations, such as constant humiliation, social isolation, or poverty related to loss of livelihood. For instance in Dar es Salaam, Congolese refugee children between the ages of 7 and 13 years reported that discrimination and public humiliation by Tanzanian adults and children was so distressing for them that they would often prefer to remain at home than to endure the taunts of neighbors and others (Mann, 2003b) (Boyden 13).

As stated above, in “Children’s Risk, Resilience, and Coping in Extreme Situations,” Boyden and Mann reflect on the way that the stress of discrimination amplifies the other hardships that communities experience. Based on their clarifications, we can see that in the context of Juntos, Latino immigrants face the consequences of racism in the U.S. in addition to the violence that drives them to immigrate.

Other researchers have expanded on Boyden and Mann’s findings, helping us understand the serious nature and impact of trauma for Juntos members. Darter describes two forms of racism: “The first refers to racism whose primary intent is the exclusion and extermination of racialized populations deemed a threat. The second, termed ‘inferiorization,’ is found in modern situations of migrant labor where rights are denied, forcing immigrant workers to take menial jobs and low entry positions that all others are unwilling to accept” (Darter 153). Deportation blends these categories in that immigrants are inferiorized but also excluded and exterminated from visibility and existence in the U.S.

In light of the serious effects of oppression on Juntos members, it is clear that working to develop empowerment and resilience individually is extremely difficult and almost nonsensical. In order to survive, let alone take impactful action, it is essential that the women whose husbands face deportation find social emotional support in their community. Just as Tamir needed the support of teachers in order to process his trauma

and engage in the class material, the women took root in the support of Juntos, the Latino immigrant community and their allies, in order to fight for the release of their husbands. In addition to the structural social emotional support of the organization, as described in Chapter two, Juntos members also provided a sense of trust for the women because they had also experienced the disappearance of loved ones and the necessity to fight against imminent deportation. In “Social Support and Growth Following Adversity,” it is clarified that, “observing similar others who have undergone the trauma and grown from it can be a source of growth possibility,” for individuals experiencing a sudden trauma such as the detention of a loved one (Helgeson 312). Because women in this situation are able to lean on each other and the expertise of people who had won the freedom of their loved ones, they were able to work with hope and inspiration. If there wasn’t that bond of commonality, the advice given to these women would have been empty and further disempower and isolate them. The community support therefore made an impact on the reality of these individual women, their families, and in that way continued to strengthen the entire community.

Although trauma has many consequences, one uniting effect is evident when a community begins to organize, define, and distinguish themselves based on collective victimization, “in order to achieve political, economic or social objectives” (Vollhardt 91). As we can see through the work of Juntos, communities can unite under a shared victimhood. The women at Juntos were able to turn to each other for support in their shared experiences. But the larger community with their diversity of experiences and traumas could come together around the injustice of the deportation and criminalization of their community. “A sense of shared collective victimhood and oppression can

mobilize people to advocate on behalf of other groups that are disadvantaged or in need, help garner support for their cause, create powerful alliances that can influence votes and policies, and bring about social change through joint social movements” (Vollhardt 89). Not every member of Juntos was undocumented, or had a family member that was deported, yet the members were united in their dedication to ensure that those who are most vulnerable to the abuse of the deportation and criminalization machine, were indeed protected.

Within this intricate support system, I have seen quiet and overwhelmed women grow to confidently stand up and take the microphone. I have watched them channel their emotions into explaining their situation and how the community can help support them by making calls to elected officials to set their husband free. They would step up in front of crowds and explain the hardships they had encountered as immigrants and resulting from their husband’s deportation; personalizing the scenario by discussing how the stress harmed the health of their children.

This is a demonstration of disseminating information throughout the community in order to affect change. The development begins with internal education first. In her work, Stout clarifies that education is an essential component for the kind of empowerment that translates into change, the kind that the women at Juntos were working to achieve. “I don’t believe that empowering people to work locally in their own self-interest will necessarily translate into national social change,” she explains, “People often don’t understand the connections between the local and national problems without education” (Stout 76). Complementing Stout’s assertion, the women at Juntos had to learn about the political structure that took their husbands away, what actions they had

the right to take in response, what organizations could help them in their struggle to bring their husbands home, and in what ways they could make compelling arguments for support.

Stout emphasized that within this education process of social action, “It is important to include in an organizing model a commitment to counter racism and sexism... By educating people to change their attitudes, we can change society for the long term” (Stout 75). The component of the political education at Juntos therefore includes a lot of un-learning. Logic developed from living in this society causes us to blame the victim. At Juntos we work to challenge the way our community is criminalized and the ways in which we mistakenly accept that untrue narrative. Challenging criminalization in this way entails challenging stereotypes that people who cross borders and work to move beyond poverty without the government stamped paperwork are illegal and delinquent. We learn about the ways in which these realities are a result of historical international relations of exploitation.

It is crucial to build these structural understandings of power so that communities can end cycles of blaming the victim and trusting the oppressor. In Boyden’s research they explore how this dynamic shows up for children in refugee camps. “These children acknowledged that... the worst consequences of being thought of as “poor” is the associated shame, social exclusion, and susceptibility to teasing, bullying, and humiliation by peers” (Boyden 15). This excerpt depicts the repercussions of oppression and the harm perpetuated within the community. Stout's emphasis of anti-racist and anti-sexist organizing models therefore makes sense in that by educating individuals of their relationship to structural power, the sources of harm and how individuals benefit from,

are hurt by, collude with, and challenge that power are made clearer. This knowledge is intended to help individuals interact more healthily with each other and therefore strengthening the community. This emphasis on the relationships in the community circles back to Oake's opening quote.

In this chapter we can see the major components of community organizing work as relationship building and education. With these components the community can work to comprehensively meet their needs. At Juntos that materialized in a strong social emotional support for individuals in the thick of trauma, and a format for vocalizing experiences in a way that activated power and created agents for change.

Chapter 4: Artistic Healing

“Sanctuary” Teya Sepinuck’s Theatre of Witness Production

In previous chapters I have focused on how people can learn and develop empowerment. Specifically, how in order for individuals to learn, communities must provide social emotional support that challenges the structural social limitations of living with trauma. Through learning and forming community individuals can transform and expand their experience; with the powerful result of inspiring and fueling social change. In Chapter 1 Tamir showed us an individual case of transformation through learning. In Chapter 3 Juntos explored how the social emotional support of community creation and empowerment counteracts the isolation of trauma and supports people to transform traumatic experiences and fight for justice. I have explored this topic from individual, to community, and now to a global level. In this chapter I look at the impact of the Theater of Witness production, “Sanctuary.”

Theater of Witness [ToW] is a particular artistic style with a method that directly informs my thesis.

Theater of Witness is a form of performance developed by founder and artistic director Teya Sepinuck in which the true life stories of those whose voices haven’t been heard in society are performed by the storytellers themselves as a way for audiences to bear witness to significant social issues. The theater productions are scripted from individual and group interviews as well as a variety of creative process techniques and consist of scripted text, music, movement, imagery and film projection. The productions are created with the performers who themselves have directly experienced the issues being explored. Theater of Witness invites audiences to put a face and heart to societal issues of suffering and to celebrate the power of the human spirit to grow and transform. Theater of Witness is a form of peace building and inspiration (About).

The ToW production, “Sanctuary,” featured the stories of three refugees in Northern Ireland and three Northern Irish natives who shared their stories of hardship and

creating peace and healing against all odds. Sepinuck worked with them extensively to develop a production which was true to their traumas but also their strength in surviving and seeking a better life. This production brought vastly different experiences together and in such a way tightened the human family. They modeled how people from different places and experiences can come to support each other working to create community that can sustain individuals despite past and continued trauma.

In this chapter I look at how artistic expression and global connections are valuable in processing trauma as a strategy for learning and empowerment. As in the previous chapters, the participants in the Theater of Witness production had experienced traumas of various extremes during their life. Especially because of the diversity in ethnicity and life experiences, community development was essential in “Sanctuary.” I will also analyze how researchers can inform the process and the work of “Sanctuary,” in order to better understand how people find strength, or empowerment and resilience as discussed throughout this thesis.

I want to emphasize “Sanctuary” because in the fall of 2013 I had the opportunity to participate in the Swarthmore study abroad program in Northern Ireland. During this time I worked with Teya Sepinuck on her Theater of Witness production, “Sanctuary.” As an intern I input data, made calls, prepared for performances, organized cast member travel arrangements, and provided a general support for cast and audience. In the work I also had the privilege of entering into the world of Sepinuck’s production; a tight community of cast members and administrators from vastly different experiences.



Loyd & Everson, from Zimbabwe, described their escape from Mugabe's military persecution and their struggle to find security in Northern Ireland. Maryama shared her experience in Samalia, where the Islamist militia dislocated her family and enslaved her, her escape, and the many difficulties she has faced in the effort to gain refugee status. Theresa grew up during the worst of the Troubles and shared her need for a mother's love and her dedication to being a good mother. Ryan escaped the violence of the Troubles by finding refuge in the club scene and shared his experience overcoming depression and rediscovering joy. Margaret was a victim of institutional abuse in an orphanage, participated in the Troubles, and has since led a campaign to demand justice for the crimes of the Catholic Church.

Each performer had experienced extreme pain, and performed the feeling of being swallowed up and powerless in moments of utter despair and pain. In "Children's Risk, Resilience, and Coping in Extreme Situations," Boyden and Mann drew conclusions that help us understand the way trauma was processed for cast members and interacted during "Sanctuary" performances.

Dealing with distressing experiences involve making sense of those experiences, assimilating and processing fear, grief, or anger; and finding ways of adapting to, overcoming, or removing difficulties. Although these may be intensely personal processes, individuals engage with misfortune not as isolated beings but in socially mediated ways that are shared. (Boyden17).

The way cast members processed their trauma with the support of each other and the audience reflects Boyden and Mann's understandings. When they named their pain in front of an audience, their vulnerability became a testament to their strength. They voiced their trauma, and as fellow humans who share the joys and pains of living in this world, audiences naturally respected that bravery, and as a result, the "Sanctuary," stories and experiences. Each performer had a firm faith and hope for the future. Between their narratives the cast would come on stage, slowly walk and move around the stage, look each other in the eye, and physically support each other. Their actions modeled compassion and human connection for the audience.

The stories of trauma are what stuck with the audience. In sharing their traumas, the performers discussed experiences from each of Galtung's typology of violence; direct violence, structural violence, and cultural violence.

1. Direct Violence: An event: "Killing, maiming, siege, sanctions, de-socialization, re-socialization, secondary citizenship, repression, detention, expulsion"
2. Structural Violence: A process: "Exploitation, Penetration, Segmentation, Marginalization, Fragmentation"
3. Cultural Violence: An invariant: "Aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence- exemplified by religion and ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic mathematics) - that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (Galtung 292)

An example of these multiple categories of violence is that Maryama fled Somalia because of direct violence; she was physically detained and abused by the Islamist militia. She suffers structural violence in Northern Ireland because she is marginalized as an asylum seeker. And she also suffers cultural violence because the violence she suffers is due to her Somalian accent and low level of English proficiency is legitimized within the majority culture.

“Sanctuary” enlightened audiences to forms of violence that are continuing in the world and in their own communities. Violence is a broad term with damaging and long-lasting impacts. Galtung defines, “Violence as avoidable insults to basic human needs, and more generally to life, lowering the real level of needs satisfaction below what is potentially possible” (291). “Sanctuary” recognized the multiplicity of violence and encouraged audiences to do something about it. After performances, audience members were invited to sign petitions to advocate for Maryama, Loyd, and Everson to receive refugee status in Northern Ireland. Audience members could also access more information about institutional abuse and Theatre of Witness to continue to learn and act out in the search for justice and peace.

Just as Tamir and Juntos members depended on their community and trusted relationships in order to feel empowered and demonstrate resilience, the same is true for “Sanctuary.” “Sanctuary,” as a Theater of Witness production, was a unique project in that it drew connections between the traumatic but resilient experiences of cast members from various countries and experiences. Sepinuck’s strategy of “Finding the Medicine” or “The Blessing at the Center of the Wound” connects to the other theorists in this thesis in that she clarifies, “In groups the medicine is often seen in the relationships of the performers- especially relationships across boundaries” (Sepinuck 229). Although the severe traumas in the cast vary, that community creation establishes a hope and healing.

Community-building unites oppressed groups in order to fight the dominant powers, as mentioned in chapter three; this is a key component of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed. As the artistic director, Sepinuck provided the leadership in the “Sanctuary” family. She brought together stories from across the globe, guiding a

work that encouraged the audience to see the similarities of suffering trauma as well as the ways in which our separate nations and experiences impact each other. In this way she allowed oppressed peoples to see how their divisions and hierarchies of privilege did nothing to heal their traumas. It is clear that community development takes intense, sustained work. Similar to the social-emotional support that allowed Tamir to be empowered in sharing his experiences, Sepinuck brought people to know each other through story-telling. The relationship development, that Sepinuck facilitated, created recognition of community and the corresponding responsibility to use social emotional support to buffer the effects of trauma.

As emphasized in chapter two, disempowered people often need guidance and scaffolding in order to appreciate their own power over their lives. Sepinuck is especially skilled at facilitating this process with her cast-members who are deeply affected by their contexts of trauma. She explains one such scenario:

I wanted to tap into Agata's inner strength. I led her in some guided imagery and asked her to imagine the animal she most identifies with. She lit up: 'I am a big black horse, running, running free in the field.' Just saying those words brought a wide grin to her face. I kept that image at the forefront in my work with her, knowing that it was this beautiful strong horse that we would both ally (Sepinuck 80).

Through activities such as this, Sepinuck empowers her cast-members to imagine and remember themselves as stronger than their traumas. She supports them as they process their trauma, but also highlights the power of their resilience. Through listening, or "Deeply listening with the ears of your heart," to the narration, silence, and body language of her cast during the initial interviews, Teya found ways to support those people to perform their own experiences on stage. In order to respectfully honor,

understand, and explain the trauma and strength of her cast, Teya developed some key approaches that she lists below.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Not Knowing | 7. Hold the Paradox |
| 2. Bear Witness | 8. Find the Gold |
| 3. Find the Medicine | 9. Take the Problem and Make it the Solution |
| 4. The Blessing is at the Center of the Wound | 10. Fall in Love |
| 5. Deeply Listening with the Ears of Your Heart | 11. Trust the Process |
| 6. Becoming the Vessel | 12. Everyone is Me |

The wisdom gained in Sepinuck's decades of working through the process of Theater of Witness has led to productions that leave an impression on audiences and participants. As described at the beginning of this chapter, "Sanctuary" was the culmination of decades of Teya's exploring this theater process in different communities and contexts. The essential key to her process is Bearing Witness; she states, "It's important, in creating this work, to honor the individual and particular life circumstances of each performer, while at the same time giving focus to the larger historical, political, religious, social, environmental, and/or spiritual group story that is shared by the cast" (Sepinuck 228). This is an essential step in the relationship between trauma and empowerment. Sepinuck gives her cast the opportunity to look at their history and experience through a larger than individual lens. In working with a group of people whose communities have harmed each other, they must grow past the binary of good or bad, complicating their histories, and in such a way humanize each other.

From the field of Peace and Conflict Studies, Lederach explores the way that this exact practice is essential as we work to overcoming violence. He states in his book *The Moral Imagination* that, "Transcending violence is forged by the capacity to generate, mobilize, and build the moral imagination.... requir[ing] the capacity to imagine

ourselves in a web of relationship that includes our enemies [and] the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity” (Lederach 5). Holding a new understanding with an old one, and challenging the good/bad binary is the groundwork for an empowerment that enacts social justice. It is an uncomfortable but necessary component of the kind of learning I am interested in.

Education researchers have provided insight into how teachers can support learners in this developmental process, just as Sepinuck supported her cast and audience. Eccles clarified that in the classroom environment, “Teachers should provide optimal level of structure for children’s current level of maturity and provide sufficiently challenging environments to pull children along the developmental path toward a higher level of cognitive and social maturity” (Eccles 92). This acknowledges that we are growing beings that need affirmation about who we are and a way to get to the next stage of who we can be. Sepinuck applies this concept outside of the classroom with the adult performers whose traumas strongly affect their understanding of self and society. Sepinuck works under the framework that Schultz clarifies for successful teachers in her book *Listening: A Framework for Teaching Across Differences*. When students are, “Struggling with something in themselves the teacher joins by providing the student with opportunities to reveal and articulate their concerns” (Schultz 33). Like a teacher, Sepinuck’s role as an artistic director causes her to invest in the struggles of her participants because she works to ensure that each participant’s story is articulated with strength and truth.

Sepinuck also works to safely give the surrounding society access to her production and the learning it scaffolds. She explained, “Our intention was for audiences

to bear witness to the stories of trauma and transformation, humanize the perceived enemy, and be moved and inspired to cross the cultural divide” (Sepinuck 185). These relationships can be especially tricky to navigate.

In the context of “Sanctuary,” Sepinuck addressed the way that when people are under pressure and stress, like the trauma of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, newcomers are seen as a threat. Refugees are the ones that are threatened in every way, through the trauma of their experiences in countries of origin, the unwelcoming way in which they are received, and the threat of deportation back to those settings of danger. Yet their presence is still viewed as threatening to the function of the society they have entered. As Stout explained, systems of oppression distort the way we understand reality. She described:

For example, if you are poor and you want to buy a used car, you soon find out you’ll have to pay more interest, make higher payments, than for a new car. So you end up having to buy a new car. People then say disapprovingly about you, ‘Look at that. He’s driving a new car.’ They don’t understand all the ways the system works to create false appearances (Stout 87).

Stout explained how the surface level understanding of how people experience difficult circumstances is very different from the underlying factors. Sepinuck worked to humanize her cast for each other and for their audiences, by bringing light to the underlying causes and effects of their traumas. She complicated the surface level understandings with her production. She worked to allow the audience to see a more clear reality through the perspective of both refugees as well Northern Irish citizens who are struggling with trauma from the Troubles. With the creativity of her artistic direction and the open-ness of her cast members, Sepinuck guided the audience and cast to imagine each other and the relationships between each other more creatively.

The value in Theater of Witness comes from Sepinuck's capacity for engaging with depth, but also her use of theater as a way to explore and convey that depth with others. Education researcher, Heath, conducted a study of the impact of out-of-school arts programs for youth in, "Imaginative Actuality: Learning in the Arts During the Nonschool Hours." They found that artistic work and expression create a key space for learning that schools cannot always provide. Heath looked at how an after-school program brought professional artists to support students in developing their own large-scale art projects related to community. "Art enables students to express pent-up feelings but also get some distance by observing closely and taking time to think and listen" (Heath, 30). The healing benefits of art are foundational for mental growth. The youth, in the program that Heath studied, developed group art projects over the course of their time in the program and developed critical thinking and problem solving skills as an essential byproduct. The results were an increase in literacy skill and self-esteem. At the end of the project, students had increased their use of, "if then" statements by five times, and mental state verbs and modal verbs by two times (Heath 27). This development of the capacity to think critically was also evident in Sepinuck's production. Her cast and audience came into the experience unsure of their connections, and they left the production with a new understanding of the full effect of their histories, and how different experiences and individuals related to each other.

Paulo Freire explains the connection between expanded communication and people understanding and caring for each other well within structural power dynamics. He explains that only when the oppressed have the ability to voice their concerns to larger society and those concerns are heard, then people can build solidarity across

differences (Freire 2009, 55). With Heath and Freire's insights we can see the advantage of Sepinuck's process of bringing people together to strengthen their skills of truth telling. Artistic expression expands the power of communication for marginalized participants.

It is evident that artistic exploration has an incredible power to inspire and facilitate learning, growing, and action. Sepinuck's Theatre of Witness project demonstrated the way art supports individuals to process their trauma and access empowerment. Creating supportive and connected communities is essential for art to structure the resilience of its participants. Theater has supported stories coming together and building power in that way. Sepinuck is not the only person who has fine-tuned theater as a method to vocalize marginalized voices and channel the power of the people.

Cleveland's book *Art and Upheaval* provided insight into how art is used around the world to process trauma in communities. One excerpt looked at the way Australians used theater to voice the direct, structural, and cultural violence of past nuclear testing. Aborigines affected and British and Australian veterans of the nuclear testing project used theater and art as a form of expression fueled by a frustration that their community's story, experience, and truth were not being recognized by the victim-blaming government.

The theater process tightened and strengthened communities. In the projects for veterans, retired soldiers connected with widowed wives and worked to respectfully and collaboratively tell the complete story. In the process of depicting the Aborigine experience, Aborigine participants constantly checked in with elders to ensure that their story was true to the community, only sharing what was appropriate to share. Just as

Heath and Freire's work described, these productions reiterate that solidarity between people requires true communication. In order to create expressive truth telling pieces, participants had to exercise discipline, build/redefine community and work through conflict/trauma.

Similar to Teya Sepinuck's Theater of Witness process, artistic directors in Australia listened to the stories of these communities and developed theater performances that brought light to the experiences of communities effected by nuclear testing. In Cleveland's example and "Sanctuary," participation in the theater project demonstrated bravery. Participants challenged what society understood to be true with the legitimate expression of their marginalized experiences.

But how do people grow to confidently express their marginalized experience? In Stout's experiences, contrary to logic, developing skills that are valued by those with structural power does not allow oppressed peoples access to exercising their power. Power is related to privilege and without privilege; even skills associated with power cannot gain access to that power (Stout 145). For example, statistics and facts can be manipulated by those with social control to further delegitimize the reality of the oppressed. This corresponds with the experience of education activists from Learning Power: Organizing for Education Justice. When parents, teachers, and students organized data on test scores, funding, and the reality of lacking support for students who most needed it, their data was torn apart and contradicted by their adversaries. "Obvious injustice can be statistically ignored and corrupted," to protect the oppressors access to power and authority over the way reality is understood (Oakes 13). In order to continue to empower marginalized communities despite opposition, these communities must instead

create power that is an alternative to the structurally created power of their oppressors. “Speaking from the heart,” is an alternative source of power supported by Stout, Oakes & Rogers, Cleveland, and Sepinuck’s work (Stout 145). The theater projects analyzed in this chapter voice marginalized voices and depict the truth of marginalization. In such a way they produce creative ways to access and channel power to improve their circumstances.

Being able to create new ways to enact power is also a clear indication of resilience. In the context of education, a resilient child has, “good communication, problem-solving skills, ability to recruit substitute caregivers actively, their talent/special skills are valued by peers, faith that their own actions can make a positive difference in their lives” (Werner 126). In Chapter 1, Tamir demonstrated his resilience when he actively engaged with personal topics in the classroom with other students. In Chapter 3, Juntos members fought for the release of their loved ones from detention and deportation. In this chapter, traumatized individuals came together to tell their story; creating an alternative family and alternative power source in order to survive and thrive under difficult circumstances. Theater allowed the participants in this chapter to strengthen their empowerment as they developed the above listed skills of resilience.

In this chapter it is very clear that theater has the capacity to voice the reality of the oppressed and in turn create a non-traditional source of power. This direct connection between storytelling and empowerment is supported in the excerpts from chapter one and chapter three as well. In the classroom, Tamir had the agency to tell his story to the extent he felt comfortable with the teachers and his classmates. In this process he was empowered to participate fully, bringing his history, experience, and reality to the

classroom. In Juntos, the women fighting to prevent the deportation of their husbands and the destructive fragmentation of their families vocalized their own story to inform and motivate people to join their efforts. These correlating components call attention to the non-traditional power of storytelling.

Conclusion

Throughout this work I have reviewed literature and personal experiences in order to understand how we can educate for empowerment; respecting experiences of trauma and using learning to process and fuel resilience. I used three different scenarios to help think about these questions. In the classroom context, as a previously homeless student, Tamir struggled to engage with the social issues under discussion because they were personal and triggering. After spending time to process those emotions with my social emotional support, Tamir returned to the classroom trusting his safety and the value of his experience. He brought his expertise to the class activity. In the community organizing context Juntos, the South Philadelphia Immigrants Right Community Organization, supported members to take empowered action to improve their life. Women in the organization stood out when their husbands were suddenly thrown into deportation proceedings. These women had to learn about their situation politically and their options for action. They stepped up as leaders in the community, telling their story, and informing people about what was happening and what they could do to help make things right. In the context of the global theater project, “Sanctuary” a Theatre of Witness production, Teya Sepinuck listened to the experiences of refugees in Northern Ireland and survivors of the Troubles. She brought their stories together around creating sanctuary through hardship. She established a familial unit in the cast and a platform for action and change, including the audience, to advocate for their needs and achieve justice in their lives.

I learned that when people tell their story on their own terms it is empowering. Bringing light to marginalized experiences activates a non-traditional power source, in

that it does not emerge from the function of systems of hierarchical oppression. I drew on the work of Dewey, Freire, and Foucault to analyze the way power interacts in my cases. It became clear that in emphasizing non-traditional power, it is helpful to first understand the traditional structure of power that also impacts the way communities experience trauma. The above theorists approached power in varied ways that enriched my understanding of power. Dewey's research looked at the power of full participation in democracy, grounding the way I saw learning as an essential component for individuals to understand how their identity is situated in reality based off of historically developed social structures. My research continued to build around Foucault's claim that power is inherent to all people and situations and Freire's specifications about how we can go about redressing the violence of traditional power structures. These two theorists fine-tuned the way I approached what it looks like for individuals and communities to demonstrate empowerment and resilience through social action. Thinking about concepts of power was essential to this research and could use more concentrated exploration.

It is also clear through my research that processing trauma is a difficult and painful endeavor, reflecting the hurt of trauma. I worked to not glorify the struggle of people experiencing trauma. Rather, I wanted to create a review of the literature to understand that trauma makes an impact on our lives whether we want it to or not, and it impacts certain communities and individuals more violently than others. For this reason I wanted to better understand what people and communities can do to support people as they process trauma. In my research I came across many factors, including religion/spirituality and nature, which researchers have found to influence the way that people process trauma. Those are topics for further study. In my thesis I worked to

answer the question, how do we create and support structures for empowering learning?

This research led me to consider that thriving through hardship is a process supported by learning and social-emotional support. I have concentrated on how when these components are healthily fortified to support people processing trauma, those individuals can in turn develop their story, activating empowerment and resilience.

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