

Article 3

Social and Academic Benefits of After-School Theatre Programming for Low-Income Adolescents

by

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Abstract

This study investigated the hypothesis that involvement in after-school theatre programming can be associated with low-income adolescents' social and academic growth. During the 2008–09 school year, 26 students at a middle school participated in an after-school theatre program, attending nineteen weekly rehearsals in preparation for four public performances at the end of the year. A second group of students with a similar baseline of self-reported social and academic confidence served as a control. At the beginning and the end of the school year, students completed a survey, reacting to 26 positively worded statements on a 1.0–5.0 Likert scale. Students completing the theatre program (n=17) had a mean score increase of .447 after treatment, compared with an increase of .109 among the control group (n=26). Results from this small sample appeared to be statistically significant ($p < .01$). Data from qualitative interviews confirmed results from the quantitative study and helped to illustrate specific benefits such as the development of teamwork and public speaking skills.

Biography

Hallie Greenberg is an 18-year-old trying to make a difference in the world. In 2005, she founded Performing Arts from the Heart, an organisation whose mission is to provide after-school theatre programs to low-income adolescents. For the past five years, she has led the group's operations, fundraising and strategic planning. During the 2008–09 school year, she designed and conducted a study on the academic and social effects of participation in the after-school theatre program. Hallie is currently studying Sociology and Education at Bard College in New York State.

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Social and Academic Benefits of After-School Theatre Programming for Low-Income Adolescents

In the United States, there are approximately eight million school-age children living in families with incomes below the US poverty line – nearly 16 per cent of children aged 6 to 17 (Child Trends Databank 2006). Instructive and organised after-school activities generally are lacking in inner-city schools in the areas where many of these families live. Due to the high incidence of working parents in these communities, there is often no one of authority at home when school is over. Inner-city schools often lack any teams or clubs to occupy children after school (Roffman et al. 2001). Additionally, many low-income urban settings are weighed down by gang- and drug-related violence, which causes many parents not to allow their children to play outside. Therefore, these children are spending more time alone indoors, and trading emotional, social and physical experiences for their safety.

After-School Programs

After-school programs have many social, academic, physical and emotional benefits for adolescents – for example, participation in after-school programming has a direct correlation with student success both in and out of school (Roffman et al. 2001). The period after school each day is seen as a particularly fertile time to invest student energy. Work by Durlak and Weissberg (2007), studying 73 after-school programs, found positive program effects in three areas: school performance, social behaviours, and attitudes and beliefs. Mahoney and Cairns (1997) found, in a study of 392 adolescents, a relationship between involvement in school-based extracurricular arts-related activities and early school dropout rates. Those students who were involved were less likely to drop out of school early.

There has been special focus on the importance of involving low-income youth in after-school programs. Posner and Vandell (1999) studied 194 low-income children and concluded that children who attended after-school programs spent more time on academic and extracurricular activities compared with children in informal care settings, who spent more time watching TV and hanging out. An earlier Posner and Vandell study (1994) of 216 low-income children reported that attending a formal after-school program was associated with better academic achievement and social adjustment compared with to other types of after-school care.

Halpern (1999) argues that after-school programs should be viewed as a developmental support for low-income children. He argues that low-income children today are too much on their own, both physically and psychologically. They would benefit from safe places to play, adult attention, help with homework and greater opportunities to participate in arts and sports.

Although low-income youth would benefit from these types of programs, supply is limited. Halpern (1999) analysed the supply of programs available in three major cities and reported that only about one-third of schools in low-income neighbourhoods offer after-school programs. White and Gager (2007) also found that after-school programs were less available for low-income populations. The study also showed that children in families who receive government assistance or who have parents who express financial worries are less likely to be involved in school- and/or non-school-related activities. However, Roffman and colleagues (2001) conclude in their study of low-income youth that in high-crime environments, unsupervised after-school time is unproductive and can be dangerous. In addition, adolescence has been shown to be a critical turning point for children in low-income communities. Rudolph et

al. (2001) show that this is the period at which adolescents begin to exhibit serious academic and behavioral difficulties. It is clear that low-income adolescents need after-school programming.

Theatre Programs

There is a smaller literature on the benefits of theatre arts programming. Shirley Brice Heath (2002) conducted an eleven-year study of 17,000 Tenth Graders and found that after-school theatre arts-involved students, particularly in low-income communities, have higher average educational aspirations as well as improved academic achievement and social and cognitive development. In a subsequent study (published earlier), Catterall (1999) analysed data on more than 25,000 students to determine the relationship between engagement in the arts and student performance and attitudes. His research documents how sustained involvement in particular art forms – music and theatre – delivers academic benefits such as improvement in mathematics and reading skills, and also social benefits – including gains in self-concept and motivation, as well as higher levels of empathy and tolerance for others.

If after-school programs can be delivered to low-income adolescents, a follow-up question becomes: What are the barriers to their success? One barrier is retention, the challenge of keeping children engaged in the program over a sustained period of time. Lauver et al. (2005) report that while many youths report a desire for more programs in their communities, attracting and sustaining their interest can be difficult.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine whether an after-school theatre program was associated with low-income children's social and academic growth. Participation in a year-long after-school theatre program that would otherwise be unavailable was expected to be positively associated with a child's self-esteem and aspirations for the attainment of future academic goals. This study focuses on low-income middle school-age students and theatre programming, a combination that has not been overly researched. This focus is deliberate, as this is a critical period in adolescent development, in which academic and social habits are formed.

Method

Participants

The study was conducted at a public middle school in New York City. The school is located within a neighbourhood known as 'Spanish Harlem', for its concentration of persons of Latino descent. Students attending the school are of Latino (70 per cent) and African American (24 per cent) descent. Students are predominantly from low-income families; most live in government-subsidised housing in the surrounding area and 87 per cent qualify for federal lunch subsidies.

A pilot test of the quantitative survey was conducted on 12 June 2008. The intent of this pilot test was to gain data on the draft survey instrument that could be analysed in order to revise and produce the instrument used for the 2008–09 research study (the following school year). Ten students in the 2007–08 PAFTH participant group were chosen randomly as an experimental group; ten students in a second group from the focus school were chosen as a control. The control group was matched for gender and grade. Prior to taking the pilot test questionnaire, students and parents were advised about the voluntary nature of participation and all parties signed consent forms.

During the 2008–09 school year, 121 students attended the focus school, in Grades 6 through 8. A back-to-school night was held on 4 September 2009 for these middle school students and their parents. At this event, a presentation was made to recruit a new class of participants for the established after-school theatre program. The audience was told the research would investigate how after-school theatre experiences would influence student social confidence and academic preparedness. Consent forms informing students and parents about the voluntary nature of their participation and the right to withdraw at any time were distributed that evening (in English and Spanish); the remaining consent forms were given to students the next day during the school day. Within a week, completed consent forms were received from 95 of the middle school's 121 students.

A 25-question quantitative questionnaire, asking students to share a self-assessment of their social confidence and academic preparedness, was drafted in February 2008 and submitted to Lehman College, City University of New York Institutional Review Board for review and approval. Approval was given on 10 June 2008 (IRB Number 141-08-139). A sampling of questions from the questionnaire is included in Table 8.

All students with completed consent forms ($n = 95$) were asked to complete the questionnaire. Faculty in students' English classes administered the survey and respondents were required to put their names on the survey in order to track students who eventually would participate in the theatre program. Prior to taking the survey, students were reminded about the voluntary nature of participation.

Later in September 2008, all students with completed consent forms were formally invited to participate in a year-long after-school theatre program, sponsored by Performing Arts from the Heart (PAFTH), a non-profit organisation dedicated to creating after-school theatre opportunities for low-income adolescents. A significant number of middle school students in the 2008–09 classes had previously attended culminating PAFTH performances from the 2006–07 and 2007–08 school years, which gave them some previous knowledge regarding the nature of the experience.

Twenty-six children signed up for the 2008–09 program and attended a first meeting on 6 October. Another 26 students in a second group were then selected from the pool of 69 students who had completed a consent form and did not elect to participate in the after-school theatre program. The control group was selected so that it would be similar to the experimental group in terms of gender, race and grade. Table 1 presents an overview of the characteristics of these participant groups.

Modest adjustments to the control group selections were made to ensure that students in the control group were starting the school year with a similar baseline of social confidence and academic preparedness compared with the experimental group. This adjustment was performed using data collected from the surveys given at the beginning of the school year. After this adjustment, the gender and race characteristics remained parallel between the experimental and control groups but the characteristics by grade resulted in the exchange of three Seventh Grade for three Eighth Grade students in the control group.

The survey instrument asked students to reflect on 25 positively worded statements (e.g. 'I feel comfortable speaking in front of my teachers'), each relating to their social and academic status (SAS) using a 1 through 5 Likert scale, with 5 representing 'Strongly Agree'. Students in the experimental group had an average mean score before treatment of 3.62, compared with an average mean score before treatment of 3.71 among the control group (Table 2), reflecting the similar baseline of SAS before treatment.

Table 1: Characteristics of participant groups

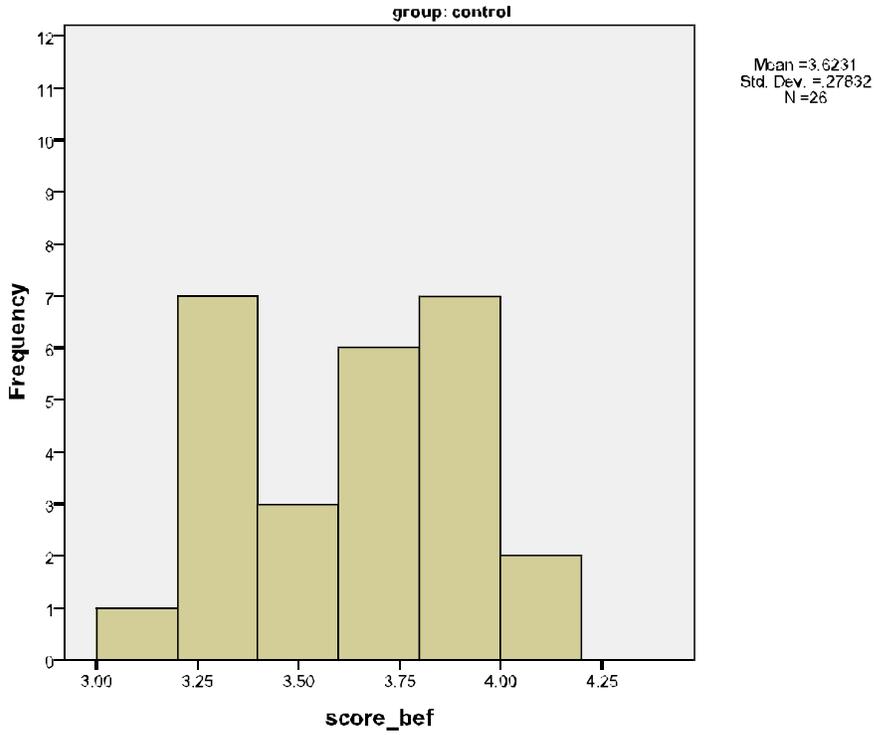
	Experimental total n = 26	Control total n = 26	All participants n = 52
Gender			
Girls	16 (62 %)	16 (62 %)	32 (62 %)
Boys	10 (38 %)	10 (38 %)	20 (38 %)
Race			
Hispanic	22 (85 %)	22 (85 %)	44 (85 %)
African-American	4 (15 %)	4 (15 %)	8 (15 %)
Caucasian	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)
Grade			
Grade 6	6 (23 %)	6 (23 %)	12 (23 %)
Grade 7	17 (65 %)	14 (53 %)	31 (61 %)
Grade 8	3 (12 %)	6 (24 %)	9 (36 %)

Table 2: Comparison of experimental and control groups, before treatment

	n	Mean	SD	Range
Experimental group	26	3.62	.278	3.3–4.2
Control group	26	3.71	.199	3.1–4.1

p = .176 (not significant)

Figure 1 shows how participants in the control group displayed a broader range of mean scores compared with the experimental group. These histograms illustrate how experimental participants were more clustered towards a middle, possibly reflecting a more homogeneous social and academic status before treatment due to the fact that experimental participants shared the attribute of self-selecting into the participant pool.



Experimental (n=26, left) vs. Control (n=26, right)

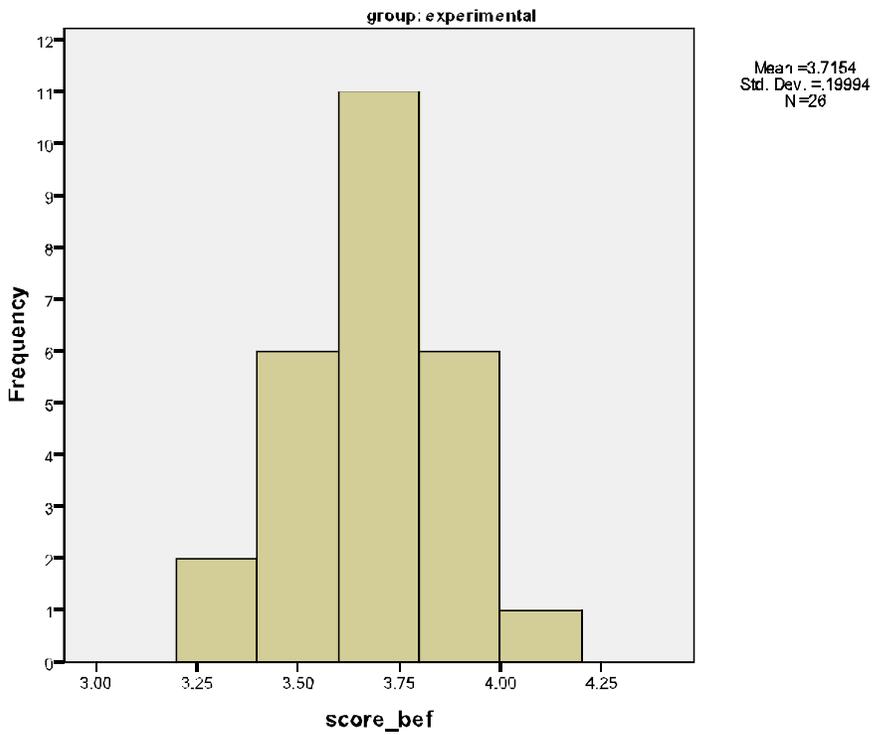


Figure 1: Mean score distribution, before treatment

Treatment

The expected benefit from the program was based in part on giving students an opportunity to learn from the group of professionals supporting the program. The theatre program was organised by this author, PAFTH director Hallie Greenberg. It was designed and led by artistic director Stephanie Kovacs, an experienced theatre educator who trained at Tisch/NYU, Yale and the American Conservatory Theatre. She is the founder and artistic director of Little Village Playhouse, a children's theatre based in Pleasantville, New York. In addition to Ms Kovacs, music director Adam Cohen, assistant artistic director Evan Kincaide, choreographer Jocelyn Jones, supervising teacher Jessica Cruz and peer coach Hallie Greenberg provided additional support at rehearsals and performances.

The curriculum allowed first-time actors to learn and review fundamentals of the acting craft, such as creating truthful moments of feeling, stage directions, theatrical vocabulary, objectives and intentions, working silently and with language, creating characters and scene work. Emphasis was placed on respecting the process, the teacher and one another, and creating a non-judgemental environment where students feel safe to express themselves fully and freely, without fear of ridicule or judgement. Goals of the experience include giving students opportunities to take risks on stage and to develop their abilities to work as part of a team. Over the course of the year, students worked towards the development of an hour-long performance work, comprised of a mixture of monologue, song and dance loosely organised around the theme of 'change'. Students were expected to fulfil a variety of responsibilities, including regular attendance, remembering to bring materials to rehearsal and memorisation.

An additional opportunity for learning from role models came from the involvement of students from another high school in New York. This program, organised by PAFTH director Hallie Greenberg, enabled other high school students to visit the project's middle school in Harlem and attend after-school theatre rehearsals as part of a public service outreach program. In this capacity, most of the work between the suburban high school students and the urban middle school students in the project took place in small-group instruction, where the middle school students would rehearse their scenes and get feedback from these visiting peer mentors.

Participating students attended nineteen after-school rehearsals, held on Mondays from 3.00 p.m. to 5.00 p.m. in the school auditorium. In addition, students were required to attend four Saturday rehearsals (12.30 to 5.00 p.m.) and three technical rehearsals. Two culminating performances took place at the end of the program. The first, on Thursday, 7 May 2009, was attended by approximately 700 students (Grades 3–8) at the school. The next day, 8 May, an 'encore' performance was given to students from neighbouring Harlem and Bronx middle schools to an audience of over 300 students (Grades 5–8). Finally, on Thursday, 14 May, students performed excerpted scenes at the school's annual 'Mano a Mano' community arts festival before an audience of over 400 students and parents. Over the course of the program, students were engaged in approximately 80 hours of rehearsal and performance.

Students who Dropped Out of the Program

During Fall 2008, nine members of the experimental group dropped out of the theatre program. Four participants voluntarily left the program; some did not like the program, others wanted more time for academic work. Three of the participants were required to discontinue their involvement due to requests from faculty that these participants lose their eligibility to participate due to insufficient academic effort. The remaining two students were asked to leave the program by the artistic director due to behaviour issues at the theatre rehearsals. These nine participants were

studied as a separate group in order to determine whether there was a ‘dosing effect’ from partial treatment – in other words, whether students who attend part of the program gain a proportional part of the benefit.

Academic Standing and Theatre Eligibility

Students in the theatre program were required to maintain a passing grade in all academic participants in order to remain eligible for participation.

Data Collection at the End of the 2008–09 School Year

At the end of the 2008–09 school year, on 1 June 2009, students in the experimental and control groups (n = 52) were asked to re-take the questionnaire. The same methodology for administering the questionnaire was used. The next day, 2 June, nine of the seventeen students who completed the program were interviewed in order to gain their qualitative feedback to the survey questions. Interviews were held in the assistant principal’s office, and consisted of a fifteen-minute session with each participant responding to scripted questions.

Risk assessment

This was a minimal risk study. The participant names are not published in this research report and the results are coded so that student identities remain confidential. The benefits of this study are that the children in the theatre program should improve academically, socially and emotionally compared with their prior standing and with those not in the program. Stress and anxiety in completing the survey were limited.

Results

Students who completed the program demonstrated superior gains in social and academic status (SAS). Table 3 reflects a positive correlation between completing the after-school theatre program and increased social and academic status. Average mean scores among students in the experimental group who completed the program increased by .447, compared with a gain of .109 in the control group. Students in the experimental pool who dropped the program part-way through the school year showed more modest but still superior SAS gain compared with the control group (.191 vs .109).

The graphs in Figure 2 illustrate the superior gains among the experimental/completed group (n = 17), compared with participants in the control group (n = 26). In the graphs, this is reflected by ‘movement to the right’.

Table 3: Change in mean scores

	n	Mean	SD	Range
Experimental group completed program	17	.447**	.336	-.08/1.0
Experimental group/ dropped	9	.191	.405	-.36/.96
Control group	26	.109	.316	-.36/1.0

** p < .01 (very significant)

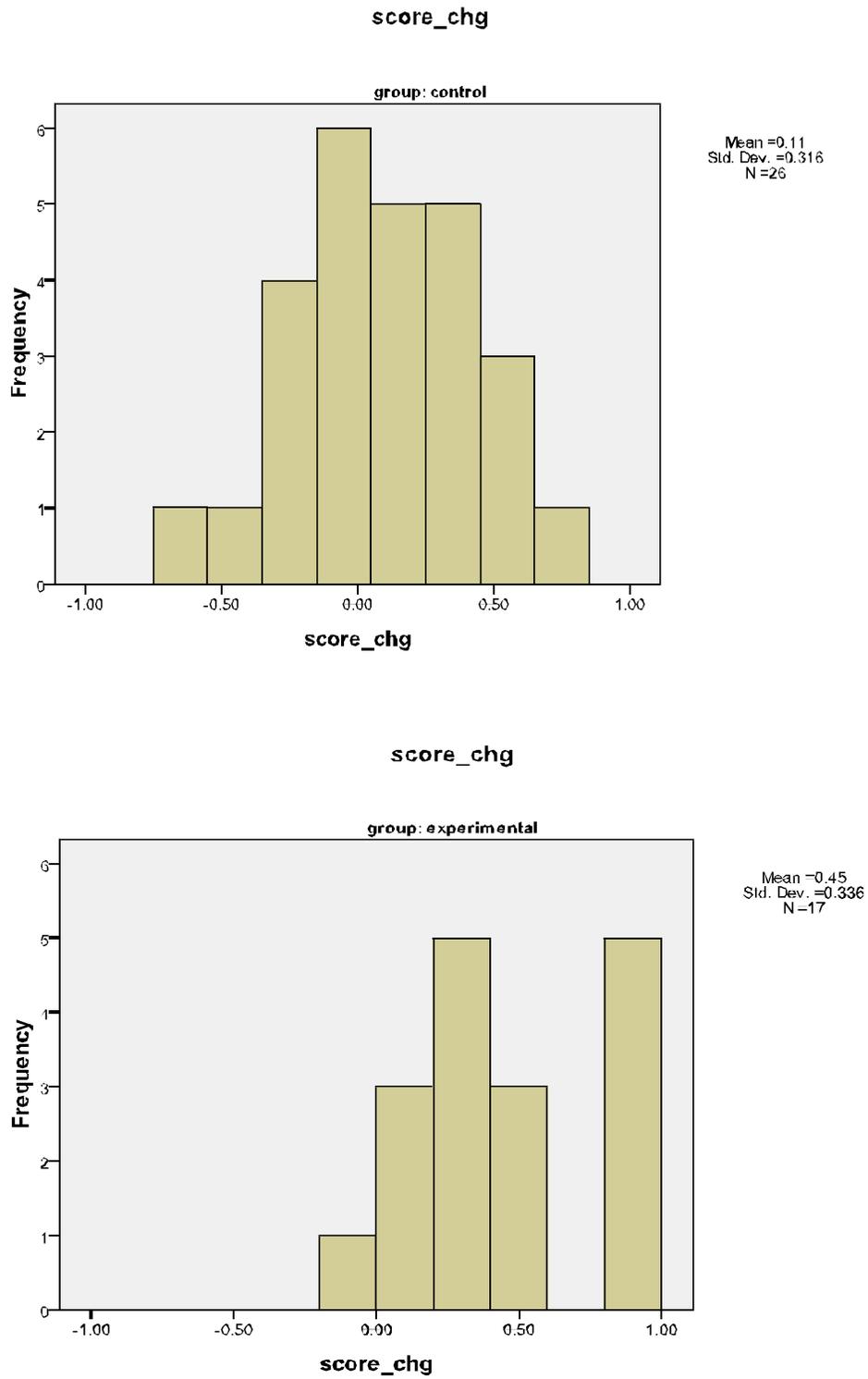


Figure 2: Mean score change, control (n=26, left) vs completed (n=17, right)

Table 4 presents the percentage of participants who reported SAS gain (change in mean > 0), using only the seventeen experimental participants who completed the program. More experimental participants improved than control participants (94.1 per cent vs 57.7 per cent).

Table 4: Increase vs no increase in mean score

	n	Increase	No increase	Total
Experimental group/ completed program	17	16* 94.1%	1* 5.9%	17* 100.0%
Control group	26	15 57.7%	11 42.3%	26 100.0%

* p < .05 (tested with Fisher's Exact Test since one of the cells has an expected small number)

A review of mean score distribution further illustrates the superior SAS gain among those who completed the program. A review of score distribution, comparing the experimental/completed (n = 17) with the control group (n = 26) is provided in Table 5. This analysis provides a further dimension to the superior gains in SAS among the experimental/completed group. Among the experimental/completed group, 58 per cent had an average mean score of 4.0 or above for all questions combined, compared with only 19 per cent among the control group.

Similarly, Table 6 illustrates the superior relative gain among the experimental/completed group. Of this group, 65 per cent (n = 17) showed an SAS gain greater than 0.25, compared with 34 per cent among the control group. Additionally, in the control group, 34 per cent of participants decreased in SAS over the course of the year (change in mean SAS > 0).

Table 5: Mean score distribution, after treatment

	Mean score (post)	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Experimental group/ completed program n = 17	< 3.6	0	0	100
	3.6-3.99	7	41.5	100
	4.0-4.4	5	29.5	58
	> 4.4	5	29.5	0
Control group n = 26	< 3.6	8	30.4	100
	3.6-3.99	13	49.4	49
	4.0-4.4	4	15.2	19
	> 4.4	1	3.8	4

Table 6: Change in mean score distribution

	Mean score (post)	Frequency	%	Cumulative %
Experimental group/ completed program n = 17	< 0.0	1	5.9	100
	0.01-0.24	5	29.5	94
	0.25-0.49	5	29.5	65
	> 0.5	6	35.1	35
Control group n = 26	< 0.0	9	34.2	100
	0.01-0.24	8	30.4	64
	0.25-0.49	6	22.8	34
	> 0.5	3	11.4	11

The 'Dosing Effect'

Students who completed the full program (n = 17) had a mean increase in their SAS score of .45 compared with a mean increase of .19 for the nine students who completed only 20 or 40 per cent of the program. While this suggests a relationship of finishing the entire program and amount of increase in SAS and is in the direction expected, this finding does not represent a statistically significant difference (p = .098). Among the nine students who dropped out partway through the school year, four participants left in November after completing approximately 20 per cent of the program. The remaining five left in January, after completing approximately 40 per cent of the program. Further analysis showed no significant differences in SAS gain between these sub-groups (the 20 per cent completed group versus the 40 per cent completed group).

A Comparison of the Change in Mean Scores by Gender, Race and Grade

There was only a modest difference in SAS score gain between boys and girls in the experimental/completed group (.520 for boys vs .407 for girls). Additionally, the t-test for this measure showed that the difference was not statistically significant.

African-American participants who completed the program showed dramatically superior gain compared with Latino participants (.920 and .384 respectively), but findings were not significant due to the small sample size of African-American participants (n = 2).

Seventh Grade participants who completed the program showed superior gain compared with Sixth and Eighth Grade participants (.514 compared with .360 for Sixth Grade and .187 for Eighth Grade), but these findings were not significant due to the small sample sizes of Sixth and Eighth Grade students.

Table 7: Change in mean score: gender, race and grade

		n	Mean	SD
Experimental group/ completed program (n = 17)	Boys	6	.520	.395
	Girls	11	.407	.312
	Latino	15	.384	.303
	Af-Am	2	.920	.113
	Grade 6	1	.360	.093
	Grade 7	13	.514	.356
	Grade 8	3	.187	.083
Experimental group/ dropped (n = 9)	Boys	4	.050	.338
	Girls	5	.304	.455
	Latino	7	.194	.466
	Af-Am	2	.180	.084
	Grade 6	5	.336	.389
	Grade 7	4	.010	.396
	Grade 8	0	n/a	n/a
Control group (n = 26)	Boys	10	.204	.281
	Girls	16	.050	.331
	Latino	22	.109	.328
	Af-Am	4	.110	.280
	Grade 6	6	.240	.274
	Grade 7	14	.029	.291
	Grade 8	6	.167	.404

p = .526 (not significant)

A review of SAS gains by question and student comments from qualitative interviews yields rich insight into specific benefits.

Table 8: Change in mean score by individual question, sorted from highest to lowest among experimental/completed group (n = 17)

	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Questions at high end of range				
I make friends of the opposite sex easily.	-1	2	.82	.728
When I join a project or group, I feel committed to having it succeed.	-1	2	.71	.849
I deal with disappointments with an intellectual rather than an emotional response.	0	2	.65	.786
I deal with disappointments with an intellectual rather than an emotional response.	-1	3	.65	.931
I feel comfortable speaking in front of my class.	-1	2	.65	.862
I feel comfortable speaking in front of my class.	0	2	.65	.702
I consider myself a leader.	-2	2	.53	.943
I always stand up for myself.	-2	2	.53	.943
Missing school affects my academic achievements.	-1	2	.53	1.007
I help my peers in school.	-1	2	.53	.800
I am good at memorising things.	-1	2	.47	1.007
I plan to go to college.	-2	2	.47	1.068
I am cooperative when I work in a group.	0	3	.47	.874
I don't give in to peer pressure.	0	2	.47	.624
I feel comfortable speaking in front of my teachers.	-2	2	.47	.943
I set academic goals for myself.				
I have an organised plan for my academic future.				

Making New Friends

Students in the experimental/completed group showed an average SAS gain of .82 (higher than for any other single question) in response to the statement: 'I make friends of the opposite sex easily'. In qualitative interviews, students spoke about how being paired up with actors of the opposite sex led to greater comfort in their interaction with members of the opposite sex. Students also spoke about how the theatre experience helped them get to know students in the other grades.

To be honest I've always been good at making friends but, like, with theatre people that I normally would not talk to, I started talking to them. We started hanging out, we started playing games together because those were people I wouldn't usually talk to and I started talking to them. (Experimental Participant 7)

I met different people. A lot of people, certain people I don't really hang out with. Since I went to theatre, I learned to, like, push myself to hang out with different people. (Experimental Participant 24)

Teamwork and Making a Commitment to a Group

Students who completed the theatre program demonstrated an SAS gain of .71 in response to the statement 'When I join a project or group, I feel committed to having it succeed' and an SAS gain of .53 in response to the statement 'I help my peers in school'. Qualitative interview comments further supported this idea.

It did affect me because when I say I'm gonna make a commitment because, if I don't keep to my word and not show up, other people go, because people depend on me. Like, 'All right, (name), we need you this Monday or Saturday because you need to do on this part.' And so, knowing that I have people depending on me, or relying on me to do this part, I can't go back on my word. (Experimental Participant 8)

What we had to do was like a whole-group thing, I had to make sure that I felt like it was my job to make sure I was memorising my lines and that everybody else was memorising their lines too. To make the scene look the best it could be. (Experimental Participant 6)

[Theatre] made me realise that, like, sometimes if other people need help, I can help them. (Experimental Participant 25)

In theatre, you're part of a team, and you gotta count on certain people. So, like, if someone was, like, messing up or something, I could help them, or tell them what to do, or they could help me. (Experimental Participant 24)

Theatre helped me make more friends easily because we had to work as a group. And we worked as a group over the year and became tighter and tighter until we basically became a family, I guess. And we just had a lot of fun doing things that we liked to do. (Experimental Participant 8)

Public Speaking and Classroom Participation

Participants also reported positive results related to public speaking. The 'I feel comfortable speaking in front of class' and 'I feel comfortable speaking in front of my teachers' questions were among those with the greatest SAS gain. Several participants specifically linked personal development gained from participation in the theatre program to success in an academic setting.

In theatre you have to push yourself to be loud, and project your voice, and show emotion and all that. That definitely has helped me in school. (Experimental Participant 12)

I used to be shy in front of class, but since I'm in theatre and I've had to perform, like, in front of the whole school, it made me not be, like, that, like, shy, and stuff. (Experimental Participant 1)

(Theatre helped me) realise that when you stay with something and succeed, it feels really good. (Experimental Participant 25)

When we did the play, we were in front of, like, thousands of, like ... not thousands but hundreds of people that we didn't even know. So it was, we were able to get comfortable, like if we can sing a song about being sick and fall on the floor and look funny in costumes, I think we're able to talk in front of our class in our everyday clothing and stuff. (Experimental Participant 6)

Memorisation

Participants offered specific observations regarding the integrated nature of memorisation in the theatre experience. The statement 'I am good at memorising things' was among the questions with the greatest SAS gain.

[Theatre] helped me remember more stuff. Like, I was able to remember, like, lines for a scene. It helped me, like, with math, I can remember more formulas. (Experimental Participant 25)

Sometimes if I'm getting ready for a test, I can't memorise that much, but when I went to theatre and learned, like, scripts and stuff, it kind of helped me more to memorise things (Experimental Participant 24)

I knew that I had to remember my lines, because if not I was gonna make a fool of myself onstage. So I wanted to make sure that I knew what I was saying and if I didn't to make sure, like, to continue trying to, that way I would remember it. (Experimental Participant 6)

Theatre made me more responsible. Like, when Steffie ... she said that we had to memorise the lines, like, I memorised the songs, I studied the script like every night. (Experimental Participant 23)

Theatre helps you, like when we had to practise our lines and stuff, it helps you remember that you have to practise to become, like, the best that you can be of your own self. (Experimental Participant 6)

As a little kid, um, always wasn't really good at schoolwork, always forgot stuff, or I forgot to do this, or forgot certain words. But ever since I joined theatre at my old after-school, I started memorising more and training my brain more and I try to do my best. (Experimental Participant 7)

Commitment to Schoolwork

Participants discussed how participation in the theatre program enhanced their commitment to academic success. The regulation that students were required to maintain good academic standing in order to maintain eligibility to participate in the program was a motivating factor for several of the participants. In discussing their response to the statement 'Missing school affects my academic performance', several students made connections between attendance patterns in theatre and school.

In theatre I know I have to have good grades to be in theatre. And, in order to be a good student, I mean, in order to do good in theatre, I have to do good in school as well. (Experimental Participant 24)

Sometimes if you miss a scene, you can't make it up. Like, last time they had a dancing scene, and two students missed it, and they weren't able to make it up correctly. Sometimes school is like this too. (Experimental Participant 25)

If I missed theatre one day I was wondering what happened and I felt, like, a little left out, so I didn't want to miss it. So I, I felt like it helped me to focus on attendance and being on time for things. (Experimental Participant 25)

Additional Benefits

Qualitative interviews revealed several additional benefits. Several students spoke about how the experience had increased their interest in attending a New York City high school that focuses on the performing arts, possibly leading to a career in the arts.

Theatre showed me that you could have, like, a profession in acting and performing arts. (Experimental Participant 12)

Another student shared how the experience has helped her to improve her relationship with her parents.

I don't really see my mom and my dad a lot because they work, but, um, like, when I do see them I'm able to talk to them. Like, if, not like if they're one of my friends, but, like, on this, on a level, but on a different part. Like, I can tell them more than I was able to tell them before. (Experimental Participant 6)

A final comment illuminated how the after-school program filled otherwise vacant time:

Theatre helped me kind of balance out my life because usually I would have nothing to do. (Experimental Participant 7)

Discussion

The results from this study offer an unambiguous conclusion that the theatre program delivered significant and meaningful benefit to its participants. The results support the study's original hypothesis that involvement in after-school theatre programming can be associated with low-income adolescents' social and academic growth. Participants were able to articulate clear areas of personal growth as a result of the experience, including making new friends, building self-esteem and increased overall confidence. This growth extended into their academic lives as well, as participants reported having developed a deeper commitment to teamwork as well as more practiced memorisation and public speaking skills.

However, there are limitations of this study that need to be considered when interpreting its results. First, the students in the experimental group were self-selected. This was unavoidable due to a variety of factors, including the small population of the school. Future studies should consider employing random selection protocols for participants in the experimental group.

A second limitation of the study is that the nine students who dropped out during the course of the program most likely caused an incremental concentration of positive results among remaining participants in the experimental pool. (In the domains of after-school programs and theatre education, there is much work to be done to investigate issues of student retention.) Interestingly, there was a high concentration of sixth graders who dropped out (four of the nine students who left were sixth graders). This characteristic makes intuitive sense, as many sixth grade students are challenged with transition issues as they move from elementary to middle school.

Given the limited scope of this research, it is impossible to apportion benefit between 'after-school' and 'theatre programming'. Are these gains more attributable to student involvement in purposeful after-school programming (channelling students' energies from what is often 'empty' time) or to exposure and involvement to experience with theatre arts? In future research, it would be interesting to investigate the relative benefits between these domains.

Another area for future research would be to evaluate whether the academic and social benefits of after-school theatre programs are sustained over time.

A central implication of this work is that after-school theatre programming can produce a variety of non-arts outcomes. It is not surprising that quantitative analysis supports the notion that participation in this kind of programming can help students gain increased self-confidence in their public speaking and memorisation skills, and the student quotes from qualitative interviews gave further specificity and authenticity to this conclusion. One would hope that these gains would translate to future success (e.g. in high school and as an adult); however, the finite nature of the study does not allow for learning about whether this growth is retained over time.

This logic raises the issue of what can be done to generate additional support for expanded funding of after-school theatre programming for low-income adolescents. We live in a world of increasing separation between ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’. If some of the ‘difference-makers’ are after-school programming and arts education, how can we bring more of these kinds of programs into low-income communities?

A related area for investigation, however, is ‘cost-benefit’. The Performing Arts from the Heart program costs approximately \$12,000 per year to deliver. If 20 students participate in a given year, that equates to \$600 per student. While this research makes a convincing case as to the program’s positive effects, in a world of finite resources is this the highest and best way to spend \$600? Are there other models that can deliver equal benefits for less? Clearly, there is much work to be done in thinking about how to prioritise available funding.

While this study explores the relationship between involvement in after-school theatre programming and increased social and academic performance, the question of ‘What exactly is it that drives these gains?’ remains elusive. If nothing else, this work suggests the value of future research. We need to better understand what is being learned and what exactly is producing these results.

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